

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA - GOD'S WORK OF ART

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Abstract: "Conformity" to Jesus Christ is the goal of Christian discipleship. Every disciple has to undergo a process of conversion and transformation at all levels of his/her experience - physical, mental, and emotional until he/she becomes a spiritual image of Christ. Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art". The human person becomes ultimately an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials into a spiritual or a transfigured body. It is against the background of this Biblical view of creative imitation of Jesus Christ we try to understand the teaching of prayer that Kuriakose Elias Chavara has laid out in his works. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person which can be compared to the formation of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. Chavara is an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection. St Chavara bears witness to the transfigured glory of Jesus who entered his glory through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Originally, this paper was presented in the Workshop on 'St

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1. Conforming to the Image of Christ

The result of prayer is our gradual "conformity" with Jesus Christ. "Conformity" with Jesus Christ means becoming the image of Christ, who is the ultimate form for our imitation and assimilation. It takes place in the life of discipleship. Imitating Christ is a process by which we put on the features of Christ and become another Christ (*Alter Christus*). St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14). Clothing does not mean a superficial change. It is a change of identity of the person. St Paul demands a radical change of life, being liberated from the attractions to sin and renewed in the attitudes of the mind. To the Ephesians, he writes: "Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires" and "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). The life of discipleship is a process of conversion and transformation at all levels of experience - physical, mental, and emotional until the disciple becomes the spiritual image of Christ adorned with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col 3:12).

2. God the Artist – Maker, Inspirer, and Model

Imitation of Christ is essentially a creative process. The creative nature of an activity is seen in its procedure. To be creative, it must be a conscious and purposeful activity. Its result is not accidental or casual, but planned and intentional. Hence, artworks are not mere mechanical productions but meaningful creations. They are expressions of the knowledge and freedom of the maker. The imitation of Christ and the transformation of a disciple are considered successful when the disciple attains perfection as a "work of art."

God has a crucial and decisive role to play in the creative transformation of a disciple into a "work of art" after the model of Christ. God's role in this artistic process can be seen as His three "Trinitarian" functions of the "Maker," the "Inspirer," and the "Model." The Father is the "Maker," the Holy Spirit the "Inspirer," and the Son the "Model." God as the Father is the supreme Maker of everything. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8; See also, Is 29:16).

The Father has called us to existence and provided us with all the physical, mental, and emotional resources we possess. It is with these resources that we undergo the process of transformation for which Jesus is the model or the mould. Already in creation, he is present as the Image of God who is the cause and destiny of every created thing in the universe. "He is the Image of the invisible God ... by him all things were created...all things were created by him and for him" (Col 1:15-16). In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body, suggesting his role as the ultimate form or model according to which everyone is moulded and transformed. Jesus the Son "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:21). But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in us. "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). The agency of the Holy Spirit in our conformation with the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For, we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ... We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:26-29). The Holy Spirit accompanies us with consistent inspiration and help in all the struggles that our transformation demands.

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "masterpiece of God." The agency of our transformation is attributed to God because it is God who, through the Holy Spirit, performs the work. He knows, calls, and predestines all to their final goal. "For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Human beings collaborate in the work by making their physical resources available for transformation. The ultimate goal of the imitation of Christ in discipleship is the transformation of the physical, mental, and emotional resources of the disciples into a spiritual or a transfigured body after the model of Jesus Christ. Prayer stands for the entire gamut of the transforming process in which all faculties of a person are involved.

3. The Art of Prayer in Chavara's Life

Chavara became a "masterpiece of God" through the "art" of prayer. He actualized in his life the words of St Paul: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). His transformation as a work the divine Artist was planned, designed and visualized by God already in advance. Chavara recounts in *Atmanuthapam*¹ how he was chosen by God at different stages of his life. On his part, he cooperated with the choice of God through prayer. He considered himself to be a humble creature like a worm. But as a miracle wrought by God, he was raised to the status of a child of God. Prayer was for him nothing but making himself available to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind (Cf. Mt 22:37). The divine design and inspiration on the one hand and the human resources on the other make prayer a spiritual-material experience rather than a purely spiritual or a merely material event.

