

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PRAYER IN KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA'S *COLLOQUIES WITH THE HEAVENLY FATHER*

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**Abstract:** Kuriakose Elias Chavara left an indelible mark on the socio-religious context of Kerala through his spirituality and contributions. This article explores the characteristics of prayer in his significant work, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, a collection of meditations that highlight the very essence of authentic prayer. For Chavara, prayer was rooted in gratitude, humility, and an intimate friendship with the Divine. His spirituality was centred on recognizing God's infinite kindness and justice. His meditations reflect a deep sense of unworthiness and at the same time they are filled with gratitude for God's mercy towards all. He emphasized sincerity in prayer, advocating for a pure heart that acknowledges human weakness. Chavara believed that God would elevate us to the perfection as we trust in God our Father – he termed it as *Abba consciousness*. His writings reveal prayer as a heartfelt dialogue, where the soul engages in conversation with

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God, reflecting the intimacy between the close friends. Moreover, Chavara emphasized the necessity of self-awareness and repentance, as they are the first steps towards divine communion. He encouraged all to avoid even the venial sins so that we might grow more swiftly in spirituality. His meditations on Christ's Passion deepened his longing for reconciliation, highlighting confession as the gateway to divine mercy. The *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* presents prayer as a total surrender to God's will, achieved through adoration, repentance, and trust. Chavara's spirituality remains relevant today as it offers a roadmap for the believers who seek deeper communion with the Divine.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Gratitude, Abba consciousness, Humility, Kindness, Love, Prayer, Repentance, Sin, Trust

## 1. Introduction

Life attains true success when we embrace it as an opportunity to leave a meaningful and positive imprint on the world. The renowned spiritual guide, Fulgence Meyer, insightfully observed that prayer guides us towards this positive direction, for prayer is often described as the very breath of the soul. Just as the quality of a person's breathing reveals the state of their physical health – steady, easy breaths signalling vitality, and laboured, irregular breaths suggesting illness – so too does the quality of our prayer reflect the health of our soul.<sup>1</sup> Nurturing of our spiritual health paves the way for a richer and more meaningful life.

Prayer stands as an important reality in human existence. Through sincere prayer, we cultivate the habits that nourish the soul and foster spiritual growth, transforming our burdens into joy and our anxieties into peace. Prayer helps us to lighten our burdens and worries by surrendering ourselves to Almighty God, leading to peace and joy as the fruit of genuine prayer. We are called to depart from this world not leaving behind scars of pain, but rather stars of joy – glowing signs of our existence that inspire the generations to come. Our legacy should be one of hope, kindness, and spiritual vitality, achieved through the simple yet transformative power of prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Fulgence Meyer, *Uni Una: To the One God My One Soul*, Ohio, Cincinnati: St Francis books, 1926, 437.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara is renowned for his contributions to the society, which brought about a profound transformation in both the social and spiritual spheres. It is, in fact, a reality that the spiritual and secular history of Kerala could be meaningfully divided into periods before and after Chavara. Unfortunately, both the political and the religious authorities and the historians maintain a conspicuous distance and silence regarding this great saint, who significantly elevated the human dignity of the people of Kerala through his active and creative interactions. Even today, he remains a scapegoat of politicization within the Church and the State. Both the Church and the State owe an immense debt to Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

Chavara’s contributions to the spiritual realm are invaluable. His spiritual writings, compiled into volumes, hold a special place, among which the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* stands out in the field of prayer literature. Written more than 150 years ago, this work, a collection of meditations and prayers, is a rare gem in spiritual literature. It remains highly significant even today, as it beautifully explains the true nature and characteristics of prayer.

Prayer, according to Chavara, is not merely the repetition of words at designated times; rather, it is an attitude, a way of life, and a transformative tool to experience God. Prayer becomes meaningful when it is accompanied by the practice of virtues in our daily lives. It becomes effective when it fosters genuine communion and communication with God. Through prayer, we are called not merely to seek favours from God, but to experience His love and care.

