

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA THE CATECHIST OF THE 19th CENTURY*

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Abstract: The world of catechesis has undergone much change from the time of the Catechism of the Council of Trent, which formulated the doctrinal approach to Catechesis. Subsequently, different catechetical approaches were proposed and practiced each in its own way contributing to something new and radical to the catechetical praxis. At the time of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the world catechetical movement had not taken birth. To our astonishment, we see Chavara adopting catechetical methods which will be endorsed much later by the world catechetical movement. It shows his prophetic vision and catechetical wisdom. The present article attempts to highlight how Chavara proposed a catechetical pedagogy that comprises all the essential elements of Catechetics.

Keywords: Catechist, Catechesis, Montessori method, Munich method, Kerygmatic approach, salvation of the soul, salvation history, Magisterium, caste system, *Malpanate*, Roccas schism, reunion

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movement, Catholic communion, Catechetical Pedagogy, *pidiyari* and *kettuthengu*

1. Introduction

Catechesis is a ministry in the Church which can be defined as education in faith. The two poles of this process are education and faith. Therefore, the process of catechesis depends upon what we understand by education and faith. We know that historically both of these concepts and their praxis have undergone much evolution. Accordingly, the process of catechesis, too, has undergone evolution in the understanding of its content and method.

Earlier, education was understood as a one-way process of transmitting knowledge from a teacher to students. It was mainly explanation or narration by the teacher to the students, in which students passively listened to everything the teacher did and everything the teacher said. Students didn't need to be active in the class except listen to what the teacher taught. Later, from the 19th century, the methodology of teaching was improved by incorporating psychological principles of growth of children. A three-step process was introduced into the process of education, such as presentation, explanation and application, so as to make the learning process attractive and more effective. Also space was allowed for the children to learn by 'doing'. The Montessori method in education is one of the fruits of such a development. Still later, the method of teaching underwent drastic change by the adoption of the inductive method in place of the deductive method. Education became more experiential with teachers making use of stories or anecdotes to introduce the lesson as well as interactions with students. This allowed a kind of freedom from the strict class room settings. It was felt that classes could be taken in particular contexts as necessitated by the nature of the themes under consideration. And in these last decades there has occurred a paradigm shift in the area of education due to the entry of electronic communication media in its process.

In the same way, the concept of faith, too, underwent much evolution and development in history. Earlier, faith was understood as believing in and accepting the divinely revealed truths necessary for the salvation of the soul. These truths were the statements uttered by God or the commands he gave us for our salvation. At a later stage, the Church held that God communicates himself to humanity not only through his words but also his deeds. It meant that faith consisted not only in believing in revealed truths, but also personalizing the signs that God worked in

history, or conforming one's life to God's pedagogy in history. At all these levels, the understanding of faith had nothing to do with human experience. Whether one's neighbour was poor, or oppressed, or marginalized didn't matter in the faith practice of the Catholics. Subsequent developments in biblical studies and theology brought in the importance of human experience in the considerations of faith. The task of faith vis-à-vis the dehumanizing situations, such as, poverty, oppression and marginalization was hotly discussed by re-reading the biblical message and revisiting the Church teachings. The liberational interventions of God in history as well as prophets' denunciation of oppressive structures were brought to the focus of faith and Church's ministries were reinterpreted through the angle of liberation. Faith could not be divorced from its task to serve for the integral development of people.

Thus, incorporating the developments that took place in the understanding of education and faith, catechesis, too, underwent historical evolution. In the first centuries of the Christian era, catechesis consisted in orally transmitting prayers, knowledge of sacraments and commandments. At a later stage, catechesis began to be considered the transmission of God's revelation. Learning and keeping to memory these truths, or doctrines, were considered essential for salvation. Catechism books were prepared in order to assure uniformity, clarity and precision of the contents. But still, it was a one-way process of teaching of doctrines to the students. Later, methodological improvements were brought into catechesis as we saw above, by incorporating the psychological principle of learning and getting pupils to be creative using their hands and thus to learn by doing, which in catechetical circles is known as the Munich method.

Still, the content of catechesis remained the same, that is, the doctrines to be believed and memorized for the sake of salvation of souls. It was felt that this kind of learning took away the joy of Christian living from the life of children. Instead, the proclamation and explanation of salvation history as contained in the Bible was found to be ideal for catechesis. Such proclamation of biblical events would not only retain the interest of the children, but also give the entire message God addressed to humanity in history. This new approach that surfaced in the catechetical circles in 1930s in the German speaking areas came to be known as the Kerygmatic approach. Thus catechesis became the

proclamation and teaching of the Bible. In all these stages catechesis was making use of the deductive method.

Now, a new problematic situation was hit upon. The proclamation of the salvation history was blind to the actual life situations of the addressees of catechesis, their hunger, or poverty or marginalised situations. Can catechesis be blind to the sufferings of our fellow brethren? Such reflections brought in the human-centred approach in catechesis, which is also known as the experiential or anthropological approach. It gave way for the inductive method in catechetical teaching that is to say, catechetical considerations should begin from the actual human situations and lead to universal and general applications. This new approach came forcefully in the catechetical circles from 1950s¹.

Today, catechesis is understood as the sum total of all that these approaches, prevalent in different stages in history, wanted to convey. Catechesis is the process that transmits authentic faith to the baptized people. Faith becomes authentic when it touches the entire human person, his/her body and soul, heart and mind, and the living conditions. Thus the aim of catechesis is to reach the people to maturity of faith life, the stage where faith animates a person's intellectual life, attitudes, relationships and his/her activities. In other words, faith becomes authentic and mature only when it becomes the guiding principle of a person's cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions. Catechesis is considered to be the tool to bring in this development in the life of a person as well as the Christian community.

The article explains the catechetical pedagogy Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) employed in the 19th century for the faith education of the Christian community of Kerala and how his mission sowed the seeds of a renaissance in the Kerala society that was lying deep down in the evils of illiteracy, underdevelopment, and mutual exclusion due to the widespread caste practice.

¹ To learn more about the development of catechetical approaches in history, see, Cyril de Souza, *Catechesis for India Today: An Appraisal of the Catechetical Proposal of D.S. Amalorpavadass*, Bangalore: Khristu Jyoti Publications, 1994, 15-20; Louis Erdozain, "The Evolution of Catechetics: A Survey of Six International Study Weeks in Catechetics," in Michael Warren, ed., *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, Winona, Minnesota: Christian Brothers Publications, 1983, 86-109.

