

# **SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT: THE SOCIAL VISION AND MISSION OF SAINT CHAVARA**

## **Part I**

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*Abstract:* The present article is an investigation of the unique nature of Chavara's social apostate and the vision behind his several initiatives in this area. With the available evidence, it is an effort to examine its strength and weakness from theological and sociological point of view. The multi-faceted personality of Chavara is examined and see how his social vision and mission were shaped by his personality, rather the article analyses how the spiritual power became an effective source and instrument to motivate Chavara and his colleagues to involve themselves in the society of the nineteenth century and bring about transformation in the various fields.

*Keywords:* Social vision, Malpanate, Kudipallikudams, Thapasu Bhavanam, Darsana Veedu, Social transformation

### **I. The Need for Social Transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Development of Chavara's Social Vision**

The personality formation the young Kuriakose received at home was, as far as we know, chiefly spiritual and intellectual, with some elementary social skills to live in a society; his own mother laid the foundation of Christian spiritual and religious life in him through example as well as

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instructions on basic Christian life and the training given in manifold spiritual exercises. He also received basic knowledge of language, arithmetic etc. from the elementary school that existed in the village. At the tender age of thirteen he was picked up by Malpan Thomas Palackal to join the seminary that he had been running at Pallipuram for training young boys for priesthood. Thereafter, his formation was under the care of the Malpan. Kuriakose spent almost eleven years at the seminary before being ordained priest in 1829.

During his studies for priesthood, Kuriakose was trained mostly in Syriac, the language of liturgy of the Syrian Catholic community, theology and a few allied subjects like Latin. Since the seminary or the *Malpanate*, as it was called then, was a one-teacher training centre; his main tutor was Malpan Thomas Palackal himself. We are told that Fr. Palackal was an enthusiastic teacher very committed not only to training his students in the conventional theological and liturgical subjects but also to supplementing the same with additional knowledge available from other sources. It is noted by St. Chavara himself that Fr. Thomas used to go to Tamilnadu and get relevant study materials from Tamil.<sup>1</sup> We must remember that in those days none of the Malpans had sufficient knowledge of modern European languages like English, French or German, and so could not get first-hand knowledge of current theological developments in the western countries. What they could gather and transfer to their disciples were theological ideas from the classic Syriac sources and the local languages. There existed few theological or spiritual books of good standard in Malayalam or even in Tamil in those days.

Coming specifically to the question of the origin and development of social vision in the mind of young Chavara, we may therefore surmise that mostly it might have been received from the vision of Malpan himself through his constant contact with him for several years and his own reflections on the contemporary condition of the Kerala society.

### **Malpan's Vision**

Malpan Thomas Palackal was one of the most erudite priests in the Syrian Catholic community then. He was quite knowledgeable about theology, liturgy etc. and was proficient in languages like Syriac, Tamil

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<sup>1</sup> Chavara Achan, *Punyacharithanaya Palackal Thoma Malpan* (Mal.), Thevara: Janatha Services, 1995, 14-15.

and probably Latin. Besides he was also a man of great vision about the future of the Kerala Church. We may surmise that he had two strong convictions – one, the Kerala society and particularly the Kerala Catholic community needs radical transformation in order to progress and become a modern and enlightened society, and two, the kind of leadership that existed in the Church then was not be capable of leading the Catholic community as well as the general society to higher levels of development; the priests who were in charge of parishes had only shallow knowledge in theological and secular subjects. So, he ardently desired to start a specially dedicated group of religious priests who could provide more efficient leadership in this area. Probably he developed this vision through his contacts with missionary religious priests like the Jesuits and Carmelites who had come from abroad and were working in Kerala then. He believed that only such a group of dedicated and learned men would enlighten and empower the society to higher levels of integral development.

