

BOOK REVIEW

Josy Maria CMC, *Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Pioneer of Social and Ecclesial Reform*, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 13), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2024. Pages 172. ISBN: 978-93-92996-48-1.

The latest book in the series of Theological Studies on Saint Chavara (TSSC) is *Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Pioneer of Social and Ecclesial Reform* and it is the mature fruit of Dr. Josy Maria CMC's determination, devotion and dedication to highlight the life and contributions of the founder of her congregation Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. She presents him as a person who was on a "mission to reach out to the poor and the oppressed, the lost, the last and the least" (p. 17). She explains why she has undertaken this task as follows, "It is sad to note that although Chavara worked for the unity and growth of the Church and for the integral development of the society, some do not recognize his contributions as a social reformer" (p. 17).

In order to substantiate her position, Josy Maria highlights in the first two chapters the deplorable situation of the Kerala Church at the time of Chavara and his role in recapturing the lost self-esteem and faith life of the St Thomas Christians. She also enumerates the inhumane social conditions of the nineteenth century and how Chavara's social vision and the resultant programmes and projects he initiated led to the integral development of the Kerala society as a whole.

Chavara was fully convinced that the family is the cornerstone of a prosperous society. A society that treats women as second-class citizens and treats them like subjects or even worse, as objects, denying their right to make choices is destined to be doomed. Chavara used education as an effective remedy to treat and cure this social ailment.

In the third chapter Josy Maria introduces Chavara's *Chavarul (The Testament of a Loving Father)*, as the Magna Carta for a happy and healthy family life. It reveals his awareness of the challenges the families of his time faced with. His dream was to transform the family into a reflection of heaven. These images were meant to awaken the desire to keep alive the dream of a heavenly home of brothers and sisters. He envisioned that

a family should be the arena, where life, the greatest gift of God, is welcomed and protected.

The fourth chapter spotlights Chavara's vision on education as well as his educational contributions. Jossy María states, "He began the popularization and reformation of education in the Catholic Church in Kerala by executing the motto, namely, the vernacular Malayalam phrase *pallikkoru pallikkoodam*, "A school for a church". The phrase became popular so that the succeeding generations could take it up to their hearts. He was the first to open a school for the dalits on 9 October 1864 at Mannanam" (p. 88). According to him, a society is integrally developed only when all the people are educated and become God-fearing. Chavara's broad mindedness led him to initiate the education of the marginalized which was unthinkable at that period. Thanks to this bold step taken by Chavara, the poor and the downtrodden could enjoy justice, equality, and freedom.

The women empowerment initiatives of Chavara are enumerated and substantiated in the fifth chapter. Jossy Maria earmarks the foundation of the first indigenous religious congregation for women and its ever broadening and continuing impact on the society as Chavara's clarion call to a renewed and egalitarian social order. Jossy laments, "In the nineteenth century women were kept in a state of utter subjection; they were denied the basic rights, suppressed and oppressed. Women were left economically, socially, educationally and politically dependent on men. Chavara instilled in the women of Kerala the conviction that they were born with potential, goodness, trust, ideas, dreams and greatness. Realizing the importance of women in shaping and guiding the society, Chavara initiated new ventures for their development for they are the agents of social change" (p. 18).

The concluding chapter presents the impact of the Chavara hegemony on the church life as well as the society as a whole. The ripples of the movements he initiated has surpassed their initial boundaries and like giant waves now make impacts on global scenarios offering hope and liberation to the downtrodden. With gratitude the author remembers that it was the first time in the history of Kerala that a Catholic priest worked for the empowerment of women by founding a religious institute for women, a boarding house and school for girls, vocational training, and income generating projects for women, and so on. Jossy Maria concludes her research work affirming as follows, "It is my firm conviction that it was Saint Chavara, who made it possible for

the Malabar Church to stand up against injustices by way of his teachings and actions.... Being an ambassador of peace and harmony, he extended his unique and outstanding leadership in the spiritual, pastoral, and doctrinal realms in the Syro-Malabar Church" (p. 157).

Jossy Maria deserves our appreciation and gratitude for dedicating her time and energy to explore and bring to light so many hidden facts and truths hitherto uncovered and unrecognized. Let her meritorious work be an eye opener and challenge to the ignorant and a matter of comfort to the truth seekers.

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