2. Chavara: A Catechist who lived ahead of his Time

When we go through the life and mission of Chavara, one amazing factor strikes our minds. He lived in the 19th century when the catechetical praxis was still at the doctrinal level. The Kerygmatic and the anthropological approaches were not even in the minds of the Church Magisterium. It is here that we need to evaluate the contributions Chavara made to the field of catechesis. His focus was on the Kerygmatic as well as anthropological approaches as we shall see below. That means he anticipated the future developments that happened in the catechetical field in the Church. One should say that he was attentive to all the four phases of development of catechesis. He was keen on giving correct doctrines in a way attractive to his listeners through the profuse use of stories, anecdotes, poetry and imageries as his works reveal. In his work, *Atmanuthapam*, he narrates the whole New Testament story in poetic form. It also crosses over to the times of the Apostles and even the Assumption of our Blessed Mother. But simultaneously he heard the silent cry of his own people as well as the society that was doomed in ignorance and underdevelopment caused by the prevailing caste system as well as lack of sufficient infrastructure for development. He devised many schemes, almost all of them, of a pioneering nature to bring in the Good News of knowledge and development to the people. His zeal and compassion for the people who were then a people without shepherd led him to a series of pioneering activities that put the foundation for the renewal of the Church and the renaissance of Kerala society. It is to be noted here that the people whom history acknowledges as renaissance leaders of Kerala entered public life after the life time of Chavara and they were all treading the paths traced by him.²

3. Brief Biography

Coming from an agrarian background, Kuriakose was born in the Chavara family at Kainakary in the parish of Chennamkary in the then Travancore state, which now forms part of Kerala, India, on February 10, 1805. He was the youngest of the six siblings of the couple Kuriakose and Mariam. Those years there were no public schools in Kerala. The first Government school (elementary) was started in Travancore in 1817.³ The

² M.G.S. Narayanan, "Precursor of Reformist Movements," in John Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi, Bengaluru: Viva Books, 2015, 41.

³ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Second Edition, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 43.

only source to receive basic education for the children was what was known as *Kalari*, the village school, where the *Asan* (teacher) taught the children, solo, how to read and write Malayalam, a little of Arithmetic, a little of Sanskrit, Tamil, Astrology, and local medicine, etc., meaning to say, the essentials an individual needed to learn to lead societal life in those days.⁴ The full duration of *Kalari* education was for five years.⁵ When he was five years old, Kuriakose went to *Kalari* and had the basic education for five years.

Simultaneously with his *Kalari* education, he also began to assist at the Eucharistic celebration in his home parish. When he was ten years old, he had a sense of divine call for priesthood. He entered the Pallipuram *Malpanate* under Fr. Thomas Palackal in 1818 when he was 13 years old.⁶

While in the seminary, his parents and the only brother died in an attack of small pox pandemic. Well-meaning relatives and well-wishers advised seminarian Kuriakose to return home and look after the family to continue the family lineage. But young Kuriakose firmly decided to continue the lineage of the priests of the Lord rather than the Chavara family of Kainakary. In 1829, he was ordained priest. As a newly ordained priest, he joined Fr Thomas Palackal (1780-1841), his seminary Rector and Fr Thomas Porukara (1800-1846) in their effort to establish the new religious congregation CMI. Thereafter, the Kerala society and the Western missionaries in India saw in him as the Prior of the new congregation, an extra ordinarily zealous priest, combining the spirits of Prophet Elijah and Activist Moses leading his people from progress to progress in the spiritual as well as societal life. He remained on the forefront of practical action to form Christian families in faith and morals and to be the vanguard of social transformation through universal education for people of all communities and other developmental schemes. In short, his life was a struggle to bring in the light of holiness, learning and knowledge to all as the portal of spiritual, social and economic development. In 1871 this holy soul left this world for his

⁴ P. Govindappilla, *Charitrathenayicha oral*, in *SukruthamSmara* (Malayalam), A Beth Rauma Publication, 2012, 51

⁵ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 43.

⁶ Malpanates were officially suppressed in 1854 by Vicar Apostolic Bernardine Becinelli and seminaries were established in course of time at Vazhakulam, Pulinkunnu, Elthuruthu and Mannanam. Cf A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 51.

eternal reward. In 1986 he was beatified as the first blessed from India. In 2014 he was canonized a saint in the universal Church.

4. Profile of a Catechist

A catechist has, primarily, to be a person who is fully evangelized by undergoing a life of formation in Gospel values in one's own self. We may enumerate a few essential features of a catechist and how these are seen reflected in the life of Chavara.

4.1. Love of the Church

The Church was at the heart of Chavara's thoughts. In a circular letter he wrote in 1843, he says, "Man the crown of creation, and is created by God of infinite goodness. The moment he is born, death too is born. To cross over this sea of death, the voyage is really difficult and perilous. In order to cross over the sea, we need a sailor who is really an expert, familiar with the route and who, at the same time, is capable of withstanding every obstacle along the route. We need also a heavy anchor, which would resist every tempest in the sea and protect the ship from being caught amidst the billows. We need also a strong vessel, strong enough to resist the tempests in the sea which gives guarantee of safety and protection to passengers. The Church is this vessel."⁷

Fr. Leopold, Chavara's spiritual father all through his life, testifies to his love of the Mother Church. The former says that an ardent love of the Church and true devotion to the Holy Father were the most outstanding virtues found in Chavara. Fr. Leopold acknowledges, "He had an ardent desire to spread the light of the Holy Catholic Church in all directions; he was grieved to the point of shedding tears when he heard the trials and persecution of the Church and eagerly longed to see the days of her triumph. Whenever he happened to hear the news about the Pope he was always moved to tears, either of sorrow or of joy."⁸

The love of the Church was the motivating factor that pushed Chavara into the pool of activities when he saw the sorry state of the Christian community of his time. Such a miserable condition was caused largely by ecclesial turmoil of the 19th century. Chavara cherished in his heart a very comprehensive plan for the overall reform and development of this Church. He knew that the Church alone cannot be pushed forward without largely bringing in reform in the secular society. So he wanted to give birth to a spiritually mature Church to counter the

⁷ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 377.

⁸ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 450.

problems of herself and the society in an intelligent way. To this effect he devised a multi-pronged approach of the renewal of the Church.

Love of the Church was a leading ideal in his life. Even in trying times, he abided by the decisions of his ecclesiastical superiors. Even as the canonical recognition of the newly founded religious congregation was prolonging indefinitely,⁹ he didn't show unrest or displeasure nor did he pressurise the authorities, but took everything as the will of God coming through the Mother Church.¹⁰ Finally, when the canonical recognition was granted, it was not as the members expected, instead, they were affiliated to the Carmelite Family, by providing them Carmelite rules and constitutions. Chavara saw it as Providence and he fully abided by the decision of the Church.

The unity of the Church was a cause dear to him. His efforts for the reunion of the breakaway Jacobite faction as well as his fight against the Roccas schism are two shining landmarks that loudly speak of his love of the Mother Church. The reunion movement was to bring back the Jacobite faction into the Catholic communion under the Pope. These efforts largely spearheaded by Chavara and later his disciples were partially fructified in 1930 when Bishop Mar Ivanios of the Orthodox faction embraced Catholicism together with a good number of his followers which resulted in the creation of the Syro-Malankara Rite.¹¹ The Roccas schism was a major threat to the Catholic Church in Kerala caused by Bishop Roccas, who illegally entered Kerala from Chaldea at the invitation of some of the eastern looking clergy of Kerala and began to bring the parishes in Kerala under his jurisdiction. Failing in all the efforts to put a halt to the march of Roccas and his supporters, the Vicar Apostolic wrote to Rome to appoint Chavara as the Vicar General of the Malabar Christians in order to contain the grave danger of a possible schism in the Church. Chavara, through his holy and diplomatic tactics, got Roccas out of India without in any way causing damage to his popularity or personal dignity. He showed extreme kindness to the

⁹ Though the CMI Congregation was founded in the year 1831, canonical recognition for the congregation was obtained only in 1955.