Thus, the idea of founding a religious congregation in the model of the Order of St. Dominic (Order of Preachers) sprouted first in the mind of Malpan Thomas Palackal even while Chavara was doing his theological studies under him.<sup>2</sup> We understand that the Guru shared this vision and desire with his favourite disciple Kuriakose during his studies. The idea of founding a religious congregation had been experimented in the past in the Syrian community; its lifestyle had been more contemplative than active. We have historical evidence of such an attempt at Edappally where a contemplative religious community had been formed and for a few years before it was discontinued. Almost simultaneous with the idea of Fr. Palackal, another priest, Malpan Thomas Porukkara, planned to start a group of persons leading eremitical life. We read in CMI history that Fr. Porukkara along with Jacob Kanianthara, a friend and protégé, tried to start a sort of contemplative religious life in a remote place or wilderness.<sup>3</sup> However, this idea of a secluded life was discouraged by the bishop himself, who encouraged more active and service oriented life from persons like Palackal, Porukkara and Chavara who were considered to be the most capable and knowledgeable priest-leaders. This shift in the concept of religious life was very well suited to the original idea of Malpan Palackal who envisaged a Dominican style religious

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<sup>2</sup> A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Revised Second Edition), Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2020, 69

<sup>3</sup> A. Mathias Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 70, 75.

congregation. So, the question is: while persons like Porukkara and Kanianthara planned to lead a secluded life with the firm conviction that salvation of souls was almost impossible in this corrupt and corrupting world, what might have inspired Frs. Palackal and Chavara to plan for the Dominican style of religious life. Here lies the roots of Chavara's (as well as his Guru Malpan Palackal's) social vision. While the former concentrated on the salvation of one's own soul through secluded and withdrawn life in contact with God through contemplation and prayer, the latter had in mind the salvation or holistic development of the entire society or the establishment of the Kingdom of God by enlightening and spiritually empowering the people. This difference in focus or orientation originated not merely due to the theological vision they held about the Church and its role in the society, but also the socio-cultural condition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala society. This double formative background – social and theological – requires more explanation. First, about the social background.

### **Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

As we know, the founding fathers of the CMI congregation lived, did different ministries and founded a religious congregation during the first half of the nineteenth century. It would be useful to have a short description of the social and cultural condition of the Kerala society of those times in order to see why these visionaries wanted to start a religious congregation in the Dominican model. The Dominicans were quite well-known for going around preaching and teaching the people, particularly the Christian community, about genuine Christian life. They were known for enlightening the people on Christian life and empowering them to lead such a life. That is why they are known as the Order of Preachers (OP). In the eyes of Frs Palackal and Chavara, this was exactly what the new group of religious priests should do and also what the Christian community in Kerala needed then. Why?

The Kerala society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by two serious and widespread social evils – ignorance and casteism. Both had serious negative impact on the society. Due to widespread illiteracy, people were ignorant of even the most fundamental realities of life and consequently the society was steeped in and beset with superstitious practices in most aspects of life. Education in the modern sense of the term was practically nil in this part of the country. According to the sources available today, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the elementary education that existed in all the three geographical units of the present Kerala, Travancore,

Cochin and Malabar, was characterized by the following: a) It was not at all organized, and was undertaken by *kudipallikudams*<sup>4</sup> run by traditional teachers (*âsan, ezhuthachan, vadhyar*), and, being unorganized it was not the State or community, but the parents of the children, who took the responsibility to send the children to these teachers. b) It was most elementary consisting of just learning to read and write, to do basic arithmetic and to grasp the fundamental tenets of religion. The few so called centres of higher learning, known as *vedapatasalas* and *sabhamatts*, imparted chiefly higher levels of religious education and more knowledge of poetry, drama, grammar, martial arts etc. Even the skill of writing was not given as much importance as reading, and the students were trained to recite from memory. (It may be noted that in ancient times there existed special persons to write down what was necessary for household or social records and the so called learned people used only to dictate to these 'writers', rather than writing by themselves). c) Apart from the basic skills of reading and writing, mostly it was religious education, teaching the children the fundamentals of religious values so that they become adapted and obedient to them rather than developing their creative intellect. d) And above all, education was limited to the male children of the upper caste groups. The women of upper caste families might have been given some elementary skills in reading at home. But both men and women of lower castes were not only denied education but their access to education was even regarded as a taboo.

