

## KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA OF THE HOLY FAMILY: A PASTOR WITH THE SENSE OF MYSTERY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DIVINE

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**Abstract:** This article is a humble attempt to trace the characteristics of Saint Kurikose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family with a particular reference to the Fathers of the Church, showcasing the sense of Mystery and the experience of the Divine manifest in his writings. Imbibing the spirit of Eastern theological outlook, Kuriakose Elias seems immersed in the Liturgical tradition of the Thomas Christians of India, which celebrates the Mystery of the Divine and highlights human dignity outstandingly. His *Colloquies with Heavenly Father (Dhyanasallapangal)* showcases Kuriakose's mystical, poetic, pastoral insights and inclinations soaked in spiritual conversation. The sequence of the article is simple: Mystery, Ministry, and Mercy, all moving in unison to enlighten and empower human beings to see the glory, joy, and beauty of the Mystery of the Trinity through the efficacy of human agents.

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## Introduction:

### Saint Kuriakose in the Footsteps of the Fathers of the Church

*Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church* observes the importance of the sense of Mystery and the divine experience. "In their attitudes as theologians and pastors, they showed to a marked degree their deep sense of mystery and their experience of the divine."<sup>1</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family was immersed in the Trinitarian Mystery and intimately experienced the Divine—his life and ministry vouch for them, which we shall examine in this brief account.

Imbued by the sense of Mystery and imbued with the divine experience, the hallmark of the Fathers of the Church, Kuriakose's *Colloquies with Heavenly Father* vouches for his outstanding reach of the Mystery in his spiritual experience. He writes, "O my Father, how graceful is your face! David's rapturous song praising your face's beauty rings in my ears. I have heard and come to believe that your face is a source of joy and consolation to those who look at it."<sup>2</sup> Kuriakose raises his eyes to God's countenance, lifts his heart, and converses with the Lord, "O my soul, hasten to Him and thank Him for His great mercy."<sup>3</sup> He locks himself with the Lord of the Eucharist in the Tabernacle and keeps gazing at the beauty and glory of God's presence, "O Let me have a closer look at the holy face of my creator. This holy face is the source – the light that brightens the angels and the lives of those in misery."<sup>4</sup> These excerpts give us a taste of Saint Kuriakose's *guru parampara* and the *guru mantra* of the master regarding the divine Mystery.

In shepherding the people of God, the Fathers of the Church used a more experiential and mystical method, congenial to biblical style and substance, rendering in the cultural ethos. They were good pastors after the image of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. Naturally, they took up

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<sup>1</sup> *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church*, Congregation for Catholic Education, published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition (English), 15 January 1990: 8-15.

<sup>2</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* in *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. III, trans. Jose Chittilappilly, The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, Mannanam, 1990, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 11.

the biblical imageries and types to interpret the faith as reasonable and relating to the faithful. Saint Ephrem took up the clothing imagery from the Pauline corpus of "put on Christ" (Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27). The whole theology of "robe of glory" is typical and topical to convey the Mystery of Baptism – the narrative of putting on Christ – tangibly.

Saint Ephrem employs this imagery as a means of linking together in a dynamic fashion the whole of salvation history; it is a means of indicating the interrelatedness between every stage in this continuing working out of divine providence. Basically, there are four main episodes which go to make up this cosmic drama: at the Fall, Adam and Eve lose the "Robe of Glory" with which they had originally been clothed in Paradise; in order to re-clothe the naked Adam and Eve (in other words, humanity), God himself "puts on the body" from Mary, and at the Baptism Christ laid the Robe of Glory in the river Jordan, making it available once again for humanity to put on at baptism; then, at his or her baptism, the individual Christian, in "putting on Christ," puts on the Robe of Glory, thus re-entering the terrestrial anticipation of the eschatological Paradise, in other words, the Church; finally, at the Resurrection of the Dead, the just will in all reality re-enter the celestial Paradise, clothed in their Robe of Glory.<sup>5</sup>

Seen from this backdrop of Saint Ephrem, there is a likelihood to imagine Kuriakose was deeply immersed in the divine Mystery celebrated in the Eucharistic Liturgy of the catholic wing of the Thomas Christians of India,<sup>6</sup> for the Liturgy is an elaborate experiential ambience of the Mystery of the Trinity unfolding the Mystery of human beings springing from the Mystery of the Holy Trinity. A concise illustration of it is found in the celebration of the Qurbana:

God the Father, You are holy. You alone are the true Father! All Fatherhood in heaven and on earth comes from you. Eternal Son, You are holy. Everything is created through You. Holy Spirit, You are Holy. Everything is sanctified through you.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1990, 66.