¹⁰ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, VI/4, *Chavara's Testament to the members of the Congregation*, Mannanam 1982, 98-103.

¹¹ There are three *sui juris* Churches in India: The Latin Church, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malankara Church. The Syro-Malankara Rite was created in 1930 so that those who reunited with Catholicism from the Orthodox Church could continue their Antiochean traditions.

intruder Prelate as well as his supporters. Chavara persuaded Rome to revoke the excommunication invoked upon him.

Yet, though Chavara fought to finish the Roccas schism and got Bishop Roccas out of India, he (Chavara), too, was of the firm opinion that the Churches in Kerala, that is, not only Syrians but also Latins, needed native Bishops to lead them. To this effect he wrote a letter to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (Propaganda Fide) in 1869 explaining the truth of the sincere and just desire of the people and requesting the Sacred Congregation to appoint two bishops, one for Syrians and one for Latins. Chavara wrote that such a move would diffuse the possibility of future troubles as well as enthuse the Jacobite faction to come back to Catholicism.¹²

Chavara's love of the Church and the outstanding virtues shining in him were recorded in a letter Vicar Apostolic Bernardino of St. Therese wrote to the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide informing him of the appointment of Chavara as the Vicar General.¹³ The Vicar Apostolic described Chavara in the letter as "a man truly Christian, virtuous, very prudent, very well-versed in Sacred Scriptures, most proficient in Syriac language, who in this circumstance with his deeds proved himself to be very faithful to the Catholic Religion and to the Holy See..."¹⁴ In the same letter the Vicar Apostolic had also made another suggestion to the Prefect and the Holy See to consecrate Chavara as a Co-adjutor Bishop "even if this highly commented and proposed person lacks the necessary knowledge for this position, nor can he have, being from this country, the chest (courage) that is required in a bishop in such particular circumstances, but supported by the Vicar Apostolic as the vine leans on the elm, and by the missionaries he will certainly bear better fruits than those of the Chaldean Patriarch ... because he is good, prudent and obedient and also fascinating in preaching."¹⁵ Chavara's humble ways are projected, again, in the next observation made by the Vicar Apostolic in the letter. "... he would not accept such (episcopal) character and

¹² Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, II/5, p. 33-35.

¹³ Letter of Vicar Apostolic Bendardino to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide informing him of the Appointment of Chavara as Vicar General, in Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 18-21.

¹⁴ Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867*, 20.

¹⁵ Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867*, 20.

dignity without (having given) a precept, as I had to give him, in order to make him accept the office of the vicar general.”¹⁶

4.2. Sense of Conversion

The beginning of holiness is the sense of conversion. The seeds of divinity can grow only in a soul that longs for God. In his most voluminous work, *Atmanuthapam*, we find Chavara in a poetic way articulating a sense of repentance over some of the events and situations of his childhood life. We need not take them as real sins committed, but these are the perspectives of a holy soul which counts even minor cases as sinful. He narrated that at the *Kalari* the children were from different religious communities and there were occasions and contexts which were not akin to his upbringing. He said that he might have imitated the actions of those children, who were mostly non-Christians. When he remembered those days he felt so much of compunction and he stated that till he joined the *Kalari* he moved only as fitting to the holy eyes of Jesus. Moving with those children, he might have become ungrateful to God. He says that what he saw in the *Kalari* were causes for sin, such as, playing without modesty, walking naked, words and actions not becoming for a child of Jesus.¹⁷

In most of his works he expressed the compunction of his soul. In his chronicles, he often lamented his faults and shortcomings. He asked pardon to his co-religious. He asked pardon also to the nuns at Koonammavu.¹⁸ At the beginning of *Dhyanasallapangal*, the saint after recollecting the advice his mother had given him, that is, to keep away from pride and self-complacency, humbled himself saying that he was

¹⁶ Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867*, 20. However, Chavara was not made a bishop because some objections were raised from the missionaries. Paul Pallath, after analysing the letters written by the missionaries citing reasons, such as, inexperience in governance, insufficient knowledge of morals, advanced age, indisposition and extreme weakness of body, against the choice of Chavara for episcopacy, concludes, “The real reason for the opposition of the missionaries to the consecration of a native bishop was their desire to preserve the episcopacy and jurisdiction over the St Thomas Christians exclusively for themselves.” Cf. Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?*, Bengaluru, Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 118.

¹⁷ *Atmanuthapam*, slokas, 92-112, in Z.M. Muzhoor (ed), *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works*, Mannanam, 1981.

¹⁸ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, VII/2, Letter to the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent, p. 106-107.

unworthy to reach high degrees of prayer and sanctity, because he was a great sinner with a heart impure and opaque without the virtues of cleanliness and modesty.¹⁹

A repentant person is a humble person. Chavara's humility can be measured from the questions he asked himself, "For is it because of my power and skill that I did things whatsoever? How is it that you came hither? Who called me from home? How did I become a priest? How could I join the community and become a member of the congregation? Why should anyone address me as prior? Do I deserve any one of these favours? The answer is: "Not at all to be sure".²⁰ His extreme humility made him identify himself with the prodigal son of the parable. In *Dhyanasallapangal*, he made a long meditation on the parable posing himself as the prodigal.

4.3. Depth of Faith

Chavara was a person, we may say, who walked not by the eyesight but by faith. He had such a strong faith in the Providence of God. There were numerous incidents in his life, where he initiated activities without resources in hand.²¹ His firm belief was God would provide it. And God did provide them. He also taught his people to have such a strong faith in God. When he instructed the people to collect funds for the future establishment of a Confraternity of Happy Death, he instructed the people to collect as much as they could and "God would provide the rest."²²

Chavara had a very childlike relationship with God. God the Father as well as Jesus, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity were for him *Appan*. He used the term *Appan* 31 times in *Dhyanasallapangal*. *Appan* is the word that shows the most intimate relationship between children and the father in a family. In *Dhyanasallapangal*, he stated that he couldnot call God by any other name.²³ He also compared God's unparalleled love to the love of a mother. Just as a mother awakens the

¹⁹ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed, *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works*, Mannanam, 1981, 13.

²⁰ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works*, Mannanam, 1981, 13

²¹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 429.

²² Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol IV, Letters*, Mannanam, 1986, 160.