Sometimes the result of prayer is thought of simply as an inner experience within the "closed doors" (Mt 6:6). But prayer is also expressive; it produces outward effects. The external visible effect of prayer is the transformation of the person. The body of the praying person becomes the visible witness of the invisible spiritual experience. In prayer, the spiritual and physical aspects, the soul and the body of a praying person communicate in such a way that the inner spiritual experience is manifested as a corresponding physical expression. In authentic prayer, the body of the praying person becomes a symbol, a witness of the experience of the soul. The body gives an eloquent testimony to the spiritual experience of the person. It accounts for the various expressions of faith, praise, and gratitude in prayer. The lack of correspondence between the inner experience and the outer expressions, be it in prayer or social conduct, is condemned by Jesus as hypocrisy. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Mt 23:25). Prayer transforms the whole person, as in the case of the "Transfiguration" of the Lord on Mount Tabor. "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone

¹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul (Athmanuthapam)*, 1.1-4.

like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt 17:1-8). It is a physical-spiritual event impelled by the Spirit of God.

There is a material as well as a spiritual dimension in the transformation that takes place in prayer. As the face and the clothes became as bright as the sun, the materials underwent a striking change, becoming the effective expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is true also of an artistic work. The materials of art, such as wood, metal, or clay, are transformed physically by the hands of the artists. But the transformation is not merely physical; it is simultaneously spiritual. Thus, an artwork is meaningful to the mind as it is beautiful to the eyes.

The meaningfulness of an artwork is due to the concept or design of the work in the mind of the artist. Before setting out to do the physical operation, sculpting, or moulding, the artist has to conceive a design of the work to be done. The artist goes through a meditation in which the hidden potential of the given materials is discovered. It is essentially a spiritual process in which the design of the work to be done is imagined and conceived. According to the traditional principle of Indian art, it is "*dṛṣṭva dhyāyet, dhyātva kuryāt*,"² meaning that artists have to move from "observation to reflection and then from reflection to action." The physical action of making must be preceded by a spiritual preparation of study and reflection. An awareness process is essential in art. That is why it is said that "art without science is nothing." Art is also defined as the "right knowledge of making things."

The personal transformation of Chavara took place through his intense study, reflection, and prayer. He subdued his physical resources, heart, mind, and body to the will of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We can find in his person a union (*yoga*) of material aspects and spiritual energies by which his life became a testimony before the world to God's presence and work.

4. "Method" of Prayer or "Art" of Prayer?

How did Chavara pray? This question naturally refers to the "method" he followed in his journey of prayer. But considering prayer as an experience of personal transformation, the "method" employed in prayer is to be understood as the "art" of prayer. We consider here two words - "method" and "art." They have some similarities and some differences. Both words have more or less the same meaning of the

² Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art - An Indian Perspective*, Rome: Urbanian University Press, 1990, 147.

“technique” of making something. But the term art refers to the “subject” who is the maker, while the method refers only to the “object” that is made. In other words, a method is a scientific approach to the making of something. It is impersonal and task-oriented. It may eventually become “mechanical” or “habitual,” lacking in awareness and freedom. In industrial productions, for example, the production belt stands for efficiency and the quality of production. Art, on the other hand, displays the awareness and the freedom of the artist. Artworks are the artists’ “self-expression,” their vision, inspiration, and imagination.

The transformation of materials like clay or marble into an artwork - a pot or a statue - corresponds also to an inner transformation of their makers. Artworks are simultaneously the witnesses of the artists’ spiritual conversion. In other words, the making of an artwork signifies the “becoming” (the evolving) of the artist as well.