<sup>6</sup> The naming of the Catholic church of the Thomas Christians of India as "Syro-Malabar Church" is of later origin.

<sup>7</sup> *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, Syro-Malabar Bishop's Synod, Commission for Liturgy, Kakkanad, 2005, 51.

It is confessional in style and the summary of the economy of salvation. All pastors and ministers of the mysteries of salvation share this foundational experience, the roadmap of the revelation and faith of every Christian. Accordingly, all pastors participate in the fundamental experience of Jesus Christ, the Master and Saviour of the world. For instance, we encounter Jesus experiencing this Mystery during his ministry. Jesus said:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father and no one knows the Son except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11:25-27).

We are called to inherit the vision of Jesus, and Kuriakose was blessed to share the same. The editors of the book *The Lord of Heaven and Earth* comment on the above passage, "Every human being is called to be blessed with Jesus' vision. They are to enter in union with the new Adam to celebrate the new creation."<sup>8</sup> Disciples are challenged to imbibe the spirit of their master. They observe, "Chavara was blessed with the vision of his Guru. Thus, he could see God's cosmic faces and hear the creator's cosmic voices in the entire creation. He dedicated his life to make every face the divine face, every voice the heavenly voice."<sup>9</sup> The experience of the Mystery is agreeable to all his followers, and the pastors have been following the path of the master in their life and ministry. Beautiful illustrations of the immersive experience of God's Mystery and the ministers' unworthiness are celebrated in the Liturgy.

Well-versed in the Liturgy of Addai and Mari, Kuriakose might have picked up the disposition natural to a pastor from the Qurbana and deepened it through his mystic and poetic writings. In the Qurbana, the priest prays the following prayer during the singing of Sanctus:

Woe to me! I am dismayed! For my lips are unclean. And I live in the midst of people with unclean lips. My eyes have seen the King, the almighty Lord. How awe-inspiring is this place where today I have seen the Lord face to face! This is none other than the House of God!

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Kalluveettil & Paulachan Kochappilly, ed., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth. Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr Lucas Vithuvattickal*, CMI, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2004, 9.

<sup>9</sup> P. Kalluveettil & P. Kochappilly, *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, 9.

Lord, may Your mercy be on us. Clean us who are unclean and sanctify our lips. Lord, enjoin the hymns of us, who are feeble, with the praises of the Seraphim and Archangels. Praise be to Your mercy that has unified the inhabitants of heaven and earth."<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the ineffable Mystery of the Eucharist shaped the vision and mission of Kuriakose. Devotion to the Eucharistic Lord springing from the celebration of the Qurbana is unparalleled in the life of Kuriakose. His writing, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, is studded with the incredible experience of the Mystery and his unworthiness to approach the Eucharistic Lord.

Sense of reality and significance of Mystery stand or fall together, for one reveals or conceals the other. Either truth and Mystery exist together, or none. Reality is the ground and meaning of the Mystery. There is no mystery without the reality. Mystery makes reality more experiential and comprehensive, providing an aura of sacredness and reverence to what is beheld. Reality shrouded in Mystery becomes more attractive and appealing to human senses and, consequently, to human reason.

Celebrations make events and moments more inspiring and motivating. So the ministers and pastors in the Church discerned the Mystery from reality and helped the folk navigate their lives in the context of shepherding to the green pastures and calm waters. The pastors knew well how to balance Mystery and reality to give them a sense of purpose and significance in people's lives. Kuriakose was no exception.

A mystery takes us closer to reality, with all its diversity and plurality. It is equally valid that reality brings us to the realm of Mystery, for everything is a riddle when approached closely and intimately. For instance, a person is a reality, but at close examination, we realise they are a bundle of mysteries, seeking further explanations and investigations. In this connection, we appreciate the insight of Soeren Kierkegaard, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but is a reality to be experienced." Later, Gabriel Marcel improved the statement by articulating, "Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved." Approaching things and persons as mysteries rather than problems helps people to anchor their relationships concerning realities, and such a disposition will nurture and foster an ambience of overall sacredness, which is fast disappearing from human interactions and involvements.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, 52.

