

CHAVARA'S LEGACY IN THE LIGHT OF *DILEXI TE*

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Abstract: The present article explores the deep connection between Pope Leo XIV's Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* and the life and mission of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Grounded in the Gospel mandate of love, both affirm that true Christian discipleship is realized through compassion and solidarity with the poor. Set within the socio-religious context of 19th-century Kerala, the study highlights Chavara's pioneering efforts in education, social justice, women's empowerment, and service to the marginalized. Through initiatives such as free schools, charitable associations, and the founding of the religious congregations, he transformed faith into action. His life stands as a prophetic witness to *Dilexi Te's* call to embody Christ's love and mercy through concrete acts of compassion and justice.

Keywords: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Dilexi Te*, Christian discipleship, Love in action, Education, Women empowerment, Social justice, Charity, Compassion and mercy, Preferential option for the poor, *Abba* experience

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1. Introduction

The Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* by Pope Leo XIV offers a profound reflection on the Christian call to love, “*I have loved you*” (Jn 15:9). It highlights how divine love must find expression in concrete action, especially through service to the poor and the marginalized. In a world wounded by inequality, indifference, and spiritual emptiness, the Holy Father invites the faithful to rediscover love as the core of discipleship and the path toward authentic Christian witness.

This exhortation is not merely a theological treatise but a pastoral appeal; a reminder that the credibility of the Church depends on its closeness to those who suffer. *Dilexi Te* urges every believer to make love visible through compassion, justice, and mercy, transforming the Church into a “community of care” that reflects the heart of Christ.

This article seeks to explore how the life and mission of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a 19th-century Indian saint and social reformer, resonate deeply with the message of *Dilexi Te*. Long before the modern social teachings of the Church were formally articulated, Chavara lived the Gospel mandate of love in action. His concern for the poor, his initiatives for education and empowerment, and his commitment to community renewal exemplify the same spirit that *Dilexi Te* calls for today.

Both Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* call the Church to embody Christ’s love through tangible acts of compassion, justice, and service to the poor. Their shared message insists that love cannot remain an emotion or ideal; it must take flesh in concrete works of mercy and inclusion. To love as Christ loved means to walk with the poor, stand with the marginalized, and bring hope to those abandoned by society.

In this light, the article will explore how the compassionate heart of Kuriakose Elias Chavara mirrors the pastoral vision of *Dilexi Te*, offering the Church today a path to renew its mission of love in action.

2. The Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te*

Pope Leo XIV’s first Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi Te* (“*I Have Loved You*”), places the preferential love for the poor at the heart of Christian discipleship and the ecclesial mission. Comprising one hundred and twenty-one paragraphs, the document offers a profound theological and pastoral reflection on love as the essence of the Gospel and the foundation of authentic human fraternity. It addresses critical issues such as the care of the poor and the sick, the abolition of slavery, and the

protection of women subjected to violence. Initiated under the pontificate of Pope Francis and brought to completion by Pope Leo XIV, this significant exhortation further expands the Church's social magisterium by emphasizing the right to education, the pastoral accompaniment of migrants, the promotion of charitable initiatives, and the pursuit of justice and equality grounded in the dignity of every human person.

The exhortation challenges Christians to see charity not as mere assistance but as participation in God's own love; a love that heals, uplifts, and restores. It calls priests, religious, and laity alike to cultivate a spirituality that is both contemplative and active: rooted in prayer yet expressed in service.

The first chapter of the *Dilexi te* reflects on the woman who anointed Jesus, showing that even small acts of love have great value, especially toward those who suffer. He teaches that love for Christ and love for the poor are inseparable; serving the poor is a way of meeting Christ Himself. The Pope recalls the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who was transformed by his encounter with the poor and became a witness of Gospel compassion. Finally, he reminds us that God always hears the cry of the poor, as in the story of Moses, and calls us to share His concern for those in need.¹ Ignoring their suffering, the Pope warns, is turning away from the very heart of God.

