

## DISCERNMENT IN THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

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**Abstract:** This study explores the meaning and manifestation of spiritual discernment in the life and writings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a pioneering saint of the Syro-Malabar Church. Rooted in the Christian tradition and enriched by insights from Scripture and the mystics, discernment is presented as both a divine gift and a personal responsibility—an inner movement that leads to knowing and doing God’s will. In Chavara, this grace found vivid expression through prayer, filial intimacy with God, and a deep awareness of Christ’s salvific mysteries. His discerning heart, shaped by purity of intention and openness to the Holy Spirit, guided his spiritual, pastoral, and social initiatives, including the founding of religious congregations and institutions for education and charity. The study highlights how Chavara’s capacity for personal and communal discernment enabled him to respond wisely to ecclesial crises, such as the Roccas Schism, and to foster renewal within the Church. In an age marked by confusion and superficiality, his life stands as a luminous model of Christian maturity—demonstrating that true discernment flows from a heart attuned to God’s will and animated by love, humility, and fidelity to the Spirit.

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## 1. Introduction

Beginning with the teachings of the Desert Fathers, the underlying theme of spiritual discernment has remained ever-present in Catholic literature, especially in the writings of the mystics. In the Christian tradition, discernment has always been held in high esteem – not merely as part of the natural virtue of prudence, but as one of the direct gifts of the Holy Spirit, both the way into and the fruit of life in Christ.

John Climacus, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, calls discernment “an undefiled conscience and purity of feeling.”<sup>1</sup> According to John Cassian, “Discernment is no minor virtue, nor one which can be seized anywhere merely by human effort. It is ours only as a gift from God [...] the most outstanding of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> He considered discernment as “the mother of virtues, as well as their guide and regulator.”<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis presents discernment as an urgent need, insisting that it is a gift we must implore. If we ask with confidence that the Holy Spirit grant us this gift, and then seek to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading, and good counsel, then surely we will grow in this spiritual endowment.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Etymology of Discernment

To *discern* means more than to understand and decide. In Greek, there are two principal verbs related to discernment: *diakrínein* and *dokimázein*.

*Diakrínein* derives from the verb *krínein*. This verb is connected with the administration of justice and means to accuse, to judge, or to condemn. The prefix *dia* strengthens the meaning of the base verb *krínein*. Thus, *diakrínein* carries the meanings: to analyse, to criticise, to sift, to select, to separate, to distinguish, to set aside, to choose, or to decide.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York 1982, 229.

<sup>2</sup> J. Cassian, *The Conferences*, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, New York 1985, n 60.

<sup>3</sup> J. Cassian, *The Conferences*, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 166.

The Latin equivalent of *diakrínein* is *discernere*. *Cernere* signifies detecting things with exact clarity and understanding. The prefix *dis-* means separation. Therefore, *discernere* indicates dividing, distinguishing, or passing through a sifter – putting the wheat on one side and the straw on the other; to differentiate, specify, recognise, or choose. It also denotes the act of interpreting.<sup>5</sup>

*Dokimázein* refers to *dókimos*, a technical term used to say that a coin is authentic. More specifically, *dókimos* denotes something tested, approved, genuine, trustworthy, and reliable – to test, probe, examine, scrutinise, and critically assess. Therefore, *dokimázein* means to purify, authenticate, evaluate, and consider proven, valid, or good. It implies a commitment to test or experiment, functioning as a way of separating the authentic from the non-authentic.<sup>6</sup>

In Sanskrit, the root word *kir* or *kri* conveys the idea of cleaning, which emphasises the purity one must have to engage in discernment. *Viveka* is the Sanskrit translation of the English word discernment. It can be more fully explained as the sense of discrimination between the real (*sat*) and the unreal (*asat*), wisdom or discriminative inquiry.<sup>7</sup> *Asat* relates to the passing circumstances of life and the world – it veils the *sat*, the unchanging, indestructible reality. *Viveka* is the ability to distinguish the difference.

### 3. Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a Discerner

The ultimate aim of spiritual discernment is to know and do the will of God. Chavara, as a discerner, possessed the following qualities.

#### 3.1. Heart Aligned with God

At the heart of Chavara's spirituality lies the profound mystery of the human person in relation to God – the majesty of the Creator and the frailty of the creature. This awareness awakened in him a deep contrition for sin and a constant yearning for divine intimacy. Yet within this sorrow, he beheld the radiant mercy of God, the loving Father, whom he tenderly called "My Father."