Every prayer is answered, though not necessarily in the way our specific needs dictate. Chavara’s understanding of prayer transcends the personal needs or the expectation of immediate answers; but rather, it is rooted in praising God for the very gift of life and existence since birth. In the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, he highlights the essential attitudes a devotee must cultivate, and he outlines the fundamental characteristics of authentic prayer. He emphasizes the importance of preparation for meditation and prayer, and makes this work a timeless guide for those seeking a deeper spiritual life. In the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, the essential characteristics of prayer are brilliantly portrayed, and in the following pages, an attempt is made to explore those foundational aspects.

## 2. God's Kindness and Justice: The Heart of Prayer and the Life of Chavara

Love of God is the centre of prayer. As we are created beings, we long to experience God. St Augustine passionately said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (1:1).<sup>2</sup> We are created out of the abundance of God's love. Life out of God's love is the most valuable gift that we received from the Almighty God, for God wanted us to be his children. As St John affirms, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him have eternal life (Jn 3:16), and the verse summarizes the message of salvation and God's love of the humanity. St Paul in his letter to Titus presents a concise summary of the Gospel message that highlights the grace, mercy and love of God as the foundation of salvation: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7). Such is the kindness of God for human beings. This is the centre of spirituality and therefore the created ones always have to be grateful to the Lord.

Chavara's basic concept of prayer was centred on the 'loving kindness' of the Father. Whenever he spoke about prayer, he underlined God's kindness because he was sure that the virtue of kindness is humbly giving of oneself in love and mercy to others who may not be able to give anything in return. Human beings are not able to render thanks to God in the same degree and manner in return for all the graces and blessings received from God. God's steadfast kindness is such that the humans are neither worthy to receive nor able to return it, for only God can be so kind to his creatures.

Chavara always insisted himself to be thankful to God's kindness. Therefore, he asks himself in *Meditation on Vocation*:

Servant of God, think carefully about your actions and your path. Like a traveller who checks his way to avoid getting lost, you must make sure your journey leads to heaven and not to destruction. During the annual retreat, God calls you to review your life honestly

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, Translated by Sheed FJ, London: Sheed and Ward, 1943.

and plan to improve it. Ask yourself why you left your family, friends, and possessions. Why did you choose a difficult life of sacrifice instead of living easily and comfortably in the world? Did you come here just for a comfortable and respected life, or to follow Jesus in sacrifice, self-denial, and hard work for your own holiness and the holiness of others? Remember, Christ paid for your soul and the souls of others with His precious blood. The real purpose of religious life is to love God completely, follow Him, and help bring others to Him. Now ask yourself: have you truly followed Christ with all your effort? Have you worked hard to grow in virtue, as your vocation requires?<sup>3</sup>

It was easy for Chavara to be thankful to the Lord, as he reflected upon the blessings he had received, especially his priesthood and religious life. Reflecting on the kindness of God is the easiest way to pray, because we are all blessed with gifts from above, especially the gift of life.

God's kindness and love are greater and broader than what human mind can imagine. As the Scripture testifies, the Ninevites were living in the peak of their sinful conditions beyond redemption. So God sent Jonah to tell them the painful days of their destruction. But the Almighty God showed his kindness as they repented. When God sees the tears of the penitent, He 'forgets' the past and the heart of a mother dominates in Him! "Lord, if you kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (Ps 130:3). Our God is the God of kindness. Chavara always reflected on kindness of God. When we reflect on his works, we realize that he could not resist the thought of God's loving kindness even for a moment. In truth, every word he spoke and every act he performed reflected the deep and abiding presence of God's love in his life. Chavara truly deserves the title "Apostle of Kindness," as during his comparatively brief life, he could accomplish remarkable apostolic works beyond any human imagination, bringing immense benefit to the Church and to the society.

Chavara firmly believed in the boundless kindness of God, a kindness that transcends human understanding. "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has

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<sup>3</sup> Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Causes of Blessed Chavara, 1990, 25.

compassion on you" (Is 54:10). Yet, he also cautioned his soul to remain vigilant against sin, for he understood God to be a just judge as well. In his view, kindness and justice are inseparable as the two sides of the same coin. Hence, he emphasized the need of sincere growth in the fear of God and adherence to the Gospel, the true path of Christian living. Constantly mindful of the graces he had received, he taught that our response to God must be measured by the generosity of His gifts. The priests and religious who are privileged with a special call and graces, bear an even greater responsibility to foster a sincere and faithful relationship with the Lord. Therefore, he says:

If the Lord should show His justice now, as of old, who would dare to ascend His altar? But now, He shows kindness and not justice. Yet, dear brother, be mindful of His sentence of justice – until the hour of justice, He will remain silent. He will not argue or protest. He is at your command; He will allow you to touch Him, He will come to your heart, He will go wherever you take Him. Oh, my dear brother, He will not mind now in whatever manner you and I ascend the altar. He will not be angry – He is patient and full of forgiveness. But remember, there is a limit to His patience. Long-suffering as His patience is, His wrath will be severe. Therefore, examine yourself carefully to see whether you have lived up to your sacred calling.<sup>4</sup>

Chavara firmly believed that God is both just and kind. Thus, it is our duty to remain constantly vigilant, staying close to the Almighty, who abounds in love and compassion.

### **3. Sincerity of a Pure Heart: Chavara's Prayerful Humility**

Chavara was always very genuine both in his life and during the moments of prayer. Before every prayer, he confessed to God that he was unworthy to stand in the presence of the Heavenly Father, acknowledging himself as a sinner seeking pardon for the sins committed knowingly and unknowingly. All his writings, especially his *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, frequently highlight this characteristic. He was deeply convinced that he was a sinner, unworthy to approach God for anything. "I deem not myself worthy to reach high degrees of prayer and sanctity. As I am a great sinner with a heart impure and opaque without virtues of cleanliness and modesty. I realize that I am not worthy to receive the spirit of contemplation and attain

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<sup>4</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditation on Vocation, 26.*

perfection."<sup>5</sup> This is what the sincerity of a pure heart. The Pharisee who went to pray was not justified (Lk 18:11-14), for he lacked the sincerity of heart in his approach to God, his neighbour, and even to himself. He did not give the opportunity to God to justify him but instead he justified himself (Lk 18:9-11).

Chavara humbly acknowledged his part in the suffering endured by Jesus, who was crucified by the Jews. Jesus entered the world to offer salvation to all the humanity through His life. In deep reflection, Chavara focused on his sins and failures admitting them sincerely with a repentant heart. He believed that Jesus' bodily sufferings were caused by his own sins. Thus, Chavara mourned for having forgotten God's goodness, which had blessed him from the childhood:

O Lord, your holy eyes – once brighter than the stars – are dimmed by the cruel, blood-spilling blows to your head. Your lips, once vivid and red like ripe apples, are now darkened. These changes on your sacred face are all because of my sins, and the thought pierces my heart with deeper sorrow. You are like the noble father and his son in an ancient tale – a king decreed to remove both eyes of the son who committed a serious offence. Yet, moved by compassion, the king decreed that only one eye from each – father and son – be taken. But the loving father chose instead to lose both his eyes, willingly bearing the full pain out of love for his child.<sup>6</sup>

Chavara continues to meditate on the painful results of his great failures in doing good to God, humanity and himself. Our sins not only affect humanity but also God our Saviour. He sees Jesus' passion directly in meditation. He experiences God's unconditional love for him and presents it without losing its depth. He had the sincerity to acknowledge his shortcomings, especially as a human being and even more as a priest.

#### **4. Prayer Rooted in Gratitude: Path to True Surrender**

Chavara was always intensely committed to giving thanks to the Lord, recognizing it as the sincerest way of praising God. The classical and traditional form of Christian prayer is offering gratitude to God for what we are by His grace. Out of His infinite love and will, God created us and everything in the universe. With this conviction, we express our gratitude to the Creator, which is, in essence, the true prayer. Thanksgiving stands as

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<sup>5</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 12.

the highest form of prayer. We cannot foresee what lies ahead in our lives or in the world. Yet, through both positive and negative experiences, we strive to understand them with the trust in the Lord, who transforms all things for our good. This represents the highest form of prayer – the trustful surrender – demonstrated by Jesus Himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before being led to the crucifixion, Jesus endured immense pain and isolation, praying earnestly for relief but ultimately submitting himself to the Father’s will (Mt 26:39, 42). The garden of Gethsemane thus reflects the supreme moment of Jesus’ prayer: complete and unconditional acceptance of God’s will.