The mentality of commodification, cut-throat competition, and the attitude of use, misuse, and abuse are rampant in our present-day scenario. Sacredness and sacramentality of creation should be reclaimed at the earliest, which alone leads us to a prosperous future.

Pastors always try their best to draw the folk to the mysteries of God in the context of their everyday lives. As a result of an encounter with the Lord, pastors share their joy, peace, and bliss with their people, leading them to the awe-inspiring presence of God as the Samaritan woman evangelises the dwellers of her city. Jesus, during his conversation with the Samaritan woman, was giving a tour of the mysteries of God in light of the turn of events in history and her personal life. As she encountered the Messiah in Jesus at the well of Jacob, the city dwellers, in turn, experienced the Saviour of the world in Jesus and said, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (Jn 4:42). Whether it is the case of the Samaritan woman or with the people of the city, turning to the Saviour is gradual, respectful, and dramatic. It gives us a beautiful pattern of drawing people to the glory of God.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, while involved in the manifold things, was taking the people step by step to the mysteries of God and enabling them to participate in eternal life. For example, Jesus taught about the question of God's creation and providence in the world through simple narratives. Jesus taught the people, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Mt 6:26, 28-29). He invites his disciples to see the beauty of the created realities. Then, he alludes to the glory and wisdom of God, leading us to the new earth and heaven, a world vision perfectly blended with cosmic and eschatological.

As a good shepherd to the newly established religious congregation, Kuriakose shares his paternal and fraternal thoughts with his confreres in a letter addressed to members in different communities:

Beloved brethren, this humble community of ours is not founded by humans but by God Himself. He has founded it miraculously; you are all witnesses to the truth that God has nurtured and brought it up. Hence, persecution by humans rejection or obstructions by creatures cannot destroy it. But one thing can annihilate it, that is, if we forget

the meaning of our call, forsake the responsibilities of our religious life and fail in humility, obedience, charity, religious discipline and genuine devotion and are satisfied with appreciating them in words and not in deeds.<sup>11</sup>

These words of Kuriakose come from a heart absorbed in the sense of Mystery and deep personal divine experience. Further, in the same circular, he admonishes, "The strength of the monasteries is not the thickness of the walls, but the zealous and devout life of its members."<sup>12</sup> Being the first Prior of the Monastery, Kuriakose reminds his friends to anchor their lives on divine providence and humble obedience.

In what follows, I would like to discuss the sense of Mystery and the divine experience of Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family under three headings mutually interrelated: 1) Sense of Mystery and Sense of Ministry; 2) Experience of the Divine and Empowering of the Human, and 3) Sense of Mercy and the Pastoral Ministry.

### **1. Sense of Mystery and Sense of Ministry**

A sense of Mystery surrounds the realities of life; all relationships illustrate a mystery of some sort, which evokes a kind of sacredness and fascination. A hallow of indescribable nature encompasses persons and things that attract us to them but with awe and reverence. Kuriakose expresses his sense of vision and mission:

Nourishing his soul, he was tutored in paths  
Of virtue; to assist at the Holy Qurbana  
Gently taught to tread the ways of holiness;  
To shun all evils that'd retard his onward march (*Compunction I*,  
137-140).

Such attraction to reality coupled with Mystery represents ineffable beauty. This incredible experience leads to imagination and serves as successive inspiration for action in the real world. This invisible, mysterious hallowing is the knot of Mystery and ministry, encircling the beholder simultaneously to transcendence and immanence. The greater

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<sup>11</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Leopold Missionary, "A Circular Letter Addressed to All Members of the Congregation Written on 1 July 1869" quoted from *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Letters*. Vol. IV, trans. Augustine Keemattam, Chavara Central Secretariat, Kochi, 2000, 102.

<sup>12</sup> K. E. Chavara and L. Missionary, "A Circular Letter Addressed to All Members, 107.

the experience of Mystery around reality, the larger the expression of it in terms of translation and transformation.