Education began to get organized and also spread in Kerala only after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch and the Portuguese who arrived in Kerala before the British seem to have had little interest in spreading literacy and education in the state;<sup>5</sup> we have no evidence of any effort from their part. Though they established seminaries for the education of prospective priests, the 'schools' they started "seem to have been

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<sup>4</sup> The word, *palli*, is probably derived from the Buddhist background referring to their gathering for prayer and meditation. It is historically established that Kerala had influences of Buddhist presence during Sangam era. Places of learning might have existed attached to such centres in ancient times. Later the word began to be used about all learning centres, and the Christians adopted the term to refer to their gathering for worship, i.e., the church.

<sup>5</sup> P. K. Michael Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development, Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIX, No. 45, Nov. 10, 1984, 1916.

(imparting) essentially catechism classes."<sup>6</sup> So their contribution to mass literacy is open to doubt. Though the literacy rate among the Brahmins and Nairs might have been rather high towards the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the mass literacy efforts were initiated only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the missionaries under the British government began to arrive in Travancore and Cochin. By 1806, the London Missionary Society (LMS) started missionary work in Nagarcoil (then part of Travancore) and established a school there in 1816. The Church Mission Society (CMS) started a seminary in Kottayam in 1820 and a school in 1821. Schools for female education were also started by the wives of the missionaries as early as in 1818 in Kottayam and in 1819 in Nagarcoil.<sup>7</sup> The Travancore Government helped the missionaries in promoting education; the now widely known Monro Thuruth was given by the government of Travancore to the missionaries to defray the expenses of the school.<sup>8</sup> Other high schools were also established by the missionaries in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself at Neyyoor, Santapuram and Parasala in the South and Mavelikkara and Alleppey in the North.<sup>9</sup> Besides, a number of primary schools were established by the above mentioned two missionary societies all over Kerala. Thus, the LMS established 175 schools and the CMS, 47 schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself.<sup>10</sup> Though there was a heavy emphasis on religious subjects in these schools, the missionaries did not neglect to give the students secular education also; hence subjects like literature, language, geography, arithmetic etc. were also taught. In these schools, the first four classes were taught in Malayalam but in the higher classes English was also taught. In order to train the necessary number of teachers, the CMS started a training school at Mavelikkara in as early as 1857.

In spite of such initiatives from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of the people were still steeped in illiteracy. For, the newly started educational institutions were mostly of very small size and also

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<sup>6</sup> H. Hosten, "Peter Louis SJ or the First Indian Jesuit," in *Kerala Society Papers*, Series 2, 1928, 45-47.

<sup>7</sup> P.K.Michael Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development, Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore," 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompatham Nootandile Keralam (Mal.) (Kerala in 19<sup>th</sup> Century)*, Kerala Sahaitya Academy, Trichur, 1988, 1062.

<sup>9</sup> P. K. Michael Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development, Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore," 1920.

<sup>10</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *Report on the Census of Travancore*, 1881, Trivandrum: Govt. Press, 1884, Ch. IV, 149-151, quoted by Tharakan, 1917.

