

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Panthaplackal CMI, *Agonies and Ecstasies of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 9), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2022. Pages 312.

The book under review is the ninth number in the series of the Theological Studies on Saint Chavara (TSSC), which is a joint effort of CMI and CMC Congregations under the auspices of Chavara Central Secretariat to promote and publish the spirituality and devotion of Chavara in the form of monographs. The book is so unique and special which stands out in the contemporary world as it presents the beauty and meaning of suffering from the life account of Chavara where people try to negate and alleviate suffering as a necessary evil. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the father of Kerala Church and society had to face many trials and tribulations on the path of liberating the Church and society from the spiritual blindness and social inequalities. But, relying on the providence and will of God he turned every such moments into the moments of blessings and grace. A deep investigation into his magnificent life would tell us that it was a wonderful mosaic image of agony and ecstasy. It is invigorating to see that Fr Thomas Panthaplackal exposes a theological perspective on the life of Chavara, especially on his agonies and ecstasies which reflects the real depth of his spirituality.

The author in the present work identified and delineated uncommon and exceptional insights from the life and personality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Besides the general introduction and general conclusion, the book is composed of 33 chapters narrating 33 instances of agonies and ecstasies from the awe-inspiring life of Chavara, beginning from his childhood to the end of his days. A few of the heart-wrenching incidents narrated in the book consist of the rejection by his own parishioners of Chennamkari during the function of tonsure, death of his parents and only brother at a very young age due to pandemic, the obstacles and difficulties emerged in the path of building 'Beth-Rauma' especially the unreasonable transfers from the authorities, death of his collaborators, unnecessary interference of the authorities in the affairs of the CMI Congregation, the Roccas schism and the following chaos, extensive suffering from rheumatic fever and eye diseases, painstaking journeys

for the people of God and the sufferings of his last days. These events may fall into the categories of physical, mental and spiritual suffering of the Saint, though it is not a strict compartmentalization. The rheumatic fever, arthritics, eye diseases and the last days of ailments may be counted among the physical suffering of Chavara. Rheumatic fever was a companion all throughout his life. Whenever he had long lasted rheumatic fever, his legs will be swollen and sometimes it bursts with puz oozing out which left him with excruciating pain. His mental and spiritual sufferings were more intense than his physical sufferings. Death of his beloved ones and collaborators, rejection from his own parish during the function of tonsure, unreasonable transfers from the authorities and the Roccas schism and the following chaos in the church left deep wounds in the mind of Chavara. Furthermore, he had many experiences of dark nights of the soul throughout his life.

The most striking feature of the work is that it not only elucidates the physical, mental and spiritual sufferings of Chavara in details but also enumerates the ways in which the Saint converted all those gut-wrenching moments into saving graces. He was a man of deep spiritual experience, creatively and positively approached the moments of suffering and turned them into the moments of blessings and graces. Therefore, the book *Agonies and Ecstasies* is indubitably a spiritual guide for the suffering humanity.

The author takes strenuous efforts to produce for the first time a work so unique and special presenting Chavara a great saint who converted the sufferings of the ordinary life into extra ordinary graces than merely qualifying him as a social reformer, literary figure or a religious leader. He carefully analyses the sufferings of Chavara from a theological perspective and claims that Chavara as an icon of suffering developed a theology of suffering in his life.

The work features the 'Agonies and Ecstasies' from the remarkable life journey of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and acts as a catalyst to guide people during the moments of sufferings and torments. The introductory words of the author at the beginning of the book places it in the context by saying that "it is an attempt to provide a handbook for all people who have to walk through this life into the midst of suffering of all sorts" (p. 25). Most of the chapters are framed with a quotation from the Holy Bible, *Compunction of a Soul*, a brief note on the chapter and narrative. The author skillfully crafted the chapters that each piece of suffering is followed by a moment of ecstasy. It makes the content and

title of the book more meaningful and coherent. The bibliography at the end of the book establishes the fact that the work is well researched and grounded on reliable sources. The book addresses many criticisms on Chavara especially he was a puppet of the missionaries (p. 105, 152). Sometimes it goes an extent to compare the experience of Chavara to the sufferings of Jesus on several grounds (p. 43, 53). The text provides an appreciation on the 19th century Kerala Church and society and clearly states that the history of 19th century Kerala Church is nothing but the history of Chavara and the CMI Congregation (p. 74, 75, 84, 138, 157, 164). The author skillfully employs his narrative instinct with a realistic touch. Hence the readers are captivated by the narrative as if he/ she is an eyewitness to the events. The minor language errors (p. 39, 48, 85, 219) and printing errors (p. 176, 197, 217, 231) do not diminish the value of the text. Though there are some such limitations, the book deserves a wider readership. I congratulate the author of the volume for bringing into light the *Agonies and Ecstasies* of Chavara which were unnoticed for years by the biographers, for some or other reason.

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