

## SYRIAC THEOLOGICAL VISION OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

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**Abstract:** The article explores the theological foundations and spiritual dispositions of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara within the framework of Syriac Christian tradition. Chavara's theological vision was rooted in the Syriac tradition of sacramental understanding of God, humans, and the world. The concept of mystery (*Raza*), the importance of the Scripture and liturgy in theology, divinization as the purpose of revelation can be found occurring in the writings of both the Syriac Fathers and Chavara. Chavara's profound love for the Church, and his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are key aspects of his spiritual legacy, which are also part of the patrimony of Syriac Christianity. Chavara's theological insights and spiritual practices offer valuable perspectives for contemporary Christian doctrine and praxis, particularly in understanding and interpreting the universal call to holiness and salvation.

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## 1. Introduction

Theology as a concept, method and practice is an attempt to comprehend and interpret 'divine revelation' and 'faith response' based on Sacred Scripture and Tradition. The purpose of theology is deification, or *theosis*, which results from divine human encounters of revelation through creation, incarnation and resurrection; and faith through the sacramental celebrations, especially baptism and eucharist in the Church. The 'Syriac theological vision'<sup>1</sup> of God, humans and the world is sacramental in nature and transformative in effect. The theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara<sup>2</sup>, present in his own writings and writings about him, resonates with the Syriac theological vision. One of the dictums of Chavara, 'God's will be done always and everywhere'<sup>3</sup> is echoing his sacramental and transformative theological vision in theory and in practical implications. Psalm 16:5 was Chavara's favourite verse in the Bible: "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure." The sources of the above-mentioned dictums often appearing in the writings and sayings of Chavara seems to be inspired by the phrase in the Lord's prayer, 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10) and in the verses of the Psalm 62:1-2, "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken". They present a beautiful blending of Scriptural, Semitic (Jewish) and theological visions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Syriac theology, a branch of Christian theology is present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church who wrote in Syriac language, which is characterized by its resonance with semitic cultural and religious ethos and its particular thrust on scriptural and liturgical theology. Syriac theology in the past was left in oblivion and remained dormant, but is now actively influencing the theological milieu with translations of the writings into modern languages and its interpretations and application in context.

<sup>2</sup> The names Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Cyriac Elias Chavara are interchangeably used by different authors. The name Kuriakose was his baptismal name whereas the name Elias was chosen by Chavara when he made his religious vows and Chavara was his surname/family name. In this paper we make use of the surname Chavara.

<sup>3</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 15.

reality of the Syriac Christians present in the theological vision of Chavara.

The life and activities of Chavara were in conformity with this conviction, and every aspect of his life was permeated with its fragrance. Being a child of God and thus a faithful son of the Church, he could go beyond the limiting beliefs and enticing trends of his time to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by God for His glory and the good of the people. In the words of Fr. Leopold, the most outstanding virtue of Chavara was his love for the Church: "Among his virtues, the most outstanding was his ardent faith in and the devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and the Holy Father. ... Never did Chavara hold himself back from any work, of fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and the salvation of souls."<sup>4</sup>

Chavara's spirituality was deeply rooted in faith, hope and charity, and he practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness in a heroic manner. He was able to understand and translate the mystery of God and the mystery of life in loving compassion towards human beings and towards nature and he lived this mystery gracefully in the Church through the celebration of the sacrament. Thus, Chavara can be called a true son of the Church and a man of God for others.

This paper is a humble attempt to search for the salient features of the Syriac theological vision present in the life and writings of Chavara. The life and legacy of Chavara are open to the public through many biographies and his own writings.<sup>5</sup> The main sources of this research are the books of Chavara himself: *Atmanuthapam* (*The Compunction of Soul*), *Dhyanasallapangal* (*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*), *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitvam* (*Anasthasia's Martyrdom*), *Nalagamangal* (*Chronicles*), and *Kathukal* (*Letters*) and some of the studies that have sought to understand and find the legacy of Chavara.