few for the fast-growing population. Besides, compared to the foreign protestant missionaries, the local Catholic Church entered the field of education only much later; the foreign prelates who ruled the Catholics discouraged English education among them for fear of Protestant influence. The illiterate and uneducated population obviously did not develop a rational and scientific temper and was immersed in superstitious beliefs and practices. An important expression of such a superstitious mindset was the widespread practice of caste discriminations in all communities, including the Christian. The cruel discriminatory practices affected and tortured almost all aspects of the lives of the lower castes – the language they were allowed to use, the food they could eat, the dress and ornaments they were permitted to wear and the mode of wearing them, the houses or huts they could construct, their mode of journey from one place to another, and the occupation or job they were destined to engage in. The rigid caste system did not allow any social mobility and one who was born into a particular caste or sub- caste was destined to live according to centuries-old caste rules till his/her death. He or she was not permitted to change his occupation or mode of living. Even the religious beliefs and practices, especially among the Hindus, were practiced differently in each caste group. Each of them had different gods, different temples or places of worship in which others could not enter and different modes of worship. Thus everything in life was believed to be static and eternally determined by destiny on the basis of *karma*. Moreover, due to the practice of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability between various castes and sub-castes, social interaction among the people was confined to the narrow boundaries of the caste group. The society was divided and subdivided into numerous groups without any meaningful contacts. It was after seeing the wide web of such caste discriminations and taboos that Swami Vivekananda called the Kerala society of those times a lunatic asylum. Yes, it was truly a dark age in Kerala.

Regarding the society that we described above, Chavara notes that the Kerala society was totally infertile (*matchi* in Malayalam), incapable of producing any good.<sup>11</sup> A letter from the founding fathers to the bishop points out this fact in the following words: “A lot of good had not been done due to the absence of a *Thapasu Bhavanam* and a *Darsana Veedu*”.<sup>12</sup> If

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<sup>11</sup> ‘*Macchi*’ is an old Malayalam word of Dravidian origin meaning infertile; in modern Malayalam, word ‘*Vandhya*’ coming from Sanskrit roots is used.

<sup>12</sup> Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 74

one looks back to the Kerala society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one will realize that the absence of good works which the founding fathers wrote about had been due to the stagnant nature of the society. The stagnation arose on account of the rigidity of the caste system that had complete grip on the society, not only of the Hindu society, but of the whole society. Caste prevailed over the society and predetermined the whole life of the human being, and ignorance and absence of rational outlook prevented them from doing anything to change the situation. The whole society was resigned to the status quo which their karma and fate had determined for them from the past.

So, the main challenge before St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and his mentors, who later became his confreres, Fr. Thomas Palakkal and Fr. Thomas Porukkara, in the nineteenth century in Kerala was to transform this infertile or barren (*macchi*) society into a fertile one with abundant fruits in all fields of life through their good works. It is in selecting the kind of 'good works' and the manner of doing them, we discover the unique kind of creativity or innovativeness in them, particularly in St. Chavara.

### **Shaping of Social Vision**

Seeing and experiencing such dark effects of ignorance and casteism in social life, it was quite natural for the very intelligent and imaginative persons like Malpan Thomas Palackal and his disciple Kuriakose Chavara to feel inadequate in their conventional priestly ministry. It may be recalled that even the priests, unlike Malpan Palackal and a few like him, were also rather uneducated in theological and secular subjects and lived quite content with performing the sacred rituals in the church. The Malpan knew well that these priests would not be able to provide leadership to change the society. That is how he began to dream about starting a religious community of priests like the religious priests who came to India from western countries. He hoped that these priests who would be more educated and committed as a group would give more efficient leadership in working for the advancement of the society.

The Malpan shared this vision with his disciples, particularly with St. Chavara, his favourite disciple, during the latter's priestly training. That is why Chavara offered the desire for starting a religious

congregation as the most important intention at his first Holy Mass.<sup>13</sup> As soon as the founding fathers got permission from the bishop to found a monastery, Chavara along with his mentors began to earnestly try for the same. Thus within two years after his ordination, the first monastery was founded at Mannanam in 1831. From here the small group of the first indigenous religious community began to take steps to change the Kerala society, not merely necessitated by the needs of the times but also inspired by the theological vision of their mentor Malpan Thomas Palackal, i.e., to enlighten and empower the people to build the kingdom of God among them.

## **II. Social Transformation a Spiritual Mission for Chavara: Spirituality of Social Apostolate**

It was noted above that Chavara's social vision was shaped by twin influences - his observation of the society beset with several social evils, in which he lived and the theological vision about Christian life and the role of the Christians (Church) in the society, which he developed over the years through study and experience. It is this second aspect of his vision that made him feel more deeply uncomfortable in the status quo and hence ardently desire for integral social transformation.