Jesus firmly believed the words of the Scripture: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 107:1). True thanksgiving involves recognizing God’s power, accepting it without reservation, experiencing it personally, and glorifying it. We witness this spirit in the story of the blind man who is depicted in the Gospel (Lk 18:35-43). The glorifying or thanksgiving made him a follower of Jesus. The result of prayer is nothing but following Jesus unconditionally. It was through this act of thanksgiving and glorification that he became a follower of Jesus. Ultimately, the essence of prayer is to commit ourselves to follow Jesus with absolute and unconditional surrender. Viewed more broadly, thanksgiving makes the prayer more effective and meaningful, regardless of the form or method we choose.

As a priest, Chavara was fully conscious of his duty to give thanks to the Heavenly Father, who had chosen him – despite his unworthiness – to stand at the altar of the Lord. He understood his vocation as a gratuitous gift of God, bestowed upon him, a sinner. With deep humility, Chavara confessed his unworthiness in receiving the sublime gift of priesthood. Throughout his life, he devoted himself to remain faithful to God, continually offering gratitude to Him and glorifying the Almighty. Reflecting upon his vocation, he exhorted his soul with these words: “Therefore, O my soul, hasten to Him and thank Him for His great mercy. You are now in the sanctuary of the Lord, where He is surrounded by His angels. Here, He is not hidden by clouds as He was when He revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. With no covering of clouds, He stands before you as an affectionate Father, ready to welcome you most lovingly. He says to you, ‘I am your loving Father. Do not hesitate to come to Me.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 10.



Living with gratitude was a joyful experience for Chavara, for God is the only source of joy of a priest.

In the Old Testament, God remained hidden even from the patriarchs and the prophets. However, in the New Testament, He revealed Himself through Jesus Christ and, following the Ascension, continues to remain perpetually present and visible to His people through the Eucharist. Chavara regarded this as the supreme gift granted to the New Testament people, and as a priest, he considered himself specially blessed. Consequently, he committed himself to a life of perpetual thanksgiving to the Heavenly Father, which he esteemed as the highest form of prayer.

Chavara had personal reasons to praise God without ceasing, and even he felt the need to spend more time in praising God for His innumerable and immeasurable blessings. Chavara in his meditations, made a comparison between the greatness of God who is the creator of all universe and the worthless being like him. He reflected on his life that was of no special benefit or use but to hurt the sanctity of all God's creations. Therefore, he asks God the reason for the great deeds He had done for the useless creature like him. He asks God like a child:

O my Lord, what love compelled You to suffer for a worm like me? How could I betray You, knowing the agony Your love endured? If You loved me so completely, how could my heart long for anything but You? Grant me, Lord, to love You with a devotion as deep as the wounds I caused. You poured out Your blood for me, as a beast drains the life from its prey. My sin opened Your sacred side, spilling every drop. O Father, your love surpasses every measure and floods beyond all bounds.<sup>8</sup>

This above prayer of Chavara appears to express pure repentance, yet at its core, it is truly a hymn of gratitude to God for His paternal love. Sophy Rose comments on Chavara's *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, "Chavara expresses the deepest feelings in spiritual life: gratitude to a loving God for the abundant blessings showered upon him and sorrow for the smallest lapses in his personal life. His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence."<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging our shortcomings and

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<sup>8</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Sophy Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore; Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 35.

humbling ourselves before the Lord is, in essence, an act of gratitude towards Him.

### **5. Speaking Heart to Heart: True Prayer as Intimacy with God**

When Chavara speaks of prayer, he includes not only vocal prayer but also mental prayer, meditation, and every form of communion with God grounded in love. For someone who truly loves God, never lacks time and opportunity for prayer. In his *colloquies*, Chavara expresses the need for a deep, personal friendship with the Lord.

In Christian spirituality, many of the great spiritual masters have emphasized the significance of intimacy with God. Chavara also highlights friendship, especially the kind of closeness and connection found between intimate friends. Without intimacy or love, there can be no genuine relation with anyone, including God.