When we consider the methods employed in prayer, we have to emphasize the “artistic” character of those methods. Without the sense of art, all prayer methods run the risk of being mechanical and habitual. The relationship of the praying persons to the methods is often limited to an objective level, in which their aim is limited to some material gain rather than the praying person’s spiritual realization. They overlook the spiritual transformation of the person. But when understood in the artistic sense, the various steps of prayer and their outward expressions correspond to the inner, spiritual conversion of the praying person. In the same way that the artistic process is a “material-spiritual” experience, the various exercises or *sādhana*s of prayer are transformative experiences for the whole person - body and soul. It is a wilful and conscious process, not mechanical or habitual actions. We can, therefore, speak of artworks as products that witness the three basic experiences in all artists: Inspiration, Imagination, and Transformation.

5. The Four Steps of Chavara’s Art of Prayer

Whatever we speak of artistic creativity can be applied to prayer. Prayer is not a mechanical activity but a creative, artistic activity. It is against this background we speak of the “art of prayer” of St Chavara. He has taught us a creative method of prayer. There are four steps in it: Reading, Solitude, Meditation, and Contemplation.³ Evidently, we can discern in

³ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 135. See also *St. Chavara and the Servant of God Fr. Canisius (Vishudha Chavarayachanum Daivadasan*

Chavara's prayer method the various steps of an artistic procedure. They are observing, remembering, visualizing, and making. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of the praying person into a work of art. It can be compared to the moulding and fashioning of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist.

Reading plays an important role in forming the imagination of the person. Reading spiritual books like the Sacred Scripture, the lives of the saints, and motivational literature helps us to enrich our imagination and purge it of all negative thoughts and ideas. By reading good and inspiring books, the ground is prepared for removing the unwanted weeds and sowing the seeds of virtues. Saint Teresa of Avila writes about the initial steps of prayer: "A beginner must look upon himself as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord's pleasure, on the most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds."⁴ Removing the unwanted weeds and nurturing the desired plants in the garden of imagination is a necessary process in the preparation for prayer. We cannot sustain our concentration in prayer due to the invasion of unwanted thoughts and images that have already corrupted our imagination. Reading spiritual and inspirational books nurtures a healthy imagination while weaning off the harmful weeds. This process settles our mind to experience significant silence and peaceful reflection. Chavara always took great interest in providing his spiritual children with good books. For that purpose, he started a printing press that produced prayer books and spiritual books.

Chavara had not only written books but also considered the Book of Nature a veritable source of information and learning. In Nature, we find God's marvels revealed, enriching our imagination. It is true that there is nothing in the mind that is not in the senses. It shows the importance of sense perception in shaping our knowledge.

Kanisiyusachanum), published by Davis Panackal, Kottamuri, Kottackal: Canisius Publications, 2019, 169-181.

⁴ Saint Teresa began to write *The Book of Her Life* in 1562 and completed it in 1565. The centrepiece of the book (Chapters 11-22) is a treatise on prayer. St Teresa speaks of different kinds of prayer as different ways of drawing water for the garden of the soul, where virtues grow.

See "Four Waters of Prayer from the Life of St Teresa by Herself", Penguin, 1957, at <https://catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/wp-content/uploads/7-four-waters-of-prayer-by-st-teresa-of-avila.pdf>, accessed on 19-08-2023.

Solitude leads to silence, and silence makes a person reflective. In the silence of solitude, one reflects on oneself and the world. Self-awareness may lead a person to gratitude for the gifts received, repentance for the sins committed, and zeal to attain future possibilities. A praying person reflects in the silence of solitude on his/her physical, mental, and emotional strengths and weaknesses to know where he/she needs change and rectification. Knowledge of the self helps to adopt appropriate methods and to do exercises needed for correction and improvement. Chavara's books *Atmānuthāpam* and *Dhyānasallāpangal* are replete with prayerful reflections on his life experiences.