### **CMI Vision of Social Involvement**

The CMI Constitution says: "God is in reality experienced by people in the concreteness of their daily lives, their needs and aspirations, and their actual fellowship as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Like Christ, we too are sent into this real world to preach the Good News to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed (Lk. 4:18). Hence, action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel (C77 a). Thus, the CMI vision considers social apostolate as an essential and integral aspect of God-experience. In other words, the CMIs are reminded that God is experienced through social involvement for making the lives of other human beings better.

The Constitution of Vatican II, *Church in the Modern World*, very clearly says the same in different words: "(Though) earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better

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<sup>13</sup> Valerian C D, *Visudha Chavara Kuriakose Eliasachan, Malankara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, (Mal.), Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, Revised Fifth Edition, 2020, 49.

ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal – a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace” (GS No. 39).

In the light of such theological views of the present times, it may be asked, what might have been the theological or spiritual perspective of Chavara almost two centuries ago about the role of the Church and the Christians in the world. Or what was the theological foundation or rationale of St. Chavara’s varied pioneering works in the social field? Was he merely a social reformer as the term is now understood and used by modern speakers and writers? Or did he have a deeper spiritual reason for his unprecedented involvement in the society?

### **A Functional View**

Some years ago, I felt quite strange and even squirmed in my seat, when I heard someone speaking in public that the founding of the religious Congregation for women by St. Chavara might have been motivated by his sympathetic affection towards his own widowed mother (just because the first member of that Congregation happened to be a widow?). Was not the establishment of the first religious congregation for women the result of a persistent desire to found a community of intense God-experience for them and service to humanity arising from that God-experience, particularly to women, similar to those that existed in Europe and to the one he himself created for men? Was a religious congregation just a haven for widows and helpless women in the mind of Chavara? Was it a kind of mere social service for him? Still stranger was another explanation I heard about his filial devotion to the Blessed Mother. Was he sublimating his love towards his own mother by transposing it to the Blessed Mother? What a strange and secular imputation on someone who imbibed the great Catholic spiritual tradition of devotion to the Blessed Mother and tried to practice it faithfully throughout his life!

Persons are often assessed in the light of the functions they perform in the society. St. Chavara seems to have been judged by several modern writers and speakers in this manner. This may be called a functional approach in measuring personalities. But functional approach can be misleading. One and the same function can be carried out from quite

different perspectives or motives, and the value of the function changes according to the vision. Compare the manifold services carried out for the betterment of the poor by the unbelievers like the members of the communist party and the religious sisters of charity under the leadership of St. Mother Theresa. The tasks may look similar or even identical, but they are carried out with quite different values or motives. For one it may be a merely humanitarian service but for the other, a worshipful service to God, seeing the suffering face of Jesus in human beings.

So, one has to go beyond the level of functions, deeper into the personality of the performer from where the motivation or vision originates. Jesus once asked his disciples what others thought about him (Mt. 16:13). They responded saying that some considered him John the Baptist, some others Elias or one of the prophets and so on. Then he asked pointedly what they thought about him. It was then Peter replied that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. While the perspectives of the people were based on the functions Jesus performed during his public life, the answer of Peter was based on an intuition about the core personality of Jesus. Likewise, we need to see the inner personality of people like St Chavara in order to understand the true value of their doings.