True and genuine friends converse freely, without interruption or impatience. In fact, it becomes a joy for them to listen each other. Chavara notes that when we are with a close friend, we don't feel tired or bored; instead, we remain active and engaged, with countless things to share. This, he says, is what prayer ought to be: a lively, loving, and never-tiring conversation with God. If we possess such an intimacy with the Lord, we eagerly converse with Him, and God eagerly listens and responds to us. Therefore, Chavara often emphasized the importance of cultivating a deep and abiding intimacy with the One who holds our lives in His hands.

During his prayers, Chavara reminded himself: "Meditation is a free and friendly colloquy with God. If meditation is a conversation with God, it presupposes a deep friendship with Him. When friends sit close together, they find endless topics to talk about. If there is love, the conversation knows no bounds. Neither friend needs to be taught how to continue the dialogue."<sup>10</sup> For Chavara, prayer was a joyful, unceasing conversation with God. Between true friends, there is nothing to hide. Similarly, in prayer, if we withhold anything from the Lord, we are not authentic in our faith or in our intimacy with Him. Genuine prayer expresses complete trust in God, saying 'I open my heart to You, who know me better than I know myself.' This is the spirit of true and heartfelt prayer.

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<sup>10</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 2.

## 6. Self-Awareness and Humility: Foundations of Authentic Prayer

In the Gospel, we come across yet another important characteristic of prayer. The blind man cried aloud as he realized that Jesus was passing through. Hearing his cry, Jesus stopped and asked the people to bring the man to Him. Jesus asked the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51). The blind man replied that he wanted his sight back, and Jesus granted his request. The man was well aware of his need; he knew he was blind. Awareness of our limitations and presenting them before the Lord is an essential aspect of prayer. One who does not know oneself cannot enter into prayer. According to the great masters of spirituality, one of the characteristics of prayer is the awareness of God's power and our limited knowledge about ourselves and the world.

Chavara examines his conscience and reflects on his state of mind and his unworthiness to experience God's love through meditations. He had the awareness of his unworthiness but also of the greatness of God's gift. Therefore, he acknowledges, all that he is, from God's greatness, "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 a member of the Congregation? Why should anyone address me as Prior? Do you think I deserve any one of these favors? Not at all, to sure."<sup>11</sup> Prayer arises from the awareness of a person who realizes that he/she has limitations in life. They humble themselves before God and unconditionally allow Him to lead them in life. Prayer is a total surrender to Almighty God and the awareness of one's unworthiness leads one closer to God.

Humility is the basic virtue that enables us to realise our unworthiness before God. Without the virtue of humility, one cannot fully rely on God. Humility led Chavara to the realization of his lowliness and brokenness before God, and he pleaded God to help him experience the love of God.

## 7. Abba Consciousness: Living in the Light of God's Forgiveness

Faith in the forgiveness of God is an important characteristic of prayer. Chavara never failed to understand and experience the fatherhood of God in his life. One significant theme we find in his writings is the *Abba consciousness*, which became the driving force of his spiritual journey. His meditations highlight his total dependence on God by acknowledging Him as *Abba*. For Chavara, no other relationship was so

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<sup>11</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

great and significant as the Father-Son relationship. It was a profound joy for him to call God as *Abba*. His *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* is a unique piece that reveals his unconditional trust in God the Father. Even when he greets Jesus, he addresses Him as 'Father', and rarely invokes Him Saviour. It indicates how deeply the *Abba consciousness* was rooted in his life.

The deep trust in God the Father led Chavara to look at himself as the prodigal son of the Gospel. He had great confidence in the loving and forgiving nature of God. He was not ashamed to acknowledge the broken condition of his soul, owing to true humility. Only a great soul can assess oneself in such a manner that highlights God's greatness and human lowliness. He writes:

Oh, it has been so long since I last beheld my heavenly Father's face! Much like the prodigal son, I have squandered all the blessings that were so generously bestowed upon me. Now, I find myself in servitude to a harsh master, tending to his swine. My hunger has become so acute that I long even for the pods upon which the swine feed. The fine garments my Father once provided have been ruined, and I am now clothed in rags. Nevertheless, I recognize that any further delay would be self-destructive. Therefore, despite my present state, I must begin my journey homeward, equipped only with my humble cap and walking stick, resolved to return to my Father's house.<sup>12</sup>

Here, Chavara humbly expresses his trust in God's forgiveness, rooted in his unwavering belief in God's unconditional love.