Chavara seems to have understood meditation as setting ablaze the memories of the Saviour – his words and actions. The intense desire to “see” the Lord constantly moves the soul. It craves the vision of the Lord.⁵ The Image of the Lord becomes clearer in the imagination of the praying person, revealing itself as an imitable form. In the practice of art, the “visualization”⁶ of the image is an important creative phase. The artist visualizes the image that is purified from selfish or transitory interests and emotions. According to the traditional principles of art, the artist is supposed to depict the ideal, not the actual image. The artist strives to create the possible perfection, not the actual imperfection. Traditional theories of art prescribe rigorous physical disciplines to “see” the image that is to be depicted by the artist.

Contemplation consists of being conformed to Jesus and identifying with him, sharing in his consciousness of the Son praying to the “Father-Abba.”⁷ A contemplative person has a constant disposition of living and moving in God. St Chavara always breathed “Abba” in his words and actions. He said that his heart did not permit him to call God any other name than “Abba.” Filled with the Holy Spirit, he realized himself as a child of God, conformed to the Son Jesus. It is the Spirit of the Son who prayed from within him. ‘Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father”’ (Gal 4:6).

6. Conformity with the Image of God, Jesus Christ

It is the Holy Spirit who impels a person to be conformed to the Lord, putting on his attitude and mentality. Prayer creates in the person a kind

⁵ Paul Kalluveettil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 64-71.

⁶ Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art*, 145-146.

⁷ Paul Kalluveettil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, 117-121.

and compassionate heart similar to that of Jesus. The impact of imaginative vision is manifested in his/her physical, mental, and emotional behaviour in day-to-day life. It is the spiritual transformation through 'dying and resurrecting.' The person is 'reborn' as a child of God. The Holy Spirit begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person.

The goal of Christian discipleship and religious formation is "conformity" with Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Romans, we read: "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29). Our conformity with the Image of Jesus Christ is already in the plan and design of God. God has its pre-knowledge. Hence it is a vocation, a divine call given to us. God has also predestined us to be conformed to Jesus Christ.

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ means to undergo a purposeful and creative process of conversion and transformation. Every disciple has to undergo this process. It affects all levels of his/her experience - physical, mental, and emotional until he/she becomes a spiritual image of Christ.

The image of the Son Jesus Christ is the rallying point of all disciples who follow him. The challenge before them is to transform their "clay", earthly body into a glorious heavenly body. St Paul writes to the Corinthians: "As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49). Man of dust is Adam, and the man of heaven is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is given to us as the ideal or supreme model for our imitation. His way of life shows the process or the method of imitation. It is the way of death and resurrection like a grain of wheat fallen in the ground, dying and living again with renewed life. As we progress in imitating the given model, we have to undergo a moulding process in our human person, assimilating more and more to the Christ-Image.

The "Exemplar" role of the Christ-Image in relation to the created world is emphasized by St Paul in his letter to the Colossians. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). According to Saint Augustine, Jesus Christ is the 'Art of God' in creation. He is the "Word" or "Design" of creation. In other words, Jesus Christ is the right "measure," "proportion," and "mould" of every perfect work created by God. It also means that in Jesus Christ, we can find the "method" and "process" through which God created and redeemed the world. St Paul uses another expression in the letter to the Romans to

indicate the primacy of Jesus Christ in relation to the redeemed creation. He is the “firstborn” of the new humanity through his resurrection (Rom 8:28-29).

7. We are God’s Masterpieces

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a “work of art.” In the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). It means that we are God’s works of art, His masterpieces, created after the model of Jesus Christ. The entire human person is involved in this transformation. He/she becomes an “artwork” by transforming his/her physical materials of body, mind, and heart into a spiritual or a transfigured image. “The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). The transformation from the earthly to the divine is the end result of a painful struggle. St Paul speaks of it as the pain of childbirth. “The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom 8:22).