### **A Deeper Vision**

St. Chavara was a person endowed with an extraordinary measure of charisma and consequent creativeness. We believe that God is the creator of the whole universe. Creativity is a unique divine characteristic. God has shared this characteristic of creativeness with human beings, not much with other creatures as far as we know. So, all human beings, are endowed with creativeness, of course in varying degrees and capability. While the other creatures have some capability to adapt themselves to the physical and social environment, human beings have the ability not only to adapt themselves to the surroundings, but also to apply their intelligence or creative mind and re-create this world. This creativity is activated by their interaction with other creative intellects, and manifests in manifold ways in different spheres of life. Thus, creativity is triggered through contact with other minds like human groups and their life situations and/or with God Himself who is the supreme creative mind. In the case of Chavara and his colleagues, they decided to activate their creativity primarily in contact with God through prayer and also with other human beings. That is why they abandoned the idea of withdrawing from the world and, on the advice of the bishop, decided to start a monastery.

The activated creative mind manifests itself in various spheres of life. So, we find creativity and innovation in literature, art, culture etc and probably most visibly in modern times, in the fast advancement of science and technology. It is the creative intelligence of human beings that has transformed the world throughout human history, especially from the time of modern age. The same creative mind is manifested in spirituality also. In the case of the Christian charismatic personalities, the multidimensional personality of Christ is meditated upon by them and many of them draw newer and newer insights from the person of Christ due to their creative mind as well as the influence of the social situation in which they happen to live. Thus, for example, we may say that St. Ignatius of Loyola was attracted by the prophet-teacher personality of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi by the poor and self-emptying Jesus, St. Don Bosco by Jesus the friend of the youth, and so on. Similarly, St Chavara living in the above-described social conditions of Kerala was inspired by Jesus who enlightened and empowered the people of his times not only through instructions and teachings, but also through miracles of healing and deliverance, and tried to transform the world into the kingdom of God. Chavara was convinced that through the mission for the social transformation that he was embarking on, he was actually building up the kingdom of God in his place and time. He also felt that he had a responsibility to continue this mission of Jesus in his country in order to enlighten and empower his people and help them move forward to more united and enlightened society that reflected the qualities of the kingdom of God envisaged by Jesus, even after his times. So, he planned to start a band of followers as a religious congregation. But, before describing, however, how this social mission became, in his Christian vision, an essential aspect of bringing about the kingdom of God, we need to elaborate a little more how the noted spiritual charisma or creativity became a socially transformative power through the person of St. Chavara.

### **From God-experience to Social Involvement**

Chavara and his colleagues, we know, were excellent parish priests who were already doing commendable service to the society through their parishes. Still, they felt something lacking in themselves and in the society at large. That was an intense and intimate God-experience as a community of leaders and the consequent energization of the lives of the people for their transformation. So they eagerly wanted to activate their creative energy through personal relationship with God in a community. Chavara wanted to nurture that relationship through prayer and contemplation even withdrawing from the hustles of the world along

with his colleagues and mentors. That was why they called the abode they wanted to build a *Tapasubhavanam*.<sup>14</sup> They hoped that they would experience God in prayer and contemplation there and the spiritual energy that emanates from their *Tapas* (literally *Tapas* is that which heats up or energizes) would energize themselves and the Kerala Church. It was a real thirst for God-experience; yes, they were all men of God seeking holiness through relationship with God. This spiritual energy they wanted to channel to the society to transform it as part of building up the Kingdom.

That was how various kinds of services became in their hands manifestations and vehicles of God's enlivening love for humanity. So, as I see it, none of them was primarily a social reformer or pioneer in social development. They happened to be so, when the spiritual power originating from God and flowing through them rained on this world and transformed it. Being human channels with creativeness and imagination, they let that power transform various aspects of human life that needed growth. The Church in Kerala and the society grew by leaps and bounds imbibing the energizing nectar from the CMI founding fathers. Thus, both in prayer and action, they were first and last men of spirituality thirsting for God-experience and holiness and for channelling the spiritual energy for the growth of the people. It is said of Mother Theresa that she once declared: "We are not social workers; we are contemplatives in the heart of the world". She proceeded to explain that whenever she and her sisters did the so-called social works or services they were not actually doing social work as the world understood it, but ministering to God through the service for humanity, and hence they were actually contemplating the face of Jesus seen in the sick and the afflicted, the desolate and the dying. Holiness is the result of our connectedness with God in contemplation as well as in action. St. Chavara has been holy - yes, heroically holy - because it was his God-experience that was manifested both in his prayer and manifold services to the society. He was just carrying God's transforming and reforming power to humanity. Yes, the founder of the CMI Congregation was not just a social reformer like the others of that ilk. When we not only recognize it but also proudly proclaim even to the non-believers, then only his holiness will begin to be recognized by the society, along with the official recognition from the Church.