The second chapter emphasizes that God's love is merciful and preferentially attentive to the poor, as seen throughout salvation history. By becoming poor Himself in the Incarnation and sharing the sufferings of humanity, Jesus revealed that divine love is most fully expressed in solidarity with the weak and the marginalized. The Scriptures consistently show God's concern for the oppressed, from the cries of the Israelites in Egypt to the prophetic calls for justice, culminating in Jesus' ministry to the poor, the sick, and the outcast. The Apostle John and Jesus teach that love for God is inseparable from love for one's neighbour, making acts of mercy and charity essential signs of authentic faith. The early Christian communities, following Jesus' example, shared their goods, cared for widows and the needy, and organized charitable works, demonstrating that generosity toward the poor is both a commandment and a source of blessing. Through these teachings, the

¹ See, Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, 4-15, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html; accessed on 13/10/2025.

Church is called to continue walking with the poor, making them a privileged focus of Christian life and witness.²

Chapter Three emphasizes that the Church’s identity is inseparably linked to care for the poor, presenting a theological vision in which the marginalized are recognized as the living presence of Christ. Drawing on Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and saints across history, the chapter illustrates that Christian faith is inherently incarnational: worship of God is inseparable from acts of charity and justice. From the earliest deacons like Stephen and Lawrence to Eastern and Western Fathers such as John Chrysostom and Augustine, the Church’s mission has been to see the poor not as objects of pity, but as sacred bearers of Christ’s presence. Monastic communities, mendicant orders, and consecrated women exemplify a life of prayer, poverty, and active service, demonstrating that contemplation and charity are mutually reinforcing. The Church’s work extends to education, healthcare, liberation of captives, and accompaniment of migrants, revealing that social engagement is a fundamental expression of ecclesial holiness. Popular movements and lay initiatives further underscore that solidarity with the poor requires structural and communal action, not merely individual acts of charity. Overall, this chapter presents a Christocentric and ecclesial theology of poverty: the poor are not only beneficiaries of mercy but teachers of the Gospel, and the Church becomes fully herself when she bends down in service, embodying a “Church for the poor” where faith, justice, and love converge.³

The fourth chapter highlights the Church’s evolving concern for the poor over the past two centuries, showing how social change and justice movements revealed the dignity of the marginalized people. Guided by both the laity and the religious, the Church developed its social doctrine through encyclicals and teachings from Leo XIII to Pope Francis emphasizing care for the poor and the need to challenge unjust social structures.

The last chapter emphasizes that care for the poor has always been central to the Church’s life and mission. The poor are not just societal problems or charitable projects; they are part of our family and the very flesh of Christ. Christians are called to follow the example of the Good Samaritan, showing attentiveness, closeness, and love for the vulnerable,

² See, *Dilexi Te*, 16-34.

³ See, *Dilexi Te*, 34-81.

recognizing their dignity and learning from their experiences. The Church's mission goes beyond welfare: it involves challenging social injustice, providing spiritual care, and promoting human development. While work and empowerment are vital for human dignity, almsgiving remains a necessary expression of charity, empathy, and practical solidarity. Christian love, limitless and prophetic, bridges divisions, transforms hearts, and reveals Christ's presence in the lives of the poor.

3. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Vibrant Echo of *Dilexi te*

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's life was marked by deep solidarity with the poor, reflecting a faith that saw Christ present in every marginalized person. The Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* by Pope Leo XIV echoes this vision, emphasizing that care for the poor is not optional but central to the Church's mission. Both Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the Church's social teaching call for attentiveness, closeness, and active engagement challenging structures of injustice, promoting human dignity, and learning from the wisdom of those who live in poverty. True Christian love, expressed through work, empowerment, and even humble acts of almsgiving, transforms hearts and society, making the poor not just recipients of charity but active partners in building up God's Kingdom.

To fully recognize the life and mission of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, it is essential to understand the ecclesial and socio-religious context of 18th and 19th century Kerala. During this period, Kerala was a society marked by rigid social hierarchies, widespread poverty, and limited access to education for the marginalized. The Church, while growing in influence, faced the challenge of addressing both spiritual needs and pressing social inequalities. Within this context, he emerged as a transformative figure who embodied a holistic vision of faith; one that combined spiritual formation with concrete action for the uplift of the poor and the oppressed.

3.1. Ecclesial Context of Kerala: A Brief Understanding

The population of Kerala is made up of communities of three major world religions - Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - all living within the same territory. The declaration of Vatican Council II, "among all the nations of the earth there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of

a heavenly and not of an earthly nature" (LG 13)⁴ is exemplified in the society of Kerala. The universality of the Church is not purely extensive, seeking to spread itself to all peoples, but also intensive by "striving energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its head in the unity of his Spirit."⁵ This is the true spirit of catholicity and in virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church.