## 2. Theological Vision of Syriac Christians

Syriac theology represents a remarkably unique trend in Christian theology, inspired by its semitic background, Syriac culture and the particular historical vicissitudes of different Syriac churches. The idea

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<sup>4</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, Mannanam, 2003, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Z. M. Muzhoor, *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vols I, II & III, Mannanam, 1981. Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol IV, Mannanam, 1982.

'the East was the cradle of Christianity' has gained general historical consensus, and this accord gives a legitimate and valid testimony to the importance of Syriac theology. The people among whom Christianity was born, first spread and developed set the mark of their own genius on its first forms of expression.

What makes the thought of the early Syriac theologians so attractive is its universal/catholic amplitude, joined with its triumphant eschatological tone. The constant object of their contemplation was the mystery in all the glory of its unity. In creation, God inaugurated the salvific plan, and through incarnation and resurrection, it was fulfilled and perfected. It continues in the Church with the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, which points to the 'already and not yet' eschatological vision of the Church, as St. Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:10, 'God all in all'.

The sources of theology and the process of theologising are integrated realities in the East. John Meyendorff says in this regard, as follows:

Theology should be based on the Scripture, on the doctrinal decisions of the Church's Magisterium, or on the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must be able to reach beyond the letters of the Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the Church throughout the ages.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Taft speaks of Eastern theology as follows: "It is an integrated world in which liturgy, spirituality, art and architecture comprise an integrated, harmonious whole in a way unthinkable in the west, with its clash of competing methodologies and philosophies."<sup>7</sup> Today, the Syriac/Eastern/Oriental way of theologizing receives much importance and momentum. While there have been translations of Syriac writings into German and French, these have remained relatively inaccessible to those who read only English. As a positive sign, Robert Murray, Sebastian Brock, Kathleen McVey, Thomas Kollamparampil and a few

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<sup>6</sup> John Meyendorff, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Taft, "Eastern Catholic Theology: Slow Rebirth after a Long and Difficult Gestation," 75.

others are making the genius of Syriac Christian writings and authors better known to English readers through their commendable efforts.

### **3. Salient Characteristic Features of Chavara's Syriac Theological Vision**

In 1805, Chavara was born into the rich and complex socio-cultural and politico-ecclesial context of Kerala as one who was a special envoy from God for the restoration of the society and Church of his time. Chavara was called by God with a special charism for the renewal and growth of the Church in India, especially the Syro-Malabar Church<sup>8</sup>, as acclaimed by many.<sup>9</sup> The particular socio-cultural and ecclesial circumstances of that time have influenced tremendously the life and mission of Chavara, and that is evident in his writings. He was faithful to the Church and her teachings and defended them with courage and fortitude, especially the tradition, beliefs, customs and practices of the St. Thomas Christians. St. Thomas Christians of his time were particularly in a phase of growth that necessitated order, discipline, new initiatives, testimonies of faith, moral uprightness as well as turmoil, uncertainties, intrusions. etc. Chavara could function as a catalyst to manage the situation gracefully for the glory of God and for the good of the people, with an absolute trust in God and unwavering commitment to the cause of the people of God.

The salient characteristic features of the Syriac theological vision, such as revelation and faith as mystery (*raza*), experience of heart and mind, symbolism and typology, biblical and liturgical foundation, poetic mode of expression and divinization/*theosis* as purpose of revelation and faith, are directly or indirectly present in the theologizing of Chavara as it is seen in his life and expressed in his writings.

#### **3.1. Understanding of Reality, both Sacred and Secular, as Mystery (*Raza*)**

The concept of mystery is central to understanding Syriac theology. The human experience of reality, both sacred and secular, is made possible through encounters with words (verbal symbols) and/or gestures and actions (non-verbal symbols). The sense of mystery (*raza*) permeates the

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<sup>8</sup> The now, Syro-Malabar Church was called Saint Thomas Christian at the time of Chavara, which remained faithful to the Catholic faith under the guidance of Chavara, amidst the attacks of Roccas Schism.