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. M. Fernández, "Discernimento," in A.A. Rodríguez – J.M. Canals Casas, ed., *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milano 1994, 615-617.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. Therrien, *Le discernement dans les écrits pauliniens*, Paris, 1973, 17-19.

<sup>7</sup> "Viveka" [accessed on 03.02.2020], <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Viveka&oldid=929523691>

In this filial relationship, he found strength, consolation, and guidance amid life's trials. In Jesus Christ, he contemplated the supreme revelation of the Father's love—a love that stooped to share in human suffering, was poured out in His passion and death, and continues to dwell among us in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, where the Spirit abides as the life-giving presence of God within the soul.

"The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5) was Chavara's motto, reflecting his profound belief that God was his ultimate treasure, inheritance, and source of fulfilment. This guiding motto shaped his spirituality, enabling him to find joy, security, and hope in God while cultivating detachment from worldly possessions. He regarded everything that occurred in his life as the will of God and considered his work a selfless act of service to Him.

From his childhood, his heart longed for God, and this deep thirst is beautifully reflected in the following lines:

You, my love, my joy, and all my good fortune;  
 If not with You, how could I live my life?  
 My very breath, my food, my drink—  
 What solace have I save in You!<sup>8</sup>

His letters and literary works testify to the profundity of his spiritual life. A loving father, a generous ruler, a compassionate nobleman, a psychologist with a tender heart, a selfless leader of the people, and a broad-hearted servant who devoted his life to the Church—all these facets of his personality are subtly revealed and deeply reflected in them.

The encounter with Christ was germinated, developed, and matured in Chavara within the context of prayer. Each time he was in prayer, he consciously recognised himself as being known and loved by God here and now. For him, prayer was the outpouring of his heart. He was a man of prayer, and prayer is the proper context of discernment. Through the light of prayer, he judged the facts relevant to discernment. Just as the light of faith enables one to read the signs of revelation as they are meant to be understood, the light of prayer enabled him to read rightly the facts related to a discerning decision.

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<sup>8</sup> K. E. Chavara, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, II, Mannanam, 1989, 144-147.

### 3.2. Fervent Desire for God's Will

In the search for the will of God, mere desire is insufficient. One should have a desire that focuses entirely on God and seeks to make Him central in one's life—and this desire should grow gradually. Even the slightest presence of such longing shows the presence of God and His grace.<sup>9</sup> The very desire to follow Him and carry out His will is already a sign that we are fulfilling His will, for the desire itself is God's grace working within us.

Desiring God's will means allowing it to be the norm in everything. This is not only an essential feature of a purified and mature desire but also a principle of growth and cooperation with the Spirit in our life situations. From this point of view, when we look into the life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, we can see an ardent desire for God and to accomplish His plans. This strong desire originated from his deep experience of God's love.

The confident awareness that he was loved by God and valued greatly in His eyes became the starting point for his effective response to that love. The lasting fruits of the saint's varied enterprises and activities for the religious, social, cultural, and educational advancement of his fellow beings proclaim that it was the Lord Himself who enkindled his heart with zeal for generations to come. All his tremendous and admirable contributions to the Church were the outcome of the holy aspirations of a heart that was ever pure and full of divine love—works that were blessed by God and crowned with success.

One must have a burning, passionate desire to encounter God and to do His will through discernment. The desire to discern God's will is itself a movement of the soul toward the good that attracts from within. The gradual progression of this desire later transforms into a combined action of God's grace and human will. Holy desires are sure signs of the presence of the true Spirit, which inflames the heart to do good in the world.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God's own divine desire to create. One can sense the passion of God the Father when He says, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3), and, "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen 1:26).

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. J. Healy, "Seeking God's Will," *The Christian Ministry of Spiritual Direction, Review for Religious*, St. Louis (1988), 327.

Likewise, when Chavara was in tune with God's ever-creative love, he felt the same passion to launch many divine projects for the world.

### 3.3. Growing Awareness of the Mysteries of Christ

Encountering Christ in one's life events deepens the discerning spirit, and in turn, the practice of discernment prepares one to encounter Christ more profoundly in daily life. The conscious awareness of what Jesus did for *me* is the beginning of discerning His ways. "Christian discernment always revolves around Jesus, who is the epicentre of Christian revelation."<sup>10</sup>

The most important aspect of Chavara's discerning life was his consistent and dynamic contact with the total mystery of Christ—His life, death, and resurrection. It is through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that God has spoken and continues to speak to us. In Him, we are given the ultimate pattern for human existence. We discern the Spirit's inspirations by consistently looking at Jesus and the example and truth He has left for us. Moreover, in relating to Jesus and His example, we must look at the total mystery of Christ.