Christianity in Kerala traces their origin back to the Apostle Thomas. Historical tradition ascribes that St. Thomas, who confirmed his faith in the Risen Lord proclaiming him Lord and God (Jn 20:28), reached South India in the middle of the first century and disseminated the Christian faith there.⁶ According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas arrived at Cranganore, Thrissur, in A.D. 52 and planted a cross, marking the beginning of Christianity in Kerala; a claim supported by Kerala's longstanding trade links with the Mediterranean.⁷ He formed Christian communities in Cranganore, Palayur, Quilon, and other areas, preached along the Coromandel coast and in China, then returned to India to organize Malabar Christians under local leaders and establish places of worship. The Christian community which, through proselytization of the local people, flourished in Kerala was known by the names of *Saint Thomas Christians*⁸ and *Syrian Christians*.⁹

By the 16th century, the arrival of Portuguese missionaries brought Latin influence, imposing Western liturgical, theological, and administrative norms. This led to tensions, divisions, and the gradual Latinization of the St. Thomas Christians, sparking resistance and eventual schisms.¹⁰ Some groups adopted the West Syrian (Antiochian)

⁴*Lumen Gentium* https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; accessed on 23.02.2026.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 13.

⁶ Cf. P. Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 2010, 5.

⁷ Cf. A. Kariyil, *Church and Society in Kerala: A Sociological Study*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1995, 31.

⁸ The name is related to the Apostle, the founder of the Church in Kerala.

⁹ Because of the relationship that the Kerala Church had with the Church of East Syria.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Kollaparambil, *The St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653*, Kottayam: The Catholic Bishop's House, 1981, 12.

rite, leading to the formation of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Malankara Jacobite Syrian Church, and later the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in 1932.¹¹ The **Syro-Malabar Church**, retaining the East Syrian rite, evolved under Rome's guidance. It is that part of the Church of St. Thomas in India which retained and developed Catholic faith in Jesus Christ brought to India by the Apostle Thomas.

The history of the Latin Church in India is connected with Portuguese Padroado although there were isolated visits of Western missionaries from 13th century, tracing the origin of the Latin rite in India back to that period. However, the Latin Catholics who were in Malabar in the 14th century became extinct before the arrival of the Portuguese. The present Latin Catholics take their origin from non-Christian converts of the Portuguese from the 16th century. Among the Latin Catholics there are a few Syro-Malabarians who at different times adopted the Latin rite.¹² In the eighteenth century, there were different groups of Christian communities in Kerala.

3.2. Socio- Religious and Educational Situations in the 18th and 19th Centuries

The arrival of the Portuguese in India in 1498 marked the beginning of western political power. It was followed by the arrival of the Dutch, the French and the English. By the end of the eighteenth century the whole of India was in the hand of the British.¹³ Kerala society was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. Its chief characteristic was the deep chasm which separated the high castes from the low castes. In spite of the administration of the English East India Company in Malabar, the upper castes like the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriya* and *Nairs* continued to enjoy several privileges and immunities. The law prevailed in the land was not egalitarian. The penal code was extremely severe as far as the lower castes were concerned. Slavery in the most primitive form prevailed in the land even at the beginning of the 19th century. There were a series of iniquitous taxes and cesses, which imposed a heavy burden on the under-privileged sections of the society.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. T. Kalayil (ed.), *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara C.M.I.*, Vol. II, Mannanam: Sanjose Publications, 2007, 516.

¹² Cf. T. Kalayil (ed.), *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara C.M.I.*, Vol. II, 517. See also: P. Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 2010 edition, 51-52

¹³ A. Kariyil, *Church and Society in Kerala: A Sociological Study*, 46.

¹⁴ Cf. A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 9.