<sup>9</sup> CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 6.

symbolic and typological expressions used by the early Syriac authors to express divine realities. The Syriac noun *raza* is used to mean type, figure, sign, symbol, likeness, mystery, sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, Trinity, Christ, Church, etc.

In the Bible, *raza* connotes the salvific plan of God, which is centred on the incarnate Lord. Syriac theologians Ephrem and Narsai have always emphasized the sharp divide between the creator and creation and recognized in their writings that human being is unable to grasp fully the 'divine hidden-ness' through intellectual scrutiny. Ephrem sings, "Lord, your symbols are everywhere, yet you are hidden from everywhere."<sup>10</sup>

Syriac theology does not rule out reason and investigation in the theological method. Contemplative theology is not the product of mere imagination; it considers the mystery of God, human being and the world revealed in the Scriptures and manifested in nature with the help of reason. Therefore, a true theologian is one who has intense God-experience obtained through liturgical celebration. The most striking aspect of eastern theology is that it is permeated with an attitude of reverential awe. For an eastern Christian, his humble parish Church is the heavenly sanctuary where men and women, according to their capacity and desire, are caught up in the worship of the redeemed cosmos, where dogmas are no barren abstractions but hymns of exulting praise.

Chavara's life and activities were always permeated with a sense of mystery. As a child, he was spiritually oriented and showed a keen interest in learning the prayers, which were mostly in Syriac.<sup>11</sup> As he grew up, he cultivated a genuine prayer culture and considered prayer to be a true virtue.<sup>12</sup> His parents were of excellent virtue, especially his mother, who sowed in his tender heart the seeds of the spirit of prayer. In *Ātmanūthāpam*, it can be noticed as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns of Faith* 4:9, see also, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 214.

Through baptism's grace you made me your cherished son  
 And showed me heaven's joys to tend me grow  
 Gave me parents grounded in faith secure  
 And faith in me engraved full firm, besides  
 A mother to feed me while yet feeble babe  
 To shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me soft  
 To pour that tender love you filled her with  
 That nectar, unto my tiny blissful heart

Mixed with her sweet milk, she regaled me  
 With thoughts of heaven, and words of grace, so pure!  
 And when reason grew strong, my little mind  
 Patiently, informed, to lisp holy names  
 Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright  
 Gently, of matters sublime, of my faith  
 As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer  
 Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air

Long hours, on her knee in prayer she stayed  
 Leaning on her then I would seat myself  
 While devoutly a string of pious words  
 To mother of God and the Christ, King of kings.<sup>13</sup>

After joining the seminary in the first year, he learned Syriac, the liturgical language of the Malabar Christians,<sup>14</sup> and as a brilliant student, he learned Latin and Portuguese besides Syriac.<sup>15</sup> Chavara's confessor and spiritual director, Fr. Leopold, writes about his seminary life as follows:

As his fellow seminarians, who are still alive, attest, the young Kuriakose was deeply interested in his studies, in observing the rules (of the seminary), and in cultivating the fear of God, motivated solely by the desire of pleasing God. He never harboured any petty jealousy

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<sup>13</sup> Cf., Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1989, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 39.

or bad blood against his companions, as was usual among the young, but always kind and charitable towards them.<sup>16</sup>

Chavara adopted the motto 'the Lord is my portion' (Ps 16:5) for life at his reception of the minor order of tonsure. The experience of God that Chavara enjoyed and liked to enjoy is expressed in his own words as follows:

Oh my God, you are my love, my joy, and all my fortune.

If not in you, how could I live my life?

You are my breath, my food and my drink.

What a solace have I in you!<sup>17</sup>

Chavara was a man on fire, a mystic in his core, who experienced the mystery of God, humans and the world, which was evident in his prayer and celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He used to spend many hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament conversing with God. His exterior life was the mirror of his interior life.<sup>18</sup> Chavara used to exclaim, 'What a bliss it is for us humans that God allows us to converse with Him.'<sup>19</sup> Fr. Marceline Alackapally writes:

According to the first constitution [of 1863] the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr. Prior spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears. ... at the end of the meditation he had to be reminded by others that the time was up. ... during the adoration of the blessed sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation.<sup>20</sup>

Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.<sup>21</sup> His mystical experiences were theocentric and self-transcending for the union with the divine.<sup>22</sup> There are many instances recorded in the biographies of

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<sup>16</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, Vatican, 1997, 623.