²³ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol III, Spiritual Works*, Cochin, 1981, 17.

sleeping child and gives it breast milk, our loving *Appan* will fulfil all our needs even before asking for them. He moved and did everything trusting in the Providence of God, the logic of which the rationalists cannot understand. He had such an intimate relationship with God that for him prayer was like the intimate conversation among the friends.²⁴

He had great faith in the intercessions of the saints. In *Dhyanasallapangal*, we often find the saint interceding to Saint Teresa of Avila, whom he considered his Mother in faith for graces to pray and meditate well. Similarly, he often invoked the names of Saint Joseph, the Holy Family and Saint Maria Magdalene in his daily prayers.²⁵

His life was guided by the faith in the communion of saints. Just as he prayed to the souls in heaven he reminded the people to be conscious of those in the purgatory who needed the prayers of the living. Through many anecdotes he taught the people on the need for praying the souls in purgatory.²⁶

Atmanuthapam, in its earlier verses, gives expression to his faith. He firmly believed in the total graciousness of God. So he thanked God for all the gifts, physical, intellectual and spiritual, that he possessed. He thanked God for being born with a healthy body without any deformity, for being born from believing and moderately rich parents, he thanked God for the grace of baptism; that he did not die unbaptized; for the priesthood, etc.²⁷ He always believed that whatever he undertook was not his work, but God's own.

A strong faith life was visible in the totality of his life-style. His humble submission to the will of the Superiors,²⁸ his sense of renunciation²⁹ and his forgiving mind are indicators of his sublime faith life. Though his hectic work during the turbulent Church history of the 19th century had earned him some adversaries, he kept nothing against them in his mind. Some of them towards the end of their life was given

²⁴ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed, *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol III, *Spiritual Works*, 14.

²⁵ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol III, *Spiritual Works*, 15, 16.

²⁶ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol II, *Literary Works*, 129ff.

²⁷ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol II, *Literary Works*, *Atmanuthapam*, slokas 1-44.

²⁸ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 142-143.

²⁹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 424.

asylum in Chavara's monastery itself. Roccas had even threatened his life, but Chavara gave him a decent and dignified sent off!

4.4. Divine Connectedness

The book *Atmanuthapam* reveals to us the man who Chavara was. The book brings to us the inner longings of a mystic. Chavara's desire was to see Jesus and all the mysteries associated with him with his own eyes. He wanted to see the primordial brightness of the Son of Man. He wanted to see the Son of Man in his incarnated form in which he assumed the form of a lowly human being in order to remove the stains of human sin, how the brightness that dwarfs the brightness of the Sun was eclipsed in his human body.

He longed to see how the son of Man spent nine months in the womb of the Virgin. He wanted to see how he in his foetal stage came to Bethlehem as per the decree of Caesar. He longed to see how God became one among us as the word Emmanuel denotes. He wanted to see the parents of Jesus who underwent suffering when they did not find any house for Mary to deliver her son. In this way Chavara narrated the entire mystery of God in poetry and the focus was that he longed to see his loving Jesus with his own eyes in all these dimensions. So intense was his love of God; so strong his urge to be united with him.³⁰

His prayer moments were intense. Meditation was for him a conversation with God. "Bound by His love, just as we converse with our friends, we sit and talk to Jesus Christ, to whom we are betrothed."³¹ During the meditation times, others often saw him intensely hooked on Jesus so much so that he would forget the time to wind up the prayer as the Prior. It was reported that often someone had to nod to him to tell him that the prayer time was up. Tears would run down his cheek as he walked to the refectory at the end of the prayer. Chavara advised his religious daughters to grow in such a divine connectedness. He wrote to the nuns, "I lock up your hearts, in the tabernacle of Jesus, for your sake, I have locked up my heart too there. Stay there until the day of resurrection."³²

³⁰ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works, Atmanuthapam*, III, slokas 1- 68.

³¹ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol III, Spiritual Works*, 14.

³² A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 453.

Having familiarised with the qualities that would make Chavara an effective instrument of catechesis, let us now have a look at the catechetical pedagogy he adopted for the faith formation of the people.

5. Chavara's Catechetical Pedagogy

Catechetical Pedagogy involves various means through which catechesis is imparted. It considers the addresses of catechesis, formation of catechists, approaches to catechesis, its content, the locations where catechesis is imparted, the sources of catechesis, etc. We shall see how Chavara employed these aspects of the catechetical pedagogy.

5.1. Addressees of Catechesis

Who were the people to whom Chavara addressed his message? The insightful reply of the Vicar Apostolic Archbishop Maurelius Stabilini to the founding fathers of the CMI congregation, when they approached him seeking permission for going for hermitage gives an exact picture of the situation of the Catholics of that time. He told them, "If you three who are educated to some extent, go for hermitage, who will be here to teach our people?"³³ The catechetical situation of 19th century Kerala church was pathetic. There was not much training being imparted in matters of spiritual, liturgical, and ecclesial life. One of the reasons for such a state was that the Church of Kerala was left without a unifying leadership. There were different contestants for the leadership of this Apostolic Church now lying divided and mutilated due to many historical reasons. There were mainly two contestants for the leadership of the Church, the Western missionaries, and the Prelates from Persia. Chavara mentioned that just as a magnet is oriented towards the North, his people, his blood relatives in the matter of faith, were always looking to the East and it caused some kind of retardation in their spiritual growth. Therefore, so much of Christian legacy and practice of Christian holiness and values were wanting in this land. And so "this land that received the light of Faith from an Apostle himself (Apostle Thomas) remains barren (*machhi*) to this day and at the same time many lands and people who received the Gospel at a later time have produced many saints."³⁴ As George Nedungatt explains, this Church was practically in a dark age for about thousand years up to the Diamper synod. Nedungatt goes on to explain the condition obtaining in Malabar of

³³ Benoy P. Jacob, "Multifaceted Life of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara," in John Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 9. See also, A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 70-71.

³⁴ *Complete Works of Chavara: Nalagamangal*, 1981, p. 172. Free translation.

those days: there were no Bible translations, no biblical institutes, no catechetical institutes, no original publications, no theological contributions, and no person of world class scholarship in the matter of Christian studies. The major reason Fr. Nedungatt attributes to this situation was the umbilical cord relationship this Church wanted to keep with the Chaldean Church. The problems were not with the Chaldean Church, but with the administrative system in force here. The Church was under the Chaldean Bishops, who came once in a while to Kerala. There were long periods of gap without an episcopal head. Worse, these bishops from Chaldea never took to temporal administration, but attended only to sacramental administration. The temporal administration of the Church was carried out by a native priest who was known as Archdeacon, whereas in the West the Church made great strides in all fields, such as evangelization, Church expansion, theological development, publication of books, pastoral practices, catechetical outreach, seminary training, secular education, social service, etc., under able Bishops. It was in fact the Diamper synod that brought the Church under the jurisdiction of Bishops putting a halt to the Archdeacon's administration.³⁵

On the other side, the situation of the society was quite lamentable. Caste system was the rule of life, which divided people into numerous groups of graded inequality. Each caste considered itself superior and maintained a distance from every other. Caste decided everything, one's food, occupation, ownership of land, access to education, dress, habitats, travelling space, etc. Every caste had a dialect of its own, each alien to the other.³⁶ It was an unequal, largely underdeveloped, poor and illiterate society that Chavara had to address. Even to the very few schools that began to be established from 1817 by the Government only high caste people had access. Swami Vivekananda characterised Kerala of those times as a 'mad house' pained by seeing the atrocities perpetrated by the inhuman caste-system.