Women's space was mainly in the household and their movement was rather restricted. They were cut off from the intellectual sphere of the community and were without access to the decision-making process that shaped the society. Socially, educationally and religiously women's status was low. They were not expected to take up any job besides their household work. Within the family itself, discriminatory treatment was meted out to the male and female children in the general socialization process. The opportunities for girls to be educated on a par with boys remained a distant dream.¹⁵ The Latin Christian women enjoyed much freedom in the family, compared to other women. Until some years ago all the heirs, whether male or female, of the same degree, took equal shares in the intestate property and the right of the daughters of a Latin Christian to share equally with their brothers in their father's estate was fully recognized.¹⁶

From 1816, Anglican missionaries¹⁷ began to establish English schools in various parts of the country. The Catholics were prohibited from attending these schools. They were also forbidden to study English. The ecclesiastical authorities of the time viewed with suspicion the learning of English as they feared that the learning of English would bring with it the influence of the Protestant doctrine.¹⁸ The state government also began to take more interest in the field of education in line with the Protestant missionaries and thus, both the Hindus and the Protestants profited much out of it. But the educational condition of the Catholics was deplorable. The Catholic missionaries who had been working in Kerala much earlier than the Protestant missionaries did not take much interest in the educational needs of their flock. Hence, the Catholics as a whole were very poor in the field of education till the first half of the 19th century.¹⁹

3.3. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Life Rooted in God

Kuriakose Elias Chavara stands as a luminous witness to the mystery of divine love that lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. His life was a

¹⁵ Cf. Jossy, "Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: Founder of the Women TOCD in Kerala," *Herald of the East* 10 (2014), 77.

¹⁶ Cf. A. K. Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1926, 263.

¹⁷ The missionaries belonged to the Church Mission Society.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1986, 74.

¹⁹ Cf. T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 7.

concrete manifestation of what Pope Leo XIV articulated in *Dilexi Te*: “Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor; contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history.”²⁰ Kuriakose Elias Chavara trusted in God with the simplicity and purity of a child and lived with profound faith in God’s providential love. For him, God was the centre and source of everything. His life motto, drawn from the Psalm: “*The Lord is my portion and my inheritance*” (Ps 16:5), expressed his total surrender to the divine providence. He dedicated himself wholly to the Lord and His service, placing unwavering confidence in God’s guidance and care.²¹ Though deeply engaged in numerous external works and responsibilities, Kuriakose Elias Chavara remained above all a man of prayer and contemplation. His spiritual life revealed what *Dilexi Te* identifies when stating that “the two loves (love of God and love of neighbor) are distinct yet inseparable”²², where authentic Christian action flows from intimate communion with the Lord. His intimate, filial relationship with God was nurtured through constant meditation and reflection. In every person he met, he discerned the presence of God; sometimes the suffering God, sometimes the labouring God, and at other times, the God who longed for love and compassion. Kuriakose Elias Chavara possessed a rare spiritual sensitivity that enabled him to recognize, admire, and adore the loving hand of the provident God in all circumstances of life. His was a life of active and practical faith; a faith that translated divine trust into concrete love and service.²³ His spirituality was marked by an incarnational vision of God’s presence in history, echoing the exhortation’s central conviction that “**On the** wounded faces of the poor, we see the suffering of the innocent and, therefore, the suffering of Christ Himself.”²⁴

Kuriakose Elias Chavara preserved a deep relationship with God and humanity. He was one with God through deep meditation and through his intense charity he was one with the people. He, who grew up in deep intimacy with Jesus Christ, saw God as his Abba. His Abba experience which he attained through Jesus is the most sublime aspect of his

²⁰ *Dilexi Te*, 5.

²¹ Cf. T. Mampra, “Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Saint for Our Time,” *Herald of the East* 10 (2014), 21.

²² *Dilexi Te*, 26.

²³ Cf. T. Kochumuttam, “A Contemplative in Action,” in P. Kalluveetil, P. Kochappilly (eds.), *Lord of Heaven and Earth*, 136.

²⁴ *Dilexi Te*, 9.

spiritual life. He considered God as his Father and himself as a child of God. This deep spiritual experience of God as Father led him to the experience of universal brotherhood and the vision of the Church as the body of Christ. Reflection on his God/Abba and Christ experience are scattered throughout his writings.²⁵ He expresses in one of his writings: "Through baptism you made me your son, through ignorance I lost my fortune."²⁶ He continues, "O God you are my father, you are my fortune without you what joy do I have?"²⁷ Pope John Paul II, on the occasion of the beatification of Kuriakose Elias Chavara in 1986, said: "His success in all his many undertakings was undoubtedly due to the intense charity and prayer, which characterised his daily life, his close communication with Christ and his love for the Church as the visible body of Christ on earth."²⁸ This profound union with God led Kuriakose Elias Chavara to a life of compassionate service, especially towards the poor and the marginalized. In him, we witness the living fulfillment of the message of the new Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te*: "Genuine love for the Lord is inseparable from love for the poor."²⁹