Discernment requires a growing, interiorised knowledge of Christ that leads to a sharing in His mind (cf. Phil. 2:5). Where the sentiments of Christ are found, there the conditions for discernment are present. As a person matures in the Spirit and according to grace, the discerning sense becomes increasingly refined.

Chavara contemplated the mystery of salvation in its fullness. We can see his profound desire to understand the mystery of the Incarnation and the entire salvific activity of Jesus in his poetic masterpiece, *Atmanutapam*. Through its inspired lines, he unveils how deeply he had interiorised these divine mysteries.

In the third canto of *Atmanutapam*, Chavara expresses his fervent desire to witness every event of the Incarnation—from Jesus' dwelling in the womb of the Virgin Mary to the beginning of His public ministry. The fourth canto describes the journey on the day of the Nativity and reflects on the helplessness of the Holy Family that night. The fifth canto recounts the message of the angels and St Joseph's tender care of the Child Jesus. The sixth continues with the events up to the circumcision.

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<sup>10</sup> M. Frohlich, "Discernment as a Way of Life," *New Theology Review*, August (2005), 44.

The visit of the Magi and the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple are depicted in the seventh canto.

Following the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, Chavara meditates deeply on the sorrows of Our Lady foretold by the prophet. The eighth canto narrates the Passion of Christ—His carrying of the cross to Calvary, His crucifixion, and His death. The ninth canto continues with the events after the crucifixion, portraying the *Pietà* scene with the lament of the Virgin Mother. The tenth canto covers the Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, the inception and growth of the Church, the conversion of Saul, the martyrdom of St James, and the Council of Jerusalem, all in the presence of the Blessed Virgin.

Beyond these meditations, Chavara's abiding spiritual experience is captured in his counsel: "Abide in the love of Jesus Christ; always sit before His eyes; walk close to Him; always converse with Him." This advice reflects his dynamic and heavenly heart—it summarises his life. As he advised others, so he himself sat close to his Beloved, spending long hours in loving conversation.<sup>11</sup> At other times, his heart overflowed in gratitude for the countless favours and graces showered upon him by his magnanimous Lord.<sup>12</sup>

He experienced not only a compassionate and loving presence of God but also His tender voice speaking within. His times of meditation were often filled with tears of joy, oblivious to everything else around him. The whole person of Chavara was enraptured in the blissful experience of divine love. It was for this continual awareness of God's presence that he built the *Dharsanaveedu* (House of Vision).

Chavara's discernment was rooted in and developed from his profound experience of Christ. Christian discernment of God's will has no foundation other than the mysteries of Christ.

### 3.4. Openness and Readiness on the Part of the Discerner

For genuine discernment of God's will, one must be truly open to God—the One who is always mysterious, often surprising, and sometimes unsettling. Openness to God's ways is connected with knowing Jesus

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. P. Kalluveetil, "A Story of Two Souls," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*, 25 (2014), 129.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Madhavathu, *Humble Minister of the Living Mystery*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2023, 29-31.

and is a gift of the Holy Spirit for which one must pray. Unless a person is truly open to the Lord, discernment is impossible.

A constant recollection of and experience of being loved by God transforms and fills our hearts with gratitude. This profound experience of God leads to self-abandonment, which means self-denial in obedience to God (*essere pronto a "morire a se stesso"* – readiness to die to self). It is worth remembering the words of Pope Francis:

We must remember that prayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, our usual habits, and ways of seeing things. In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security but lead us to a better life (GE 172).<sup>13</sup>

Chavara was willing to undergo suffering and hardship to achieve the greater good for his people. When his companions were struck by contagious diseases such as smallpox, he readily came forward to serve them with tender care. He stood beside Fathers Velyara, Nellissery, and Kalapurackal during their illness and final moments, offering comfort and spiritual strength.

He never thought of his own health or safety but placed the needs of others before himself. Through mature discernment, Kuriakose Elias Chavara cultivated a warm inner strength that guided every choice he made. His decisions – whether in prayer, community service, or spiritual guidance – reflected the mind and heart of Jesus, always seeking to do what pleased the Father.