The Lord of mercy in His great compassion  
To His blessed mother did enslave me  
And while on nectar, Mother on earth fed me  
At her feet, Mary kept me safe hourly (Compunction, II, 1-4).

People who glimpse the Mystery will show great enthusiasm and energy to walk the path of darśan. Such darśan in the religious realm gives added impetus and momentum to commit wholeheartedly to facing challenges squarely. The life of Kuriakose was an ode to the Lord encircled by divine Mystery and divine mercy. He vents his foundational experience on different occasions:

God almighty, who was in the beginning  
You created me, a son of Adam  
O God, wherefore this grace, reveal to me  
O Lord eternal, your infinite mercy.<sup>13</sup>

A worm creeping on the face of the earth  
You created me from the dust of dust  
Granted me a guardian spirit so pure  
That I may dwell on earth in grace and ease.<sup>14</sup>

What shall I render you, my Lord, my God,  
For all your wondrous gifts of mercy and love  
For cleansing my soul, so holy, spotless and fair  
At the very start of my journey of life?<sup>15</sup>

The mystical experience of the Mystery takes one to the terrain of ministry, an overflow of the vision or darśan. To have a *darśan veedu* for the religious communitarian life may be seen from this angle. *Bethrauma*, the house on the hilltop, tells volumes on the sense of Mystery, irradiating the biblical and Indian spiritual and religious traditions manifesting the thirst and hunger for divine Mystery.

As the Mystery, so the ministry. The mystery dimension of the experience envelops and empowers the agents to enlighten and enhance the people, leading them to the realisation of the darśan in their own

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<sup>13</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul*, I, 1-4, trans. Mary Leo, CMC, The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, Mannanam, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, I, 17-20.

<sup>15</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, I, 37-40.



lives. There is an energy welling up in the heart of the one who beheld the reality, always overflowing with Mystery. The religious experience of God is not an exception to this phenomenon. Devotees who behold the darśan of the Lord God will feel compelled from within to communicate communion with others who also seek the same darśan of the Mystery of God.

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God  
His glorious splendour, I long to see.<sup>16</sup>

The whole mission of Kuriakose was to help people experience the same Mystery in their life contexts. When the pastors encounter the Lord of Glory and Mystery daily, a blessing bestowed on them intermittently becomes a game-changer in their ministry to the people of God. All desire to have a glimpse of the Lord, the sense of Mystery which accompanies as usual, and those who have witnessed the significance of Mystery, in turn, will pass this memorable character of the glory beheld by the ministers.

The Good Shepherd, seeking his flock  
That had gone astray, I long to see.  
The Lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself  
As our loving friend, I long to see.<sup>17</sup>

Seeing the characteristics of the Good Shepherd in Jesus Christ, Kuriakose puts the robe of a good shepherd on to make others experience the goodness and friendliness of God to those who have gone astray from the fold. His ministry resembles the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, seeking the flock of his time, a Church in deep slumber sans religious leadership and saintly pastors.

The sense of Mystery is coupled with an experience of the divine and never in a vacuum. Kuriakose's sense of Mystery is founded on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity and everything that belongs to the Lord of all. The experience of the Divine empowered Kuriakose to carry out the mission of the Lord in the world.

## **2. Experience of the Divine and Empowering the Human**

The encounter with the Divine transforms people. They possess a holistic perspective, charged and shaped by the spiritual outlook. Kuriakose was

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<sup>16</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, III, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, III, 97-100.

blessed to have the vision of the Lord, and through it, he gained a mission for the world:

When your bright visage, I see  
My gloom effaced, love glows  
In your look of mercy, I behold  
A gentle saviour, not a judge.<sup>18</sup>

Kuriokose finds himself rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the experience in him a gentle saviour instead of a judge. His friendship with Jesus and ecstatic experience of the Eucharistic Lord transformed his image of God. The sacred knowledge empowers and overpowers his outlook and, consequently, his commitment. His vision of the Lord becomes his mission for the world.

O Lady, clad in the rays of the Sun  
Holding the moon at your feet  
Forgive the sins of sinful me  
And fold me to your feet!<sup>19</sup>

Beholding a compassionate image of Mother Mary raises concurrent feelings in the saint and takes refuge at her feet. Human beings begin to see things through the luminous eyes of their faith experience. He is enlightened by the divine mysteries and empowered by the spirit to translate his darśan with greater involvement and interest.