In short, it was a Church with an ignorant laity and a society of poor and illiterate people that Chavara had to address with his teaching and activities of development.

³⁵ George Nedungatt, "Liberation from the Dark Ages of the Pre-Diamper Indian Christianity," *Journal of St Thomas Christians* 24, 2 (2013) 11-42.

³⁶ M. Gopinath, "Saintly Voice of Silent Prayer," in John Mannarathara, ed., *Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 42.

5.2. Formation of Catechists

Chavara was quite sure that in order to effect true and authentic catechesis what was of primary need was a band of holy, trained and well-educated priests to take up the role of catechesis. The foundation of two religious congregations by him, for men and women respectively, has to be seen through this angle, that is, to provide trained leaders for the Church. He knew that the secret of the success of the Jesuit, Carmelite as well as Protestant missionaries was that their priests or pastors were well-educated, whereas among the Syrians this was not the case. The seminary formation among Syrians followed the Malpanate system in which a single priest, called Malpan, gave the priestly training to the candidates. Govindappilla, a secular historian says that Malpanates followed something like a feudal system. That is to say, the priests, who normally came from rich families would suggest their relatives for training in Malpanate. These candidates would live with the Malpan in the parish rectories akin to a kind of *Gurukulam*, where they would learn whatever the Malpan would teach them. It was anybody's guess how much a single Malpan, who, in most cases, would be in-charge of the parish as well, could teach the candidates. To remedy this situation and to give effective formation to the candidates for priesthood, Chavara established seminaries like those of the Western and the Anglican missionaries.³⁷ Besides, he constantly updated the priests by providing them ongoing catechesis pioneering what is today known as annual retreats for priests.

The prophetic mind of Chavara realized that a religious congregation for women would be an ideal tool in giving formation to women in the matters of integral faith. So together with Fr. Leopold the Italian missionary he founded the first indigenous religious congregation for women in 1866. Its aim was to train a good number of women and make them true instruments of Jesus for disseminating the Gospel in the interior villages and especially among the women and the poor people. He wanted to uplift the society financially by devising schemes for micro financing schemes, such as, rosary making, through the able leadership of these sisters.

5.3. Liturgical Catechesis

Even before the Kerygmatic catechesis was proposed by the Austrian Jesuit Joseph A. Jungmann in 1930s, Chavara had initiated the process here in Kerala. For him liturgy was the chief medium for faith education. Preaching of the Word of God during the liturgy was not common or

³⁷ P. Govindappilla, "Charitrathenayicha oral," in *SukruthamSmara*, A Beth Rauma Publications, 2012, 55.

effective in Kerala before Chavara's time.³⁸ He propagated the practice of preaching homilies every Sunday during the Holy Qurbana. His homilies were very powerful rendering of God's actions in the human minds and many people were converted hearing his homilies. Using biblical materials as well as stories that he had heard or read from books both from his own land and abroad, he called the minds of the people for conversion and adherence to Jesus. He established seven monasteries in prominent places in Kerala which could serve the people through the sacraments and the ministry of the word.

Chavara approached the liturgy itself with a catechist's mind. During his time, liturgical celebrations and the Scriptural readings were not systematized for each day of celebration. He took keen attention in renewing the liturgy by making it more priest and people friendly. Taking sufficient time and consulting original Syriac liturgical rubrics, he prepared a liturgical calendar for the Syrian community of Kerala. His deep scholarship in Syriac, besides Latin, Portuguese, Sanskrit and Malayalam stood him in good stead.

In like manner, Chavara renewed the canonical prayers of the Church, which many priests avoided due to its unscientific composition. The number of Psalms prescribed for each day was numerous. Sundays meant still more groups of Psalms, and Feast days furthermore of them so much so that on Easter Sunday and Christmas all the 150 Psalms had to be recited during the night prayer! No wonder, the priests avoided this kind of prayers. Chavara's spiritual wisdom urged him to compile a canonical prayer book which was affordable for use for all priests on all occasions.³⁹

We can say that Chavara brought liturgy out of its mere ritualistic understanding and made it more catechetical by introducing the moment of breaking of the word during a liturgical celebration, which would years later be mandated by Pope Saint John Paul II in 1977 in his catechetical document *Catechesi Tradendae*.⁴⁰

³⁸ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 218.

³⁹ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol IV, *Letters of Chavara*, Mannanam, 1982, 131.

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 23 in *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1986, 367-416.

5.4. Biblical Catechesis

Chavara, who was well-versed in Bible, wanted to dispense biblical knowledge with the people. First of all, his liturgical sermons were centred on the events and messages of the Bible. His wished to reach the biblical messages to as many people as possible in as many forms as possible. For this he adopted different methods. He wrote in poetical form the entire story of the New Testament. *Atmanuthapam* contains the description of the events of the New testament period and beyond. He resorted to poetical methodology in biblical catechesis for its power to impress the hearts of people as well as its evocative effect.

He also composed small dramas with biblical themes called eclogues.⁴¹ They were initially composed for his confreres and novices so that they could enact them during the Christmas holidays. Later, after the foundation of the convent for sisters, these eclogues got a wider stage.

His major historical intervention to disseminate Bible knowledge was his mega plan of establishing a printing press which at that time even his confreres considered the ambition of a man gone out of senses. For it was a project incurring huge costs. Nobody associated with him had any working knowledge of printing presses. Those days, there were only a few printing presses in India, like, the Government press at Goa, the press that belonged to the Church Mission Society at Kottayam and the one at Trivandrum that belonged to the Travancore Government, among others.

But Chavara's determination to supply people with books on biblical messages didn't dissuade him, even though his own people called him mad to conceive of such an ambitious project. He approached the Church Mission Society authorities to have a look at their press at Kottayam for which permission was not however granted.⁴² But his resolve was not to be snuffed. He made it to Trivandrum and had a look at the printing press there. Reaching back, Chavara made a form of the Press in plantain stem and engaged his carpenter to make one in wood. This wooden press became successful. Through his contacts with Spain, Chavara arranged for printing ink. He got a person experienced in printing work to set types.

⁴¹ John Paul (compiler), *Chavara Kuriakose Elias, Idayanatakangal* (Eclogues), Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2014; T.M. Abraham, "An Ascetic's Legacy in Theatre," in John Mannarathara (ed), *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 159-162.

⁴² P. Govindappilla, "Charitrathenayicha oral," in *SukruthamSmara*, 56.