<sup>20</sup> *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 561.

<sup>21</sup> *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.



Chavara about his fervent prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament or in the cemetery.<sup>23</sup> Fr. Leopold makes the following observation:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the divine liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visit to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.<sup>24</sup>

Contemplation and action are very talked-about aspects of Catholic spirituality, especially in the eastern tradition.<sup>25</sup> Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.<sup>26</sup> From the life of Chavara, one can learn love, hope, compassion and authenticity, the genuine fruits of deep mystical life and practice.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most attractive features of early Syriac theology is its symbolic character. The early Syriac fathers used images and symbols to expound the truth of salvation.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Ephrem uses the metaphor of clothing to understand the mystery of the incarnation. Everything in the created world, and in creation as a whole, is a symbol.

On the human level, all modes of logical patterns are necessary and applicable. But as one is invited to approach the divine level through divine revelation, the medium of analogy and the symbolic mode of perception have to be sought. At such a level, the vehicles are types, symbols, images and mysteries of salvation in words and deeds. Symbolic theology does not look for 'the logical sequence' and does not jump directly into conclusions.

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<sup>23</sup> Valerian Plathottam, *Very Reverend Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam, 1939, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed study in this regard see, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 53-84.

In the sacramental vision, the natural world stands side by side with Scripture as a witness to God. Everyone, literate or illiterate, can read and understand the book of nature. The approach of the early fathers of the Church to nature was one of wonder and reverence, not greed and exploitation.

Chavara was aware of the mystery aspect of reality, both divine and secular and he had great admiration for the revelation of reality through the mediums of Scripture and nature. In his writings, there are instances where this aspect is evidently presented. While speaking about his vocation, he writes in *The Compunction of Soul* verses 118-120:

My mother's heart leaped with exultation  
That God did ear-mark me to be his possession  
Tear-dimmed eyes gleamed as sun amid clouds  
Could a heart maternal brave such parenting.<sup>29</sup>

### **3.2. Experience and Expression of God with Heart and Mind than with Head and Intellect**

In Syriac Christian context, theology is not just information and systematic knowledge about God and divine matters attained through epistemological endeavour; rather, it is the lived experience of God of the faithful on personal and communitarian levels, attained through faith and liturgical celebrations. While speaking on the specific characteristics of Syriac theology in the decree on ecumenism, Vatican Council II refers to the most important sources of theology in the East:

With regard to the authentic theological traditions of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scripture, fostered and given expression in liturgical life, and nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the writings of the Fathers and spiritual authors of the East; they are directed towards a right ordering of life, indeed toward a full contemplation of Christian truth.<sup>30</sup>

For a long period in history, the importance of a genuine and authentic personal experience in the elaboration of theology had not been recognized by theologians. This was mainly because of the fear that Christian faith would be reduced to mere feelings. For eastern theologians, contemplation of God is the very basis of theology. Pope

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<sup>29</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* 17.

John Paul II stated in his 'Sunday Angelus' message on September 29, 1996: "Today's prevailing scientific culture puts an enormous quantity of information at our disposal; but every day it is apparent that this is not enough for an authentic process of humanization. We have greater need than ever to discover the dimensions of the heart." He pointed out that eastern spirituality makes a specific contribution to authentic knowledge of human being by insisting on this perspective of the heart.