Chavara's trust in the loving Father goes beyond limitations. For him, God the Father is generous in forgiving and forgetting his ingratitude and all the sins. He makes his soul conscious of it, saying, "You are sure to be reinstated to your former filial status and privileges. Oh, I have a look at my Father's palace and the mansions therein with their graceful high walls."<sup>13</sup> Chavara is very sure of his Heavenly Father's love for him. He reflects on his life and realizes it that he is not better than the prodigal son. But, Chavara does not go back from his trust in God and tells his soul with confidence, "Yes, that's true indeed. Still my Father is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear."<sup>14</sup> This is what

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<sup>12</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

we often refer to as resolute and unshakable trust in God, even when there appears to be no hope. It was this unwavering trust in God that enabled him to persevere during the tough moments. Through prayer and steadfast faith and confidence in God, he was able to confront every challenge.

Prayer is keeping the doors of our hearts open at all times, allowing God to enter whenever He wishes. It means we must be clear in conscience and be ready to acknowledge our shortcomings. This openness is the result of our unreserved trust in God. Chavara longed to experience God as he reflected on the graces he had received and he realised his shortcoming in his life. It helped him to put his trust in the goodness of God. Prayer leads us to see the graces we receive from God and accept our failures thankfully. Therefore, prayer always demands our absolute faith in the Lord's forgiveness and make our spiritual life vibrant.

### **8. Sin: A Barrier to Experiencing God's Mercy**

Chavara firmly believed that human sins offend God and are the root cause of all the problems the humanity faces. His meditations on mortal sin reflect deeply on the sin as a grievous wound by which we separate ourselves from God. As a priest, he was greatly sensitive even to the slightest transgressions, fully aware of their impact on himself and others. Sin, he taught, is a perilous path that distances us from God. Thus, Chavara remained ever vigilant in examining his conscience. He emphasized that improper thoughts, imaginations, and actions lead us to offend God. A priest, as a shepherd of the community, must maintain a pure and clear conscience. Chavara was unwavering in fulfilling his priestly responsibilities with utmost sincerity. For him, sin was a multidimensional, destructive force that draws humanity away from God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbour caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as 'an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.' Sin is an offense against God: 'Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.' Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods,' knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to

contempt of God.' In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation.<sup>15</sup>

In the view of Chavara, sin becomes a serious disaster whenever we strive to go beyond the inherent limitations of humanity.

Chavara reminds his soul to be cautious of even the smallest tendency to offend God by disobeying His divine law. To him, all sins, regardless of the size, bring about the same harmful effects on the human soul. As one sins, one makes a false attempt to stand on his/her own, but in reality, he/she is nothing without God's grace. Chavara asks, "O privileged priest of God, countless saints and holy souls have chosen to endure every kind of suffering – even to the end of time – rather than commit the smallest offense against God. You deceive yourself if you consider sin, especially mortal sin, to be something minor. How can you think that offending and denying Jesus is a simple matter? Such a belief shows that you have not fully grasped the deep horror and seriousness of sin."<sup>16</sup> When we are careless in obeying God's will, we are open to be trapped by the evil. This is one of the key messages highlighted in the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*.

### **9. Urgency of a Sinless Life**

Chavara reflects deeply on the reasons that compel us not to commit sin against God. According to him, sin arises from an unawareness of God's invaluable blessings. Life itself is the greatest sign of God's love for us. If we do not remember God gratefully for this extraordinary gift, how can we claim to love Him? And if we do not love Him, how can we resist the evil that tempts us? Without a longing for the Lord, true obedience to the Gospel is impossible. Therefore, Chavara warns his soul with a beautiful example:

O priest, your life is a blessing through Him; you live because He gave His own life for you. Do you believe that the sin of a priest and the sin of a simple, uneducated person will be judged equally? Certainly not. God, who is perfectly just, rewards and punishes each according to their position and responsibility. His justice is flawless and never errs. Just as a king may excuse a stain on a comedian's garment but would be angered to find one on his son's or queen's robe, so too does God show greater patience toward the laity. But when a priest

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<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1849-1850), Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditation on Mortal Sin*, 29.

commits even a small venial sin, it is a grave offense. God holds priests to a higher standard of responsibility, and their failings are judged more severely.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, priests must vigilantly safeguard their souls, avoiding even the slightest venial sins.