The first books printed on this wooden press were all Malayalam translations of spiritual books in Tamil, Italian and Portuguese.

5.5. Popular Catechesis

Chavara's ingenuous spiritual wisdom was quite conversant with the local religious traditions. The Hindu spiritual masters used to give discourses for days together on temple campuses on the occasion of their religious feasts. For ordinary Hindu folks, this was the occasion to gather religious knowledge.⁴³ At the same time, Chavara had heard of the missions being carried out in the West chiefly by the Jesuit priests. Combining these, he initiated what is now known as annual retreats or parish retreats for people under the auspices of parish churches. Talks, classes, prayers and liturgy were the different components of these retreats. A very important aspect of this retreat was the family counselling given during these days. Reconciling families, divided couples and broken relationships were an essential feature of these retreats. These retreats worked for effective renewal of personal, familial as well as parish or societal life. Not long before, such annual retreats became a regular annual feature in every parish. Looking retrospectively, one can understand what a farsighted person Chavara was in developing such a useful catechetical methodology, which is now accepted as one of the best tools of renewal of life both by lay people as well as the consecrated, not to speak anything of its impact among people of other religions.

On the methodology of such parish missions, Porukara writes, "These brothers at the order of superiors, preached in different parishes having thousand or two thousand or even five thousand and more faithful, spiritual retreats and missions, taught catechism and heard confessions."⁴⁴

Because of the success of these parish missions, Vicar Apostolic Ludovico Martini officially appointed in 1849 the religious community headed by Chavara as the official preachers of spiritual exercises for the whole of the Vicariate. The Bishop wrote to Syrians and Latins in his Vicariate, "Therefore, I select and send to you Rev. Fr Kuriakose Malpan

⁴³ ThichNhatHanh describes large gatherings of Buddhist monks for annual retreats that lasted for 90 days in rainy seasons during the life time of Buddha. Cf: ThichNhatHanh, *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noises*, London: Rider, 2015, 177-180.

⁴⁴ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 218.

Chavara and the other priests at Mannanam. When any of them come to you, the vicar of the church takes care that an eight-day retreat is conducted in a convenient church either for each parish community separately or cumulatively for a few of them... Be diligent to participate in these exercises with good will and reap abundant fruit from them. This we command on precept of charity.⁴⁵ It is said that about 30 such retreats were conducted every year.⁴⁶

5.6. Catechumenates

Catechumenate was an institution of the ancient Church that lasted up to the 7th century, where potential adult converts to Christianity were given catechetical and liturgical training. This institution had died a natural death when infant baptism became the practice in the Church. It was revived in the West during the colonial missionary period, when again, adult conversions offered great possibility. The first of sorts in Kerala was established by the missionaries at Varapuzha. Later on there were individual efforts in this regard from different priests. In 1864 Chavara started a catechumenate attached to the Mannanam Monastery. The chronicles reveal that on Sundays and Feast days many boys came to study catechism and remained on the campus till 5 o' clock in the evening. Some of them came from distant places and some others were poor. So these boys were fed at noon time. They were also given clothes and pious articles, like rosaries and scapulars.

Soon, all the monasteries followed suit and catechumenates were started attached to every monastery. Many adults and children were trained and baptized every year. During the period between 1866 and 1931 more than 20,000 souls were gained for Christ by the missionary zeal of the fathers of the CMI Congregation.⁴⁷

5.7. Family Catechesis

Chavara was deeply conscious of the importance of family in ecclesial life. He never lost a chance to reach families with his catechetical resources. During the retreats, families were one of the focus areas. Even the name he took, Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family speaks much about his concern for families. Years before the Second Vatican Council called the family a domestic Church,⁴⁸ Chavara wrote, "A good Christian

⁴⁵ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 219.

⁴⁶ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 219.

⁴⁷ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 218.

⁴⁸ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

family is the image of heaven."⁴⁹ Everyone is a product of one's family upbringing. Chavara projected the Holy Family as the model for all families.

Chavara wrote a rather lengthy letter in 1868, a little before his death, addressed to his parishioners, which is now published as a booklet with the title, *Chavarul*. The content of his family catechesis is summarised in this letter, which can be considered as a 'code of conduct for families' of any religious community.⁵⁰ It offers a comprehensive plan for a family to remain and grow in Christian principles. It is a collection of wise teachings on all essential elements of family catechesis. This book can be considered the first catechetical letter in the Indian Church.⁵¹ Emulating St Paul, who wrote letters to the Churches he established, here Chavara wrote to the members of his Church, his local Church. The catechist in the man comes out shining in the methodology he proposed in this book for the effective spread of its contents. He asked each family to take a copy of this letter, keeping the original in the church and to read the letter every first Saturday of the month with family members assembled together.

This booklet has 24 paragraphs for general family code and 16 paragraphs regarding upbringing of children. Who knows whether it was a coincidence that the number 40 is fulfilled in these codes? The book touches all the aspects of family life, such as, the basic virtue of love that should unite all the family members, relationship between husband and wife, upbringing of children, prayer in families, conversations in families, acceptable visitors and guests in families, children's interactions with servants, children's friendship in the neighbourhood, kind of dress permitted for children at home, children visiting relatives' houses, family financial dealings, taking and giving loans, timely partition of parental properties, duties towards servants and workers, just wages to workers, etc. The letter gives clear indication to respect the developmental stages of children while dealing with them. He illustrates all these teachings with impressive stories and anecdotes. In all these,

⁴⁹ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara, Chavarul*, 133.

⁵⁰ Jancy James, "A Precious Source of Reference and Assurance," in John Mannarathara, ed., *Life and Legacy*, 134.

⁵¹ Saju Chackalackal, "Foreword, Family as the Heaven on Earth: A Theology of Family in the Chavarul of Saint Chavara," in George Kaniarakath, *Saint Kuriakose Chavara, in A Teacher of family Theology*, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 2, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 10.

Chavara articulated the Christian way of maintaining family life. There are many touching expressions in the book. For example, he said, "Children who go as angels to their own relative's house, sometimes return as devils"⁵² alluding to the possible misuse of children even by relatives. He advised the parents not to take upon themselves the minor fights that occurs among children and make a mountain out of them. He advised parents not to allow boys and girls of the same siblings to sleep in one room, because "What they do not know by nature, the Satan will teach them."⁵³

5.8. Social Catechesis

"Between evangelization and human advancement - development and liberation - there are in fact profound links," declared Pope Paul VI in his celebrated document *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.⁵⁴ Jesus ministry was not restricted to the souls of the people; he addressed to the physical needs of the people as well. The prophets of the Old Testament were keen on teaching the people that covenant life was fulfilled only when they did their duty to the poor, moving away from oppressions of all sorts and attending to the needs of the poor, the orphans, widows and the strangers.

Chavara understood that the crux of all the problems that the society faced was the closed mind, closed in all sorts of superstitions, caste considerations and its consequences, such as marginalization of the lower caste people, untouchability, unseeability, and appropriation of educational facilities to upper caste people. The general public was illiterate and dependant on the rich upper caste people for their livelihood. Only universal education, open to all sections of the people reaching to grass roots levels would solve this problem, he understood. He ventured in a large way into this mountainous mission.