While a person undergoes a painful process to become a “work of art,” God plays His crucial and decisive role as the Artist. The obedient collaboration of the human person must accompany God’s work. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: “Lord, we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Is 64:8). The clay needs flexibility and pliability to receive the shape given to it. The attitude of receptivity to new forms is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In every creative experience in human life, there is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit from inspiration to its completion. In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body. But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person. “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

The agency of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of every believer and his/her conformity to the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:28-29).

8. Art in Chavara's Method of Prayer

It is against the background of this Biblical view of the creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer laid out by St Chavara in his writings. The four steps of prayer⁸ - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation - taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person, which can be compared to the formation of artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. We can see Chavara himself as an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection passing through various formative phases of life. We can observe the process of making an artwork in the experiences of prayer practiced and proposed by Chavara.

Reading good books prepares the mind to develop a proper imaginative vision of the model image with its contours, forms, and colours. It has two functions: 1) purging the mind of negative images and 2) filling the mind with noble thoughts and ideas. According to traditional practices of art, artists are supposed to perform some ascetical exercises to free the mind from all transitory images. They include fasting and *yoga*. The unbridled images of sense perception are to be "yoked" and controlled as a preparation for delineating the image to be portrayed. Observation and study of nature are to be complemented by the knowledge of the traditional canons of art from the masters or canonical books. The artist has to achieve the harmony of physical and mental faculties, body and mind, dexterity, and knowledge before he/she sets to work. Chavara's instruction to read good books in preparation for the prayer is to be understood as a means to deepen the awareness of oneself and the world around.

Solitude and silence are necessary for the "visualization" of the image. The observed data are not organized or defined. They are chaotic and unintelligible. Only through a reflective process, the observed and studied forms, patterns, and colours can be developed into an imitable idea. The traditional principle of art is *dr̥stva dhyāyēt* (the perceived data is to be meditated). Knowledge of the traditional canons of art is helpful in the process.

In spiritual life, the given materials to work with are the body, mind, and emotions of the person with their limitations and possibilities. A praying person reflectively assesses them before he/she visualizes the image to be

⁸ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 135.

depicted. The image often lies hidden as a possibility in the actual conditions of life. Silence and solitude help to awaken and animate it.

Meditation or *yoga-dhyāna* is the process of visualizing an image with clarity of all its features. It takes place through a mental activity inspired by the Spirit. The artist in a state of the Spirit's possession transforms the given materials into an imitable idea. It is a spiritual vision that reveals the possibilities hidden in the materials. The inspiration, the working of the Spirit in the artist is so intense that sometimes it is said that the artist has the vision directly from heaven, from God.

In spiritual life, meditation leads to the vision of the Lord. His glorious image of Jesus is revealed through the events of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Hence, the spiritual understanding of the image is as a dynamic reality, not as a static object. It is endowed with the energy to be revealed with infinite possibilities.

Artistic operation consists of realizing in materials the visualized image. The materials are transformed according to the vision of the artist. The materials become meaningful, and the vision becomes effective. Every artistic expression is a continued witnessing and proclamation of the inner vision of the artist. Every image is, therefore, considered an event rather than an object.

Contemplative life makes the life of a person a constant witness and an eloquent proclamation of the Lord, even in the moments of silence. He/she actualizes the presence of the Lord through gestures, words, and actions. His/her life becomes an uninterrupted memory, an aspiratory prayer of repentance, gratitude, praise, and joy. Chavara's life of prayer is an example of this spiritual perfection. Prayer transformed him into a work of art by the hands of God. There is God's signature on him, on all his actions and words. That is the beauty of his holiness. The beauty of holiness is the transcendence of truth captivated by its various spatial and temporal limitations. Holiness liberates truth from the actual conditions of human life, pain, agony, and ugliness. On the cross of Christ, we can find the truth of suffering and death. It is this truth that is transcended by the resurrection and glorified by the beauty of life. Beauty is, therefore, the revelation (*aletheia*)⁹ and the transparency of truth. It is through prayer that Chavara confronted the reality of life and attained the beauty of holiness.

⁹ See Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972, 69–70.