3.4. Education: A Path to Upliftment

Kuriakose Elias Chavara viewed education as the most powerful means for spiritual and social uplift, a conviction that led him to establish religious congregations for both men and women³⁰ dedicated to this mission. His educational vision was not merely a response to the social conditions of his time but an embodiment of divine love in action – a vision profoundly resonant with the message of the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te*. Pope Leo XIV, in *Dilexi Te*, reminds the Church that "Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor. The same

²⁵Cf. N. Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, Bangalore Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 187.

²⁶ K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. II: *Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, (trans.), M. Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989, 10.

²⁷K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. II: *Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, 10.

²⁸ John Paul II, "A Heroic Son of the Church in India," in T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 61. See also: John Paul II, *Venerabili Servo Dei Cyriaco Elias Chavara Beatorum honores decernatur*: Apostolic Letter, 8 February 1986, AAS 78 (1986) 1076-1078.

²⁹ *Dilexi Te*, 5.

³⁰ Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) for men in 1831 and Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (TOCD; now CMC and CTC) for women in 1866.

Jesus who tells us, 'The poor you will always have with you' (Mt 26:11), also promises: 'I am with you always' (Mt 28:20). ... Contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history."³¹ Through the institutions, he created a network of committed educators and missionaries who transformed the society by spreading knowledge, faith, and human dignity among the poor and the marginalized. He understood that education was the surest way to break the cycle of poverty and discrimination. By offering free education, meals, and learning materials to children of all communities, he not only uplifted the poor but also laid the foundations of universal literacy in the region. He was very sensitive to the basic needs as well as dignity of human person. Introducing 'noon feeding' in schools he assured their regular attendance of classes in the schools.³²

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a visionary educationist who sought to harmonize classical learning with modern education. In establishing schools, he ensured that children received a well-rounded education that included not only the modern Malayalam language but also Tamil and Sanskrit. While Tamil was commonly taught in the schools of his time, Sanskrit remained largely inaccessible, particularly to the students from non-Hindu communities and the marginalized groups. Recognizing this gap, he took the pioneering step of founding a Sanskrit school at Mannanam, providing broader access to classical knowledge and fostering intellectual growth among all sections of the society.³³ By establishing a Sanskrit school, he ensured that the marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits, could access knowledge and cultural learning traditionally reserved for the higher castes. In an era when untouchability was widespread and education was largely restricted to the privileged, admission for lower-caste children was nearly impossible. Viewing these children as equal children of God and recognizing their right to education, he worked tirelessly for their upliftment. One of his most transformative measures was keeping schools open and accessible to all sections of society, a revolutionary step that not only addressed poverty but also challenged the entrenched practices of untouchability and social discrimination.³⁴ This initiative

³¹ *Dilexi Te*, 5.

³² Cf. L. Malieckal, "The Legacy of Saint Chavara's Pioneering Religious Life: Challenges for the Consecrated Life in India," *Herald of the East*, 10 (2014), 263.

³³ Cf. S. Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2013, 10.

³⁴ Cf. S. Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, 11.

exemplifies what *Dilexi Te* affirms: "By her very nature the Church is in solidarity with the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, and all those considered the outcasts of society."³⁵ This reflects the Gospel's call for a love that is inclusive, liberative, and restorative.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara viewed education as the divine light that opens the eyes of the soul to God and holiness. His educational vision becomes evident in his letters. He wrote that "the second means for vision is education. Just as we cannot see things without vision in the eyes, without knowledge, we will not be able to see heaven and God who dwells therein. Those who cannot see are blind; similarly, those who are not educated are spiritually blind. It is because of this blindness that the Christians of Malabar, although they are followers of Jesus of Nazareth from the very beginning, are without the seed and sprout of holiness."³⁶ Education, for Kuriakose Elias Chavara, was thus a participation in divine revelation; the means by which the light of God dispels the darkness of ignorance and sin. Education was made accessible to everyone, free from caste or class-based discrimination.