For Chavara, faith is the 'heart's eye', an expression present in the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians 1:18.<sup>31</sup> Chavara advised his readers in *Dhyanasallapangal*: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty, you must look at him with the eye of your heart and worship Him."<sup>32</sup> In fact, Chavara had the eye of the heart always wide open so that in every event of life – small or big, delightful or painful – he would easily see God's hand, and thus, he could enjoy uninterrupted vision of God.<sup>33</sup> *Dhyanasallapangal* presents Chavara's personal encounter with God, in which one can find his profound *Abba* experience.<sup>34</sup>

Chavara's life of prayer was inspired by a close and intimate relation with God the Father, whom he called '*ente appa*' (my father).<sup>35</sup> Making the sentiments of the prodigal son his own, Chavara states:

Oh, its long time since I saw my *appan*, I squandered all he gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. ... Oh, my soul, your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of ingratitude of yours. ... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? Still *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear. ... Oh, *ente appa*, I cast myself on my knees before your throne of mercy.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

<sup>32</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 235.

<sup>34</sup> Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 329.

<sup>36</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 4-5.

Chavara indeed experienced God's hands in everything that happened to him and around him. It was inspired by the divine wisdom of faith. He looked at all things with his heart's eye.<sup>37</sup> Chavara instructed the inhabitants of *bes-rauma*, the 'vision house', to possess a pure heart and clear conscience so that their intentions may be purified, and they can do everything for the greater glory of God and the good of the people.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.3. Biblical and Liturgical Foundations of the Syriac Theological Vision

The early Syriac ecclesial tradition and its theology represent the authentic Semitic world out of which the Bible sprang. The theologians of the East depended primarily on Sacred Scripture for theologizing. The writings of both Aphrahat and Ephrem demonstrate an intimate familiarity with the Bible, and their writings are packed with biblical citations, images and allusions, especially from the Old Testament. The early Syriac theologians approach Scripture as the book of faith, and their interpretation of the biblical texts is both spiritual and practical. For instance, Ephrem regards Scripture as the incarnation of God in human language. The reading of the Scripture was for the fathers, synonymous with conversation with Christ.

Historical exegesis of the scripture was not the primary concern of the early Syriac fathers. Rather, they emphasized the spiritual exegesis that proceeds from faith. The inner meaning of the scripture can only be perceived by the inner eye of faith.

Early Syriac theology is liturgical theology. Liturgical theology refers to the theology that is present in the liturgical texts. Basically, when the liturgical texts are analyzed, the Trinitarian and Christological dimensions of human salvation can be found in them. When theology is said to be liturgical theology, the liturgical prayers are the source of theologizing, taking inspiration from the axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer establishes the law of faith). In the liturgical celebration, one encounters the mystery of God, which theologians try to articulate. Thus, liturgy is the natural root of theology, and the theological thinking of the Church should be verifiable in the liturgical text of the Church. Pope John Paul II states in his encyclical, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* # 1: "The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 299.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 105.

does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church."

The Word of God was for Chavara, food and drink. His sermons and other teachings are mostly based on the Sacred Scripture, and he learned the mysteries of God by meditating on the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> His approach to the Word of God is far from academic; it is spiritual and personal. In a spirit of faith and an attitude of reverence, he attentively listens to the Word and zealously responds to it with docility and awe.<sup>40</sup>

In *Dhyanasallapangal*, there are 43 explicit citations from the Bible and 70 implicit or allusive ones. Then there are seven texts that Chavara interprets by way of expressing, explaining and translating them. "His whole personality was an expression of the Word of God ... He could explain the Bible in his own life situation ... thus the Word of God became his own word."<sup>41</sup>

The liturgical renewal that Chavara initiated in the Church and its after effects are positively experienced by the Church today. The first thing that Chavara did in this regard was the compilation of the divine office of his Church.<sup>42</sup> The daily divine office that was in use those days was too lengthy and available only in manuscripts, and the priests tended to ignore its recital. After having discussed this with several *malpans* assembled at Koonammavu, he prepared a handy book of divine office in 1862. It is to be noted that this was the divine office that was in use until the late 1960s, when the breviary in Malayalam was introduced.