Merciful Lord, Son of Almighty God  
O, that I may see!  
Sea of Mercy, seat of compassion  
Who effaced the stain of sin.<sup>20</sup>

The experience of the Divine is deep-seated in the saint. His experience is fundamental to the biblical revelation of God; it is founded on mercy and compassion, the very nature of God. A gaze at the sacred mysteries leaves lasting impressions on the contemplative, expanding the horizon of vision and mission. The experience of the Divine is an anointing to undertake a particular ministry to accomplish the task of God for our times.

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<sup>18</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, V, 163-166.

<sup>19</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, III Contd., 65-68.

<sup>20</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, III Contd., 1-4.

My Lord the Blessed Babe Emmanuel  
Did choose to make his dwelling in my heart.<sup>21</sup>

Rightly, our saint sees God as Immanuel, God-with-us and enjoys his indwelling presence in his heart, making it the temple of the Holy Spirit. The cave of the heart is a celebrated spiritual imagery in India, to which Kuriakose attests importance in his spiritual journey. Seeing things from the perspective of the Lord God, people become prophets and pastors of outstanding command to execute the will of God in their daily lives. These people feel the urgency and advocacy.

Under his [Kuriakose] leadership or inspiration, a good number of apostolic initiatives were undertaken: the establishment of seminaries for the education and formation of the clergy, the introduction of annual retreats, a publishing house for Catholic works, a house to care for the destitute and dying, schools for general education and programs for the training of catechumens. He contributed to the Syro-Malabar liturgy and spread devotion to the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Family. In particular, he dedicated himself to encouraging and counselling Christian families, convinced as he was of the fundamental role of the family in the life of society and the Church.<sup>22</sup>

We get a glimpse of the various apostolates Kuriakose undertook to empower society and the Church through his eventful religious priestly missionary zeal. P. Ramachandran, Governor of Kerala, said, "Fr. Chavara's life is an inspiring and edifying saga. From the day he was ordained as a priest of the Catholic Church, the Father dedicated himself wholly to God and worked piously for the social, cultural and educational uplift of his fellow beings."<sup>23</sup>

R. Venkataraman, former President of India, acknowledges and acclaims the yeomen contribution of Kuriakose to humanity, a testimony to the human development and empowerment of people:

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<sup>21</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, IV, 189-190.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, Address at the Beatification of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Alphonsa Muttathupadath at Kottayam, on 8 February 1986. Quoted from Z.M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Current Publications, Kottayam, 1993, 128.

<sup>23</sup> P. Ramachandran, "Blessed Chavara a Man of Deep Vision," in his welcome address at Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara Stamp Release Function, Trivandrum, December 20, 1987, quoted from Z.M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Current Publications, Kottayam, 1993, 132.

It is well over a hundred years since Father Chavara left us. And yet, he is a living inspiration for thousands and thousands of persons. He is gratefully remembered as a profound scholar, an educationist, and a builder of institutions for the underprivileged, the illiterate, the destitute and the needy.

Few people have been able to combine the contemplation of God with the service of man as naturally and creatively as between the world of faith and the world of action. Father Chavara represented both. A mystic, he could also be an engine of activity. Capable of withdrawing into his innermost being, Father Chavara was, at the same time, a motive force for the establishment of a social order in which everyone could live in dignity and faith.<sup>24</sup>

People from all walks of life acknowledge the towering personality of Kuriakose and his leadership in society, including the head of the state. The President made an emphatic statement on the contribution of our saint and the source of his strength to carry out the good news to people.