3.5. Charitable Institutions

The two pious associations he established, namely Confraternity for Happy Death and Association for Charities (*upavishala*)³⁷ were meant to help, especially those of the lowest rung of the society to have a peaceful and happy death, for which every human being, created in the image of God has a right, he held. Everybody born in this world has an inalienable right to live a decent human life and all, especially the resourceful ones, are obliged to help him/her to fulfil this right, he believed. We get a personal appeal of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara in this regard in his circular letter to his confreres and in his *Chavarul*.³⁸ In his spiritual compendium, the *Chavarul*,³⁹ he provided clear guidance for living out this mission, emphasizing that compassionate care for the vulnerable is an essential expression of Christian discipleship. In his *Testament*,

³⁵ *Dilexi Te*, 111.

³⁶ K. E. Chavara, Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, (trans.), A. Keemattam, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, xii.

³⁷ See, K. E. Chavara, Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, (trans.), A. Keemattam, Letter IX/7.

³⁸ Cf. L. Malieckal, "The Legacy of Saint Chavara's Pioneering Religious Life: Challenges for the Consecrated Life in India," 263.

³⁹ See, K. E. Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, S. Chackalackal (trans), Kakkannadu: Chavara Central Secretariate, 2018, 20-21.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara reminds us that “the days in which one has failed to do good to others will not be recorded in the book of life.”⁴⁰ For him, the ministry of charity was not an optional virtue but a constitutive element of Christian discipleship; an active participation in the compassionate love of Christ.

By establishing these charitable institutions, he effectively transformed social service into a lived theology. The Confraternity for a Happy Death and the Upavisala were more than organizational structures; they were instruments for promoting equality, compassion, and justice at a time when societal hierarchies, caste discrimination, and poverty severely limited access to basic human rights. These initiatives exemplify the teaching of *Dilexi Te*: “Knowledge, illuminated by charity, becomes service.”⁴¹ In enabling marginalized individuals to experience care, dignity, and communal solidarity, he challenged entrenched social norms and offered a model of inclusive service that resonates with contemporary understandings of human rights and social ethics.

3.6. Concern for the Servants

In 19th century Kerala, social discrimination against lower-caste communities was widespread, with Dalits often treated as slaves whose basic human dignity was routinely denied. They were compelled to work under oppressive conditions and were frequently deprived of fair wages. Kuriakose Elias Chavara strongly opposed these injustices, insisting that laborers receive just compensation. Guided by his deep faith and understanding that God champions the cause of the poor, he advocated for the rights and dignity of the marginalized, challenging societal norms and promoting social justice. In his writings, he explicitly admonishes: “Never withhold just wages from labourers or make undue delay in paying them, because it is an offence that cries out to God for justice. Do not insult the poor; neither should you vex them because if God sees them weeping he will surely wreak vengeance on you.”⁴² He instructed families to take care of the spiritual needs of their servants: “Masters should know that they are responsible for caring for the needs of their servants and assisting them in their spiritual welfare.”⁴³ He went

⁴⁰ K. E. Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, 20.

⁴¹ *Dilexi Te*, 57.

⁴² K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, (trans.), A. Keemattam, Letter IX/10

⁴³ K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, (trans.), A. Keemattam, Letter IX/10

so far as to advise families to keep only a reasonable number of domestic workers and emphasized that they should be paid fair wages consistently. He also insisted that these workers be allowed to attend Sunday Mass.⁴⁴ Such guidance regarding timely payment and the respectful treatment of workers was unprecedented in nineteenth-century Kerala. By ensuring that laborers received proper wages without undue delay, he affirmed the inherent dignity of every human being, recognizing them as persons created in the image of God.

In *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV emphasizes that "to love as Christ loved means to defend the poor, to ensure justice for workers, and to build relationships that reflect the equality of God's children."⁴⁵ His concern for the servants embodies precisely this synthesis of love and justice. By demanding just wages and humane working conditions, he translated divine charity into concrete social ethics.