5.8.1. Overcome Caste Barrier

All of humanity is but one family. Hinduism proclaims this value loudly through its message of *vasudhaiva kudumbakam*'. But the caste practice in Hinduism that puts up barriers between humans disproves this noble idea. Chavara wanted to create a society that recognized the equal dignity of all. He taught that social values, or cultural assets were not reserved to any castes or religions. To bring this point home into the

⁵² Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, 145.

⁵³ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, Chavarul, 145

⁵⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 31, in *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*, 149-200.

psyche of the people he started a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846 for Dalits. This step was revolutionary on two counts: first of all, Sanskrit was considered the language of high caste people. Dalits were forbidden to learn it. Secondly, in those times only high caste people had access to education, but here in this school Dalits were the pupils. So in one stroke, he expressed his vision for the society; he wanted an egalitarian society where everyone had access to all of its resources. He made education free of cost for the poor people. He started midday meal for the poor pupils of this school raising funds from different parish churches.

5.8.2. Universal Education: Every Parish Church to run one School

True catechesis and sustained development of society presuppose a society that values education. Chavara was determined to transform the educational scenario of Kerala. It was a time when the educational mission was just picking up due to the efforts of some well-meaning kings and Protestant missionaries, though access to Government schools were restricted to caste people.

Saint Chavara's spirit was awakened in a great way. In his capacity as the Vicar General of the Syrian Catholics, he embarked upon a ground breaking idea that would in future make history for the entire Kerala society. Chavara issued a circular in 1864 asking every parish in Kerala to open a school attached to it. He hit upon this idea, again, from his contacts with the West, where parish churches ran schools attached to them. The effect was marvellous. This was the moment when the society of Kerala woke up from its long slumber to a new era of universal primary education. Many schools came up attached to the churches. And the trend never lost momentum. Soon other religious communities entered the field of education and all of them together made Kerala a hub of quality education and a place of hundred percent literacy.

Chavara was keen to enrol children from Dalit families in the schools. He sent messengers to Dalit houses asking them to send their children to the church schools. However, there were huge drop outs initially from the part of Dalits who were poor and whose parents wanted their children to go for work. Chavara asked the parishes to circumvent the sorry state by providing midday meal, books and clothes freely to those children by raising funds.

5.8.3. Social Concern: House of Charity at Kainakary

Caring for the sick is an act of mercy. Our catechesis teaches us to see Christ himself in the sick and the suffering. Chavara wanted to open a house to help the elderly and the destitute. To this effect he wrote to his

people at Kainakary on 15 October 1869 in which he pointed out how important it was to prepare themselves and others for a happy death as well as to love and care for the sick and the dying. In preparation for opening a house for the destitute people, he started a Confraternity for Happy death and made arrangements for the collection of funds. He asked the people to keep a charity box labelled, "Happy Death Charity Box" and without being ashamed of it, beg of others and raise funds and build a modest charity home near their small chapel. He asked them to place such charity boxes in the markets of Changanachery and Alapuzha, two major townships teeming with trade. He asked them to carry such charity boxes at the time of harvest around the fields. He encouraged them to begin taking care of at least one or two sick people. In this way he hoped to spread this ministry of compassion in the entire region of Malabar.

So far we have seen the elaborate catechetical pedagogy that Chavara adopted to spread the Good News and educate his children in the tasks that the Good News of Jesus enjoins upon us. Now let's have a look at some of the concrete methods that he used to realize his catechetical pedagogy.

6. Methodological Aspects of Chavara's Catechesis

Chavara's catechetical approaches made use of a variety of methodological aspects, such as, writings, print media, library system, accompaniment, pastoral letters, warnings, storytelling, narration, inculturation, evocation, learning from observation, etc.

• Writings:

○ *Dramas and Plays*

The original and creative mind of Chavara devised a new method for catechesis. It was dramas or plays. He wrote 10 catechetical plays from 1856 onwards⁵⁵ with themes such as salvation of man, Christian virtues and moral values. Some of them were centred around the annunciation and birth of Jesus. These plays of catechetical content were written in the form of *eclogues*, and were meant for stage presentation by his confreres as well as novices from Christmas day to the Day of Epiphany. This was his way of celebrating the birth of

⁵⁵ Thomas Panthaplackal, *Snehadoothintenatakasakhyam*, in John Paul (compiler), *Chavara Kuriakose, Idayanatakangal* (Eclogues), Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2014.

Jesus and impressing the message of Christmas in the hearts of his seminary students.

In this matter Chavara's pioneering spirit is to be recognized. He was the first to compose original plays in Kerala. The first historically recognized drama in Malayalam language is the translation of Kalidasas's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* which was published in 1882. If we consider the origin of dramas in vernacular languages again Chavara's eclogues come first. As of now, "*Nil Darpan (The Mirror of indigo)* written by Dinabandhu Mitra in Bengali in 1860 is considered to be the first Indian vernacular drama that went on stage."⁵⁶ "The Eclogues of Chavara were written and staged well before *Nil Darpan*. They also preceded Kerala Varma ValiyaKoyithampuran's 1882 Malayalam translation of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*."⁵⁷

○ Poetry

Poetry attracts people and engages their heart. Poetry is illuminating whereas prose can be boring. What is expressed through poetry lingers in the heart for a longer time than what is conveyed through prose. So, Chavara took the medium of poetry to describe the entire New Testament history to the people. In like manner, he dealt with different spiritual themes, such as, the role of virtues, the theme of death, the need for praying for the souls in purgatory, courage to witness to faith, etc.,⁵⁸ through the medium of poetry. He wrote poems to reveal to people in a language familiar to them the greatness of their faith.

○ Books and Library System

Chavara knew that his people had no sources to receive spiritual ideas and insights apart from the homilies and the retreats. Spiritual books were not available to the people. So as we noted above he established a printing press at Mannanam and published many spiritual books. *Jnanapiusham*, a Malayalam translation of a Tamil spiritual book was the first one to be printed. And later on Chavara published many spiritual books translated from Portuguese, Latin and Italian.

⁵⁶ T.M. Abraham, "An Ascetic's Legacy in Theatre," 161.

⁵⁷ T.M. Abraham, "An Ascetic's Legacy in Theatre," 161.

⁵⁸ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works*, 129ff.

The method he employed to reach these books to people was very ingenuous. He started in those days what later developed into the public library system in India. He opened the libraries of the monasteries he established for the people of the locality so that the latter could read the books there or even take them home, read, and return. In this way Chavara made sure that people had occasion for reading and growing in Christian and spiritual knowledge.