When we repeatedly commit venial sins without listening to our conscience, believing them to be insignificant, we gradually open ourselves to the temptation of mortal sin. Thus, Chavara advises: "Avoid even the smallest sin in your priestly life, for you are appointed to lead souls to salvation through sacrifice, prayer, and penance. Failure to do so may cause the grace of God to be withdrawn, ultimately resulting in spiritual ruin."<sup>18</sup> We must firmly resist the wickedness of evil and always submit to the will of God.

Deeply aware of his sacred duty to God and the neighbour, Chavara continually examined his conscience in prayer, reflecting on how faithfully he lived the holiness demanded of the priests. He earnestly scrutinized whether he had neglected any opportunity to serve God and his fellow human beings. Chavara calls upon the people of God, especially the priests, to exercise great care and vigilance in dedicating themselves to the divine mission entrusted to them by God through His Son, Jesus Christ, and transmitted through the Apostles.

#### **10. Repentance: The Foundation of Sincere Confession**

Confessing sins is the basic requirement or as Chavara would say, the first step to meaningfully and effectively enter into prayer and experience God's mercy. Our sins block every path to God, who alone is good. "No one is good but God alone" (Mk 10:18). In his meditations, Chavara emphasized the faithful confession of even the smallest of the venial sins. He explained, "Meditation requires that one be united in love with God. But a sinful heart is incompatible with God. Therefore, on the very first day of my meditation, I must come to my Saviour, Jesus Christ, my beloved Bridegroom, to beg pardon for my sins."<sup>19</sup> The Spirit of the Lord must guide us into meditation, for without His help, we are unable to experience God's loving care.

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<sup>17</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditations on Mortal Sin*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditations on Mortal Sin*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

To make a sincere confession of our sins, the indispensable virtue of repentance is required. Chavara passionately affirms his deep longing for inner peace. He was convinced that without true repentance and sincere confession, no one could draw near to God. In prayer, he declares, "I come to You, my Heavenly Father, with a heart full of sorrow and a firm desire to change, seeking the peace only You can give. Though my sorrow is far less than the weight of my many sins, I offer it to You with deep grief and a spirit of penance."<sup>20</sup> For him, approaching God was a painful task, for his heart ached over the faults that had tarnished the image of God. He was filled with deep remorse for his grave negligence in doing good, despite the blessings he had received from his earliest days. His conscience would pierce him every time as he looked at the crucifix, recognizing the countless wounds borne by Christ due to his sins. Therefore, he was prepared to endure any punishment, even for a lifetime, in atonement for his wrongdoings. In complete humility, he surrendered himself to God saying, "O merciful Father! I am unable to raise my eyes and look upon Your face. Lord, as I gaze upon Your holy head, I am filled with fear at the thought of how it came to be pierced with thorns. How many times have I pierced Your head through my pride and impure thoughts! O Lord, place Your crown of thorns upon my head, so that I may be strengthened to maintain the spirit of repentance until my death and keep my mind free from any thought displeasing to You."<sup>21</sup> True repentance and confession transform a person's attitude and actions, bringing them into harmony with the will of God.

## **11. Conclusion**

In sum, Chavara was a man of God, who tirelessly devoted himself to the well-being of the Church and the humanity. His commitment to protect the Church cannot be fully understood without appreciating his deep spirit of prayer and his profound experience of God through a life of unwavering devotion. The history and his writings clearly reveal this truth. His literary works consistently reflect the love and mercy of God, emphasizing above all the need to fulfil God's will, regardless of the difficulties encountered on the way. His own life, marked by turmoil and trials, stands as a testament to his unshakable faith in God's protection. Prayer was the only means and method for him to discern and fulfil God's will. He humbly opened his heart to the Lord, recognizing his own

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<sup>20</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 6-7.



unworthiness even to stand before the tabernacle. Another major focus of his spirituality was sincere repentance; he believed that confession of failures purified the soul, making one worthy to approach God. This deep conviction is well-explained in his *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, a work that continues to inspire the readers on their journey towards spiritual perfection.