The Holy Eucharist was the centre of the spirituality of Chavara. To use his own terminology, he preferred to shut himself up in the tabernacle with Jesus. He wrote to the nuns, "Behold I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us stay there until the day of resurrection."<sup>43</sup> Fr. Leopold gives

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 238.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 246.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Kalluveetil, "Chavara the Dynamic Hermeneut of the Word" in Paul Kalluveetil & Paulachan Kochapilly eds., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 294-311.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

an unambiguous testimony of Chavara's devotion to the Eucharistic as follows:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the Sacred liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.<sup>44</sup>

Chavara also made sure that the Holy Eucharist was celebrated in an orderly manner. As the available missal lacked the correct rubrics, priests, while celebrating the Holy Eucharist, followed customs and practices that were different from place to place. To remedy this, Chavara wrote a book called *Tukasa* containing the rubrics of the Syrian Mass and got it printed for the use of priests.<sup>45</sup> This book, reprinted in 1926, was in use until 1962, when a new missal with an ordo was promulgated by Rome.<sup>46</sup> That means, for almost a century, Chavara's *Tukasa* served as the only means of ensuring an orderly manner of eucharistic celebration in the Syro-Malabar Church.

The restoration and updating of the liturgical calendar of the Syrian community was also a great contribution that Chavara actualized. For many years, the Syrians used the Latin Rite calendar, which naturally enjoined Latin practices and ignored the Syrian one, such as the division of the year into specific liturgical seasons of the Syrian Church. With much dedication and difficulty, Chavara prepared and printed the Syrian rite liturgical calendar. This pays testimony to Chavara's knowledge of his Church's ancient traditions and his concern to preserve them. Along with the liturgical renewal, Chavara also introduced retreat preaching and pastoral care for the faithful, especially the sick and the poor.

The practice of preaching homilies during the Holy Eucharist and annual retreat in the parishes were also initiated and made popular by Chavara. He also introduced and promoted religious practices and devotions such as adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the office for the

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<sup>44</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard TOCD, *Malayalathinte Ka. Ni. Mu. Sa Sabhayude Charithra Samshepam*, Mannanam, 1908, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 268.

dead, the way of the cross, the rosary and scapular, novena prayers, etc. Even though they are neither liturgical prayers nor originally Syrian practices, with their introduction and promotion, Christian life among the Syrians became lively and more appealing, responding to the legitimate emotional needs of the common people.

### 3.4. Poetic Mode of Expression of Theology

Theology in poetry and theologians as poets may sound like contradictions to the modern mind. Syriac fathers employed poetry as the principal vehicle of their theologizing. It is not because they were unable to pursue the prosaic medium, but because they found the poetic way doubly useful. Poetic medium can equally handle conceptual matters usually carried by prosaic medium, and personal sensorial experiences usually effected mainly by poetic medium, at the same time. The poetic medium can effectively handle the seeming paradoxes and contradictions in the divine-human engagements in the history of salvation. The language of poetry can express spiritual reality more successfully. Doctrines and teachings, when given in a poetic manner, contain the needed flexibility, fluidity, dynamism and personal applicability. But when doctrines and teachings are given at the logical and rational levels alone, they will remain more hardened by losing adaptability and dynamism.

Chavara was a great poet. He found the poetic medium apt for communicating matters of faith, spirituality, and morals, as it was for the early Syriac fathers. Chavara's God-experience is well expressed in his poetic writings, which he calls spiritual canticles (*atma-geetangal*), spiritual colloquies (*atma-sallapangal*) and spiritual union (*atma-vismruti*).<sup>47</sup> All his writings contain a poetic style, especially *Atmanuthapam*, *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitvam* and *Maranaveettil Padunna Pana*, which are written in poetic metres.