• Pastoral Letters and Circulars

Chavara's close contacts and familiarity with the Western missionaries and their customs, were, perhaps, behind his profuse use of letter writing as a means of educating his confreres and people. He wrote in all 86 letters in languages such as, Malayalam, Syriac, Latin, Italian, and Tamil.⁵⁹ He used this medium to educate people in faith, inspire them to undertake pastoral initiatives, correct his confreres and request Holy Father's mediation in many of the Church concerns. His letters are an authentic source of information on the situation of the Church and the society of his times.

- **Storytelling:** Chavara was a very effective story teller. In all his writings as well as sermons, he has made use of this method to substantiate his arguments.
- **Narration:** Narration was another means employed by Chavara. He used to narrate different situations with all its possible nuances.
- **Evocation:** His poetic works such as, *Atmanuthapam*, *Martyrdom of Anastasia and Dirge* are capable of raising the hearts and minds of the readers in sublime spiritual thoughts as they constantly evoke a sense of awe and love and intimacy to the *Appan* of all of us.
- **Inculturation:** Chavara was keen to take good elements from the Indian culture to enhance the quality of spiritual life and liturgical life of the people. First of all, he encouraged the study of Sanskrit for its content of spiritual and devotional writings and hymns. It was in imitation of the twilight singing of bhajans in Hindu homes that he composed some of his poems and songs based on the life of Jesus. Ending the practice of keeping artificial flowers made of paper and cloth in churches, influenced by the European practice, he insisted on keeping fresh flowers, which was the practice in temples. In like

⁵⁹M. Gopinath, "In Pauline Lineage," in John Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy*, 124.

manner, as was mentioned above the retreats he initiated were all original practices in the Indian tradition.⁶⁰

- **Warning:** Just as Paul enjoined Timothy to "warn them before God against quarrelling about words" (2 Timothy 2:14), Chavara used to warn his confreres as well as his readers that whether one wills or not, God will do his will in our life.⁶¹ Many times he warned his confreres that if they didn't practice humility, obedience, love and discipline, God himself would bring an end to their religious congregation, though it was constituted by himself. Seeing the non-exemplary life of the members he once wrote, "Be sure, if we go this way, our monasteries will not last for twenty years from now. The stability of the monasteries is guaranteed not by the thickness of the walls, but by the zeal and virtuous life of their members. How many monasteries, larger than ours existed in different parts of the world! But, they have, we don't know how, now become woods and habitats of wild animals."⁶²
- **Accompanying:** The cumulative effect of all the methods mentioned above shows Chavara's intense desire to be with his people in their spiritual journey. Besides, he was a man on continual journey, as well. He established monasteries in many places so as to give access to people of those localities to spiritual and sacramental life. He masterminded their constructions without exempting him from his other tasks such as writing chronicles, poetry, and giving retreats. He even wanted to be with the sick and the suffering. Once during a Small Pox epidemic, resisting everyone's warnings and advices, he went to a small pox patient and gave him holy communion.
- **Learning through Observation:** Chavara was humble enough to accept good and useful elements from any authentic sources. Most of the prayer methods he brought to our land were imitations of the same practice in the West, such as, forty-hour adoration, thirteen-hour adoration, stations of the cross, rosary and devotions to the

⁶⁰ A. Shreedharamenon, "Ghoshikkapedathepoya Charitraparvam," in *Sukrutham Smara* (Collection of articles), A Bet Rauma Publication, Kochi, 2012, 19.

⁶¹ Z.M. Muzhoor, ed., *Complete Works of Chavara, Vol II, Literary Works*, Mannanam, 1981, 13.

⁶² Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara*, VI/1, The letter written to members of the Congregation by Fr. Chavara and Fr. Leopold, 94.

saints. Similarly, some of the methods he employed in raising funds to help the Vicariate as well as his own projects were imitations of the practice he found in his own confreres or other priests, such as, fixing five percent taxes on the net income of parishes, *pidiyari* and *kettuthengu*.⁶³

- Summing up, we can say that Chavara put to maximum use the time-tested as well as original methods born in his insightful mind to bring people to maturity of faith in life and action. His attention was to reach out to people of all walks of life and of different tastes with catechetical means appropriate to them.

7. Conclusion

Saint Chavara was a man who lived much ahead of his time. His ideas of faith correspond not to his century but to the twentieth century. For him catechesis could not be merely doctrinal, but had to be experiential. Catechesis had to influence all the aspects of human life, matters of soul, sacramental life, liturgical life, family life, social life, and interpersonal relationships. It had to bring people to conversion of hearts and greater communion with God and the Church and a holy and virtuous Christian life in families, on the one hand, and address the dehumanizing situations, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and marginalization, on the other. Thus, life of faith was not a matter concerned only with church going, but it was more to be concerned with what sort of a person one

⁶³ The expenses of the Vicariate were being met by the annual subsidy from France. But this was not sufficient. When Vicar Apostolic Becinelli sought from Chavara regarding means to raise funds for various activities, such as, running of seminaries, and other developmental programmes, Chavara suggested collection of 5% tax from each parish, 5% of the net income of every parish (net income means total income minus expenses). Though the Bishop was sceptical about its success, Chavara was confident considering the esteem he had among the people and because almost all of the vicars were trained in the seminaries at Mannanam and Pallipuram.

Pidiyari: This was another local method employed to augment the income of the Vicariate. *Pidiyari* means setting apart a handful of rice before cooking, especially, to donate for poor people. Though it was originally employed by another priest, Fr. Geevarghese Thoppil of his own congregation for the construction of the Pulincunnu monastery as Vicar General Chavara introduced it in the entire Vicariate.

Kettuthengu: Yet another ingenuous method, this time advised by the same Fr. Geevarghese, was the *kettuthengu* custom, that is, reserving one coconut tree of a family for church purpose.

becomes and what sort of a society one tries to create. His firm conviction was that faith should lead one to action (James 2:14-17). This led him to greater concerns for social development and transformation. He said that "A day on which you have not done a good deed would not be considered in the Book of Life."⁶⁴ His concern for the neglected working class was proverbial. In the 19th century, even before the ideas of Karl Marx in his work *Das Kapital* (1867) could echo in our land, Saint Chavara advocated just wages for workers and to give the same on time.⁶⁵ Just as Jesus' ministry involved verbal teaching of faith and signs of the power of faith, Saint Chavara envisaged a catechetical pedagogy that consisted in incessant education in faith as well as untiring work to develop the standard of human life. This he tried to achieve primarily through giving the light of knowledge and fruits of development to the people of the times.

Saint Chavara shows that one teaches primarily through lived examples. No one can be a catechist unless one has a profound experience of God. His life was characterized by a kind of filial love of God. He approached God with the innocent love of a little child calling God 'Dad'. At the same time, he spent the moments of his meditation in sweet talks with God as between friends. Saint Chavara proved himself to be a true catechist, a contemplative in action.

⁶⁴ Lukose Vithuvattickal, ed., *Letters of Chavara, Chavarul*, n. 13.

⁶⁵ Chavara made this admonition to people in his letter, *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (The farewell words of a good father) that he wrote to his parishioners on February 13, 1868.