He stands as a radiant model for the present generation through his constant openness and docility to the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit. He was a man of God who maintained a relationship vertically with God and horizontally with his fellow beings. Knowing both the dreams of the Lord and the needs of the people enabled him to set himself aside for a greater cause.

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<sup>13</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html); accessed on 23.02.2026.

### 3.5. Discernment in the Lived Experience

Discernment presupposes the capacity to see and comprehend the nature of reality around us. It is a capacity "to discern the truth of a situation," not merely to decide what should be done. It is a way of sensing what is happening at every moment. This means discernment encompasses not only thinking, feeling, and acting, but also *being*. It is the active search to find God at work in oneself, in others, and in the world, and to collaborate with what God is doing. Through discernment, we come to work *with* God, who is already working in the world.

During his seminary days, Chavara faced a deep personal struggle when his parents and brother passed away. The tragedy occurred shortly after he had received the tonsure—a ceremony marking his entry into the clerical state. With his only brother gone, relatives urged him to abandon his priestly formation and return home to manage the family affairs. However, after earnest prayer and discernment, Chavara courageously decided to return to the seminary. He made proper arrangements for his household responsibilities and continued his priestly studies with renewed faith and determination.

As a spiritual leader, Kuriakose Elias Chavara imparted a new dynamism and model for discerning the ways of the Lord. His defence of the unity of the Kerala Church during the Roccas Schism stands as a powerful example. In 1861, Bishop Thomas Roccas came to Kerala under the orders of Joseph Audo, the Patriarch of Babylon. The Syrian Christians, longing for a bishop who understood the Syriac Rite of Malabar and its ancient customs, welcomed him wholeheartedly.

Chavara, however, recognised the danger of accepting a bishop who had no recognition from the Holy See. He carefully discerned how to respond during this critical period of schism. While many parishes accepted the new bishop, he sought confirmation from Rome regarding Roccas's true identity. He wrote to the Pope, requesting clarification and asking that the reply be given in Syriac so that the local clergy could read it and be convinced. Once he received assurance from Rome, Chavara courageously confronted Roccas and, through patient and sincere efforts, persuaded him to return to Syria.

His literary and spiritual works—such as *Compunction of the Soul*, *Dirge*, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, the *Eclogues*, *Anasthasiayude Rakthasakshyam* (The Story of a Christian Martyr), and *A Testament of a Loving Father* (*Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul*)—the first instruction manual

for Christian families – further attest to his profound spiritual insight and pastoral vision.

These writings not only reflect his contemplative depth and theological understanding but also his keen awareness of the moral and social responsibilities of Christian life. Through them, Chavara sought to form the consciences of the faithful, strengthen family life, and promote holiness in the everyday realities of the Church. Together with his numerous ecclesial initiatives, these works stand as clear evidence of his sound discernment and enduring contribution to the spiritual nourishment and renewal of the Syro-Malabar Church.

### **3.6. Communal Discernment in Chavara**

Several moments of communal discernment can be seen in the life of Chavara. Only a man of deep prayer can truly participate in communal discernment. In addition to prayer, several elements are essential for this process – such as a shared vision, commitment to carrying out decisions made together, mutual trust, and the ability to listen to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit through others.

Not only in personal matters but also in addressing the needs of the Church, Chavara played an active role in discerning God's will along with others in the concrete situations of the Kerala Church.

From 1831 onwards, Chavara engaged in various spiritual and welfare activities, such as starting a Sanskrit school at Mannanam for the educational uplift of the local community, establishing the first wooden press in Kerala, renewing the order of the liturgy, popularising Sunday sermons, and organising annual parish retreats to foster spiritual renewal among the faithful.

Soon after his priestly ordination, he joined his *malpans* – Father Thomas Palackal and Father Thomas Porukara – along with Brother Jacob Kanianthara, to lay the foundation of a spiritual movement at Mannanam. This small community, rooted in prayer and apostolic zeal, became the cradle of the first indigenous religious congregation in India – the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI).

Their joint request to Bishop Maurelius Stabilini expressed their shared vision:

"Seeing that a lot of good has not been done due to the absence of a *Thapasu Bhavanam* (house of discipline) in Kerala even for priests, we desire to start a *Darsana Veedu* (house of vision) at least for priests."<sup>14</sup>

A religious congregation for women in Kerala was another great desire of Father Kuriakose. In 1866, Chavara, in collaboration with Father Leopold Beccaro, an Italian Carmelite missionary, founded the first indigenous religious congregation for women in India—the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC). Their vision was to empower women through spiritual formation and education.