In one of his correspondences, Chavara, the mystic, depicts a moment of divine love using a style and language that closely resemble the poetic and spiritual expressions found in the *Songs of Songs* and the *Spiritual Canticle*:

When the human spirit is in the delightful solitude, the Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet His beloved in that lovely solitude. He begins to speak with her sweetly, at first, she does not clearly understand His

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<sup>47</sup> Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 30.

language and intentions. Then He takes her to the wine cellar and pours her some wine, initially a little. Having enjoyed it she begins to understand His language; yes, she understands His love. Then this lover of hers begins to speak more distinctly, and opens His heart so as she realizes how great His love for her is. Her love too increases. He becomes pleased with her, adorns her with precious ornaments. This is how the affair begins and then it doesn't ever stop.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.5. Divinization, the Purpose of Revelation and Faith

Syriac fathers conceived that the very aim of the incarnation was the deification of human beings. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem states, "He clothed himself in the likeness of man in order to bring man to the likeness of Himself."<sup>49</sup> In the theology of the salvation of the Syriac fathers, divinization is seen as the result of a downward movement – 'divine descent' – and an upward movement – 'human ascent'. God's love for humanity is so great that God took the initiative, in revelation, to bring humanity back to paradise.

The life, activities and writings of Chavara were focused on one and only purpose: the salvation of the soul, primarily his own soul and the souls of others. In his letters, there are instances where his confreres, sisters and lay faithful are instructed and encouraged to strive for salvation.

Chavara's prophetic role and enormous contribution in fighting the Roccas schism are a testimony to his noteworthy zeal for the Church and the salvation of souls. In the book, *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, it is noted as follows: "If there were not the Ark of Noah during the flood no single human being would have been spared; similarly, if there were not the Prior and this religious community, it is quite reasonable to think that all Syrian churches would have been lost in schism."<sup>50</sup>

### 3.6. Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary

Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the characteristic features of Syriac theology. Hymns and treatises on Mary are abundant in Syriac writings. Chavara too had a great devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. Chavara's approach to the Blessed Virgin Mary was one of filial and

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, II:6-7.

<sup>50</sup> *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, Mannanam, 1995, 28.



spontaneous, whom he addresses as '*ente amme*'.<sup>51</sup> He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her.<sup>52</sup> The most impressive testimony of Chavara's Marian devotion is the foundation of two indigenous religious congregations in her name. Concerning his trust in Mary, he writes, "Till now I have never had to draw the net empty after casting it in the name of our holy Mother."<sup>53</sup> About Chavara's filial love and trust in Mother Mary, Fr. Leopold has testified as follows:

His devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call 'Mother', to overcome fears and temptations associated with the fateful moment.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Chavara was a luminary of the Church, and he shines bright with his theological vision founded on the Syriac Christian tradition and he opens new horizons for understanding and interpreting the Christian doctrine and praxis. His theology is permeated with the salient features of the Syriac Christian theological vision, and there are parallels in understanding, experience and expression of it in his life, activities and writings. For Chavara, theologizing was not merely an academic exercise but a sacramental and transformative engagement with divine revelation and faith, grounded in the Sacred Scripture and Tradition. His favorite biblical verse, Psalm 16:5, "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup ...." encapsulates his deep trust in God's providence, reflecting the Syriac theological emphasis on God's will and the mystical union between the divine and the human. Chavara's theological outlook was significantly influenced by the socio-cultural and ecclesial context of Kerala, his devotion to the Church, and his deep spiritual life. His writings, including '*Atmanuthapam*' and '*Dhyanasallapangal*', among others, reflect the Syriac Christian tradition's unique characteristics, such as the integration of revelation and faith as mystery (*Raza*), the

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 250.

<sup>52</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing.

Central to Chavara's life and teachings was the exploration of the concept of *theosis* or deification, as the purpose of God's revelation and human response in faith, which facilitates divine-human encounter and effects salvation. His admiration of Blessed Virgin Mary and the affection he shows towards her, the praises he showers on her and his adherence to her intercession are akin to the Syriac traditions, where the Mother of God adorns the first place among the saints. He also heroically practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness and gave inspiration and impetus to the Church today for a holy life and radical following of Jesus. The purpose and resolve of the call and mission of every believer in Christ are the same: radical following of Jesus Christ and being a true and faithful child of the Church to obtain one's own salvation and to invite everyone for the same.