Through the encounter with the Lord in the context of his life, Kuriakose puts on Christ and commences living in Christ. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the supreme example in this regard. He lifts his eyes to God in praise and thanksgiving, and, in turn, Jesus goes down the lane doing great ministry regardless of caste and creed. For instance, Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (Mt 11:25). Immersed in the divine experience, Jesus invites all to the loving and comforting presence, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). Anyone who experiences the divine presence in life will go forth to reach out with a healing touch and deliver peace and prosperity. Blessing the Lord follows the blessing of the people, bringing down the joy and peace of God to all. The prayer of Our Father is a typical example in this regard: the first part of the prayer celebrates the divine presence of God – heaven on earth – and as a result of this experience, there is the presentation of the human need for daily

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<sup>24</sup> R. Venkataraman, "Father Chavara Represents Indian Community at its Best" (his address at Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara Stamp Release Function, Trivandrum, December 20, 1987), quoted from Z.M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Current Publications, Kottayam, 1993, 128.

bread and a life of forgiveness, to hasten the dawn of the reign of God in the community.

On his way to Damascus, Paul had an extraordinary dramatic encounter with the Lord, a turning point in his life and mission. "Now, as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing" (Acts 9:3-8). This episode shows a typical example of religious experience and concurrent commitment. Saint Paul recalls this foundational religious experience repeatedly, for it transformed his life and mission. A man of divine experience cannot but empower humans in their spiritual or material necessities. The faith experience of Saint Paul throws light on the fruitfulness and fearlessness one gathers through the knowledge of the Lord. He confesses his stance for Jesus Christ, "No, in all these things, we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:37-39). We see the dynamics of the spiritual experience empowering human agents to share the conviction of their hearts in following Jesus Christ, the foundational understanding of Saint Paul.

There has been a concerted effort from different quarters to establish Kuriakose as a social reformer. He deserves to be adorned as a forerunner of nineteenth-century Malabar's social, economic, religious, and cultural reform. Mathias Mundadan points out some of the salient features of his ministry in the Church for the world's welfare. "The activities the Blessed undertook for the renewal, reform and all-round development of the Church were many and varied: his close association and his exemplary cooperation with the vicars apostolic and the missionaries, his services as vicar general, his pioneering actions in the fields of education, social service and liturgical reform."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it is to be acknowledged and orchestrated sufficiently that he could

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<sup>25</sup> A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2008, 224.

empower people because of his overarching spiritual encounter with the Lord. Silently yet eloquently, Kuriakose is a message for those who are engaged in empowering people in different fields of human life to have a sound spiritual experience, ecclesial belongingness, and concomitant vision to accomplish the mission of Jesus for our times. The oneness with the Lord gives the activists the energy and enthusiasm necessary to empower human beings, rendering human dignity, gender equality, and the bounty of creation towards a prosperous and, harmonious, happy life on earth. God's love experienced in the cave of the heart urges us to work to empower people.

Aptly said, "St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is revered today as a spirit-filled person who contributed towards rejuvenating the Christian life and initiating reform in the social life of the people of Kerala."<sup>26</sup> Thomas Chathamparampil captures the dynamics found in the founder, who was an outstanding spiritual and social leader, in his words:

He was a leader and activist who could give direction to the Church and the society of his time. He is the co-founder of a Congregation for men and women. But at the same time, his saintly life shows categorically how a saintly person like him can, also going through the sufferings and agonies of life, remain firm and solid in his faith, turning every such moment as a moment of blessings and grace and to declaring with confidence finally with a sense of gratitude to God that he has never lost the baptismal grace which he has received.<sup>27</sup>

Here is a beautiful blend of spiritual depth and active commitment in its zenith. Faith in the Lord confers the impetus to carry out the mission despite troubles and tribulations.

Sense of Mystery and experience of the Divine leads to the act of mercy through pastoral ministry. Kuriakose, having had the divine touch, is a champion of pastoral ministry.

### **3. Sense of Mercy and the Sense of Pastoral Ministry**

As stated earlier, the spiritual experience takes the agent on the path of transformation, both oneself and others with whom the agent works.

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Chathamparampil, "Word of Blessings," in *Agonies and Ecstasies. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Thomas Panthaplackal, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara -9), Chavara Central Secretariat, Kakkannad, 2022, 7.

<sup>27</sup> T. Chathamparampil, "Word of Blessings," 7.

Grant, O Mercy, that with sanctity my soul may flood;  
Forgiveness of sins through your precious Blood.<sup>28</sup>

This engagement for change is the field of pastoral ministry. Equipped with the experience of the Divine, the pastor moves smoothly and enthusiastically in bringing God's dream come true in the given context.