All these pioneering initiatives of Kuriakose Elias Chavara—the establishment of the first common seminary, the foundation of the first Home of Charity (*Upavisala*) for the sick, the elderly, and the destitute at Kainakary, the introduction of the Way of the Cross devotion, the founding of the printing press and publishing house, the opening of the first Catholic Sanskrit school and Catechumenate at Mannanam, and the first boarding house and school for girls at Koonammavu in Kerala (together with Father Leopold OCD)—are clear signs of his deep spiritual discernment and pastoral foresight.

Through these works, he sought the spiritual nourishment and renewal of the Church, ensuring that faith, education, and devotion were harmoniously woven into the life of the Christian community.

The appointment of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as the first Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Church stands as recognition of his exceptional administrative ability, spiritual depth, collaborative grace, and moral integrity. It reflects the confidence the Church placed in his discerning capacity and pastoral sensitivity.

#### **4. Discernment for a Renewed Commitment**

In today's world, it is almost a heroic act to bear witness to one's faith. The strong provocations and pressures of the socio-cultural environment increasingly foster hostility towards the Church and the Christian way of life. To face these challenges and oppositions to faith, discernment plays a fundamental role in guiding each Christian towards a personal encounter with God. Experience shows that when discernment fails, confusion and disorientation follow.

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<sup>14</sup> T. Panthaplackal, "Life and Mission of Saint Chavara," *Journal of Saint Thomas Christians* 25 (2014), 32.

This spiritual deficiency can be seen in many attitudes and situations of modern life. Gilles Jeanguenin highlights several issues that demonstrate the lack of true discernment among the faithful: spiritual blindness, selfishness, the revival of superstition, the dulling of conscience, religious indifference or attraction to false forms of religiosity, insensitivity to evil and sin, ignorance of faith, fascination with miracles and apparitions, religious fanaticism, absence of depth and interiority in one's relationship with God, tolerance of what is clearly wrong, and hardness of heart.<sup>15</sup>

We face all these difficulties more than ever before. We lack authentic discernment in the face of such challenges. Yet, at the bottom of our hearts, there remains a continual longing for a more just society and a better world. However, our failed ideologies often give rise to a disappointed generation—people who no longer wish to face their dissatisfaction or even talk about it, though many recognise that their lives are broken and burdened. A renewal of commitment to lead an active life of faith is the need of the time. Generally we are satisfied with the keeping of the commandments and seem to think that we are not called to develop an interior life beyond moral discernment. In reality, we are called to a deeper life of faith, but fail to listen to that call.

When a person ignores the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit, they resist the very means through which God communicates His will. Such negligence obstructs the growth of holiness, for it prevents the individual from responding to the divine invitations that shape the soul toward sanctity. Consequently, one becomes unable to serve as an instrument of renewal in one's vocation and context. Authentic Christian maturity arises when one listens attentively to these interior promptings and cooperates with God's grace in freedom and love.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

We have a marvellous example in Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who, in moments of great trial and uncertainty, showed profound discernment and courage. In prayer, he sought to understand what the Lord was asking of him, and once he recognised God's will, he followed it with

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Jeanguenin, *Discernere: Pensare e Agire secondo Dio*, Italy, 2008, 10-12.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. T. M. Gallagher, "Meet You at the Fig Tree CCO Conference 02 (10 May 2019)" [accessed on: 16.12.2020], [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiGQNihYeE&ab\\_channel=ShalomWorld](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiGQNihYeE&ab_channel=ShalomWorld)

unwavering trust. Listening to the voice of God speaking in his heart, he acted with a clear conscience and became a true instrument of God for the renewal and unity of the Church in Kerala.

Each one of us has a purpose to fulfil in this world – a purpose that no one else can accomplish. As St Paul writes, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Rom 8:19). Chavara possessed this divine gift of discernment in an extraordinary way. He constantly sought to recognise what truly came from the Spirit of God and what was influenced by the spirit of the world.

His deep prayer life, regular reflection on the Word of God, and openness to spiritual guidance enabled him to distinguish between divine inspirations and mere human impulses. In times of confusion and conflict – especially during the crisis of schism in the Church – he relied not on human reasoning alone but on the light of the Holy Spirit. Through prayer and consultation with his spiritual companions, he discerned God's will with humility and courage. Chavara's life shows that true discernment is not merely an act of intelligence but the fruit of a heart fully surrendered to God.