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<sup>14</sup> Valerian CD, *Visudha Kuriakose Eliasachan*, 50-51

## Humanization for Kingdom of God

As we noted above, God created us human beings bestowing on us a spark of his own divine creativity and empowering us with his spirit (Gn. 2:7) in order to look after the whole earth (Gn.2: 15) so that we go on re-creating what is given to us. He created us also in his image (Gn. 1:27) so that his light shines and his will radiates through us in the whole world. Jesus, the Son of God, came to this world as the Light of the world (Jn. 9:5; 12:46), a true light that enlightens everyone (Jn. 1:9); so, those who were in darkness saw a great light (Mt. 4:16). And he told us, his disciples, that we are also the light of the world (Mt. 5:14) and let our light shine before others (Mt. 5:16). So, St. Paul added that God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Hence our Lord commanded his disciples and through them all of us to go and proclaim the good news to the whole creation, and teach all nations what he commanded us (Mk.16:15; Mt. 28:20). Thus the Word of God teaches us that God wants all human beings, his children, and Jesus wants us, his disciples, to enlighten the whole world with the divine light and empower it with the divine spirit so that it is transformed into God's Kingdom in the fullness of time.

Drawing our attention to this most important responsibility of all the disciples of Jesus, the CMI Constitutions of later years state that "Christ praying on the mountain and proclaiming God's kingdom to the multitudes, identifying himself with the poor and always obeying the will of the Father is the supreme model according to which we have to form ourselves and also help the new members accepted into our community attain God-realization (*iswaranubhava*) through continuous transformation into Christ, the true Teacher (*sadguru*).<sup>15</sup> *Veritatis Gaudium*, the Apostolic Constitution on ecclesiastical education says the same in the following words: "The joy of truth expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God's Light, and shares that Light with all people.<sup>16</sup> For truth is not an abstract idea, but is Jesus himself, the Word of God, in whom is the Life that is the Light of man (cf. Jn 1:4), the Son of God who is also the Son of Man. He alone, 'in revealing the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling."<sup>17</sup> Accordingly,

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<sup>15</sup> CMI Constitutions, C79.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Conf.* X, 23.33; I, 1, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22; VG No. 1

the Church demands that the consecrated persons receive spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic formation so that they can be effective witness to Jesus and his Gospel in the modern times.<sup>18</sup>

As if possessing this vision almost two centuries back, the bishop at the time of the beginning of the CMI Congregation was reluctant to allow the founding fathers of the congregation to lead a life of seclusion and solitude, as they desired in the beginning, fearing that there would be less leaders to teach and guide the people. The chronicle written by St. Chavara notes: "They (the two founding fathers) told him (the bishop): "We have decided to live a quiet life in solitude, so we are seeking permission for the same and we shall find another suitable person as secretary for you here." The bishop replied: "If you two who are sufficiently learned enter into silence in a secluded place, who else would teach the people. But, however, if you so desire, then establish a convent (monastery) that would be beneficial for all..." We agreed with the proposal'.<sup>19</sup>

As soon as the first fathers came together and began to live as a community of prayer, study and mission, their new way of life began to enlighten and empower themselves with the word of God which they easily translated into concrete guidelines for their own life and that of the people. We may believe that they meditated on the person and mission of Jesus in the context of the then Kerala society. In the midst of the all-enveloping darkness of ignorance and superstitions on the one side and the weakening divisions and subdivisions of the society on the other, what touched and inspired them most, it seems, was the person of Jesus praying on the mountain and proclaiming God's kingdom to the multitudes, as the CMI Constitutions later noted. Hence, they responded enthusiastically to the call to 'continuously transform themselves into Christ, the true Teacher'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, they began to enlighten and empower the Kerala society that was dark and weak, through manifold ministries, which became the charism of the CMI Congregation. Since the founding fathers, and particularly St. Chavara, was a man with an extraordinary measure of charisma, he was capable of taking initiatives to start several ministries for transforming the Kerala society into a genuine Kingdom of God.