Kuriakose, immersed in the sense of Mystery, is imbued with a sense of mercy, for God's nature, name, and face is mercy. Mercy is the synonym for God. Wherever there is mercy, there is God. Mercy is divine. When showing mercy, human beings become divine in human form. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, emphatically teaches, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:44-45). Luke calls the perfection of God as mercifulness. "Be merciful, just as your heavenly father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). We are called to imitate the mercy of God. Mercifulness is tangible, but the mercy of God is invisible. At the moment of acts of mercy, two things happen: one, the mercifulness of God is made credible; two, the divine in humans is made visible.

The Mystery of God takes us to the sense of mercy, for the Mystery of God is essentially mercy or compassion. Whoever experiences the Mystery of God experiences the Mercy of God, for it is the grace of God which bestows the gift of the divine encounter full of mercy and compassion. The sense of God is interwoven with the feeling of mercy, for God is mercy in nature; God cannot be but merciful. Mercy or compassion is the litmus test for a human person. To be compassionate is to be natural and normal for a human being, for everyone bears the image of God, and every time someone displays mercy through thoughts, words, and actions, they assume the original nature of a human being. Kuriakose was a replica of God's heart.

Kuriakose was found on his knees, asking for God's mercy. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Lk 18:38) is a cry for mercy and healing. People attracted to the person of Jesus and convinced of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, VI, 353-354.

healing power of Jesus repeated the plea for help. A sense of Mystery and the gift of mercy complement each other in healing and well-being.

The story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke gives us a typical pattern of Mystery leading ministry. Filled with awe and reverence for Jesus, Zacchaeus wanted to have a gaze of him. He takes the trouble to climb a sycamore-fig tree to see Jesus from afar. Zacchaeus is attracted to the personality of Jesus, and his surprise, having seen him on the tree, Jesus asks him, "Come down immediately. I must stay at your house today" (Lk 19:5). So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly. He does not attend to people's complaints on their way to his home. The encounter with the Lord had raised mixed feelings in Zacchaeus. He feels a sinner and is honoured to welcome Jesus in his house. As a result of the experience of the Mystery of Jesus, Zacchaeus publically declares, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Lk 19:8). Communion with the Lord transforms Zacchaeus and enables and empowers him to continue the ministry of conversion. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, though he maintained baptismal innocence to the end of his life, often expressed his sinfulness and God's mercifulness in one go:

I deem not myself worthy of reaching high degrees of prayer and sanctity. I am a great sinner with a heart impure and opaque without virtues of cleanliness and modesty. I realise that I am not worthy to receive the spirit of contemplation and attain perfection.<sup>29</sup>

In all humility, Kuriakose counts the blessings from God, all as a gratuitous gift from the Lord:

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 so come by the present status? Do you think I deserve any one of these favours? Not at all, to be sure. If so, remember that God's will is being accomplished.<sup>30</sup>

Having accomplished numerous things in his eventful life and ministry, Kuriakose enjoins God's mercy as the rationale for his magnificent missions. He further recounts his experience of the glorious

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<sup>29</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.



Mystery and proposes putting on the robe of glory. He muses, "So if you are humble enough to ask Him who brought you hither, you will certainly be gifted with the royal robe, i.e., higher degrees of prayer and sanctity."<sup>31</sup> The Mystery of God not only helps persons to experience divine mercy but also moves by it to do the ministry, the work of mercy, which Chavara was well known for.

The monastery Chapel was the central stage of Kuriakose's life and ministry; it was the wellspring of his immersing mystery experience and the powerhouse for dispensing his all-round holistic ministry, taking religious, social, economic, educational, and above all, spiritual dimensions of human life. Time and again, Kuriakose underscores and exults mercy, the character of God:

Behold! My bounteous heavenly Father is seated on His Throne of mercy in the Chapel. On His right and left stand the Blessed Mother and our Patron, St Joseph. Close to them is St. Theresa in genuflection to intercede for her children, particularly for me, the sinner.<sup>32</sup>

Kuriakose's contemplation focussed on the throne of divine mercy. An array of heavenly accompaniments is more than a comforting and encouraging experience to Kuriakose. He takes the courage to step into the heavenly Father's Mystery field, "So here I am on my feet to make a move to my Father's house with my country cap and walking stick."<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, he walks into the throne of God's glory without any fears and artificiality but fully armed with natural and cultural identity. A homely experience of the Father's glory empowers Kuriakose to ministry. Meditating on the parable of the Prodigal son, Kuriakose confesses, "Oh, it is a long time since I saw my heavenly Father's face! Like the prodigal son, I have squandered all the nice things you benignly bestowed on me."<sup>34</sup> As enjoyable, so is it attractive to see the swift change in the dispositions of Kuriakose, shifting back and forth from sinfulness to empowerment through God's mercy.