3.7. Women Empowerment

The foundation of the religious congregation by Kuriakose Elias Chavara marked the first decisive step toward women's empowerment in Kerala. At a time when women were denied education, freedom, and social recognition, he envisioned a community of women who would live with dignity, faith, and purpose. By founding Third Order of Discalced Carmelites (TOCD)⁴⁶ in 1866, he opened a new path where women could be educated, spiritually enriched, and actively involved in teaching, social service, and pastoral ministry. The establishment of the religious Congregation was inspired by a dual purpose: the sanctification of its members and active service to society. Its mission extended beyond personal holiness to encompass doing "much good" for others, particularly for women. Kuriakose Elias Chavara envisioned the new Congregation for women as a dynamic force for social

⁴⁴ Cf. K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, (trans.), A. Keemattam, Letter IX/10

⁴⁵ Cf. *Dilexi Te*, 33.

⁴⁶ The first indigenous Religious Congregation for Women in the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church was founded as the Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (TOCD), on 13 February 1866 at Koonammavu, in the Vicariate of Verapoly Kerala, by Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara the Vicar General of Syrian Church of Kerala. Rev. Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD, an Italian Carmelite missionary is its co-founder, who was the Provincial Delegate of the time in Kerala. In 1890, the Holy See decreed a separation of the congregation along liturgical lines. The Syro-Malabar-rite Sisters continued as the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC), while the Latin-rite Sisters became the Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC).

transformation. He stated clearly that, “Besides striving for their own spiritual perfection, the members of the Congregation must teach other girls to pray and train them in various handicrafts.”⁴⁷ This vision positioned the Congregation not merely as a community of prayer, but as a vital instrument for the education, empowerment, and holistic uplift of women, enabling them to grow in faith, skill, and dignity.

This initiative not only transformed the status of women within the Church but also became a catalyst for their wider participation in the society, making Kuriakose Elias Chavara a pioneer of women’s empowerment through faith and education. In founding the congregation, he simultaneously pursued a vision of social transformation, understanding that empowering women religious would extend their influence and service beyond the convent into the wider society.⁴⁸ Pope Leo XIV, echoing the words of Pope Francis, writes in *Dilexi Te*: “As we contemplate Christ’s love, we too are inspired to be more attentive to the sufferings and needs of others, and confirmed in our efforts to share in his work of liberation as instruments for the spread of his love.”⁴⁹ This profound insight finds a living expression in the mission of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, particularly in his pioneering efforts for the empowerment of women. Through the founding of the first women’s religious congregation in Kerala, he translated contemplative love into transformative action; educating, uplifting, and restoring dignity to women who had long been deprived of opportunity and recognition. His vision thus mirrors the very spirit of *Dilexi Te*, where authentic love for Christ becomes a liberating force that heals, uplifts, and renews the society.

4. Conclusion

Kuriakose Elias Chavara stands as a luminous example of Christian discipleship lived through love in action; a love that *Dilexi Te* so powerfully reaffirms for the Church today. His life reveals that genuine faith cannot remain confined to piety or personal devotion; it must overflow into compassionate service, transforming both individuals and society. Rooted in deep communion with God, he recognized Christ in

⁴⁷ General Council, *CMC Constitutions: Revised 4th Edition*, Aluva: Mount Carmel Generalate, 2014, 47.

⁴⁸ L. Malieckal, “The Legacy of Saint Chavara’s Pioneering Religious Life: Challenges for the Consecrated Life in India,” 265.

⁴⁹ *Dilexi Te*, 2.

the poor, the sick, the servant, and the marginalized, making his mission a living testimony of the Gospel of love.

Long before the language of Catholic social teaching formally emerged, Kuriakose Elias Chavara embodied its core principles; the preferential option for the poor, the dignity of labor, the right to education, the empowerment of women, and the call to justice. His initiatives in education, charity, and social reform were not simply acts of benevolence but expressions of a theology of incarnation: God's love made visible through concrete deeds. In *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV invites the Church to rediscover this same incarnate love; a love that listens to the cry of the poor, challenges injustice, and builds communities of care and communion. His life is a prophetic witness to this call. His enduring legacy urges the Church, especially in India, to continue walking with the poor, nurturing a faith that acts, educates, and heals.

As *Dilexi Te* reminds us, "to love as Christ loved" is to make love tangible; in homes, parishes, schools, and society. Kuriakose Elias Chavara did precisely this, turning faith into service and compassion into transformation. His life remains a radiant echo of the Gospel and a living commentary on *Dilexi Te*, showing that the path to holiness always leads through love; love that walks humbly with the poor and makes visible the merciful face of God in our world today.