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<sup>18</sup> Address of Pope Francis to the Union of Superiors General on 29.11.2013

<sup>19</sup> Chavara's Chronicle, 6, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Rfr. *CMI Constitutions*, C 79

### **Enlightening and Empowering for the Kingdom**

At the beginning of this section, it was noted that God created us with a spark of his divinity in us. The chief characteristics of this divine spark or image of God within us are the twin faculties of the human spirit – the ability to think creatively and act freely and responsibly, rooted in intelligence and will respectively. If these two faculties of human beings and the related qualities are nurtured to blossom and grow to their full potential, they will shine forth from our lives and activities, making the well-known saintly saying a reality: 'glory of God is human being fully alive' (St. Ireneus). For this to happen, the society should become fully enlightened and empowered.

The kingdom of God, as the Gospels envisage, is a special lifestyle that Jesus wanted to bring about among his followers. The kingdom he proclaimed and began on earth is essentially a community marked with justice and peace; its foundation lies in the loving and wholesome, lively and vibrant relationships among the members of the society and towards God. Such relationships get established and flourish only when all human beings are accepted as equals and are free to think creatively and act responsibly, or in other words, only when the inner life of all grow abundantly. That is why Jesus claimed that he had come so that we "have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). However, taking into account the fact that many were in fact denied to have life in abundance, Jesus declared that the Spirit of the Lord was given to him and God had anointed him 'to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Lk 4: 18).

Human societies all over the world at all times had and still have many millions who are 'blind and lame' yearning for enlightenment and empowerment, and 'captives' longing for liberation. As we know, several kinds of inner blindness and powerlessness, and consequent oppression exist in all societies; we are familiar with the economic, social, political and cultural expressions of such a situation. But what we notice every day is just the periphery, the outer manifestations. The core of blindness and powerlessness lies in the inability to think and act freely for oneself and get out of the conditioned thinking patterns imposed by powerful interest groups who benefit from and enjoy the status quo. In simple words, the

foundations of the present oppressions and exploitations lie in the “culture of silence”<sup>21</sup> of the majority sustained by ignorance and fright.

If one studies the history of the Indian Church and most of the other developing countries, one would know that it is chiefly through the initiatives taken by the Church that people began to develop the ability to think creatively and act responsibly; thus the Church has been functioning as an instrument for the inner liberation and empowerment of several crores of people. For millions, acquisition of knowledge has widened their mental horizons; training in free thinking has empowered them. If the missionary involvement has been successful in this process in any part of the world, the seeds of a just society have already been sown there, even if not fully efficiently and effectively. And the kingdom has begun to sprout there, even if there are not many baptized Christians and ecclesiastical institutions.

And it is this service to the Gospel (the good news of a just society) that Chavara and his colleagues believed that they were called upon to do as the members of the new religious group. In other words, they tried, first and foremost, to become spiritually and religiously enlightened and empowered, and wanted to help others become so. In continuation of General Synaxis Resolutions No. 37, which called upon all members of the CMI Congregation ‘to be good educators capable of imparting new vision and employing effective methods in the apostolate’<sup>22</sup>, and ‘to foster our legacy and give leadership in theological education wherever we are called upon’, the CMI Congregation tries to carry this legacy forward.

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<sup>21</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, N.Y.: Continuum, 2005. The whole book is an analysis of various kinds of oppressions resulting in a culture of silence.

<sup>22</sup> General Synaxis Resolutions, No. 33, 35.