Notice the sudden surprise in the interior movement of Kuriakose, "My Father is out to embrace me! Oh, No, be off. I am not worthy to be touched by Him. So let me fall prostrate at His feet."<sup>35</sup> Soon, he changes

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<sup>31</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 5.

the scene to a filial clinging to God the Father, "O my Father dear! I cast myself on my knees before your throne of mercy. I am bent on clinging to your pierced but live feet until you speak to me words of forgiveness."<sup>36</sup> The experience of the ineffable God's Mystery, Kuriakose captures the beauty of mercy through friendly conversation or sheer gazing at a friend's face. In his *Colloquies*, Kuriakose comes into the monastery chapel, the focal point of his immersive encounter with the Lord and utters:

This Chapel which is filled with your presence, is dreadful so far as a sinner is concerned. But I know you are present here not as a frightening judge but as a friendly Father. Great is your majesty and power. So also is your generosity and kindness. As you have said, there is a time of justice and salvation. I must seek it.<sup>37</sup>

He is not tired of waiting. Instead, Kuriakose spends long hours before the Eucharistic Lord with zeal in oblation:

From atop your altars, let me offer  
Myself as a gift of love and reparation  
O, how long have I been waiting in love  
With zeal have I tarried, oh, how long.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

The Divine Mystery encircled Kuriakose throughout his vision and mission, and everything came from the mines of his deep divine experience characterised by the Lord's mercy. Kuriakose's darśan of the Holy defined his pastoral ministry as flooded with joy and compassion. Schooled in the Eastern Liturgy of the Thomas Christians of India, Kuriakose picked up the mystery dimension of the Qurbana and, guided by the Holy Spirit, animated his ministries with the sense of Mystery and Mercy of God, the hallmarks of the Eastern Liturgical tradition.

Kuriakose breathed in and breathed out the Eucharistic Lord as his food and drink and tried to impart a mystic and poetic touch to the Christian life, marked by the intimacy with the Lord and the joy of the Gospel:

You, my love, my joy and all my good fortune  
If not with you, how could I live my life

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<sup>36</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, VIII, 17-20.

My very breath, my food, my drink  
What solace have I save in you!<sup>39</sup>

Along with breathing Jesus, Kuriakose developed a deep-seated desire to behold the Lord in his life. The caption, "God's will always and everywhere," a slightly modified version of his text to the contemporary audience from *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, leaves an image of a *yogi*, one in union with God in thought, word, and deed. The contemplation of the divine face took Kuriakose to action on the ground, inviting everyone to glorify God, establishing peace on earth and hope for human beings. Thomas Mampra sketches Kuriakose as:

A contemplative in action. Drawing deeply from India's cultural and religious traditions, he lived his cherished gift of Christian faith in single-minded commitment and ardent devotion to the Lord on the one hand and in deep communion with and selfless service to his fellow humans on the other. In his life and that of his community, the good news of Jesus of Nazareth found a new and refreshing expression, spreading its splendour and fragrance far beyond the confines of his neighbourhood."<sup>40</sup>

I want to conclude this reflection with a passage from the Qurbana, which Kuriakose celebrated with great devotion, diligence and pure heart, and I am inclined to think that the Eucharistic Mystery shaped his sense of Mystery and the overarching divine experience:

Merciful God! Bless us. Grant that all of us, as one body, may properly please You throughout our lives by works of justice that reconcile us with You. Make us worthy to offer You never-ending praise, homage, thanksgiving, and adoration. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Lord of all, forever.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Compunction of the Soul*, II, 143-146.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Mampra, "Words of Appreciation" quoted from Z.M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Current Publications, Kottayam, 1993, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, 39.