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CHAVARA,¹ A PROPHET OF OUR TIMES

A charismatic feature of human society is that it develops or is destroyed through the role played by certain individuals during the course of its history. This is true of social, political and religious leaders all over the world. Whereas a Francis of Assisi is responsible for the birth and growth of a dynamic spiritual movement in the church during the 13th century, Adolf Hitler is responsible for attempting the total destruction of the world order in the 20th century through his political ambition and misguided philosophy. It is the vision of life such people held which ultimately conditioned the kind of role they played in the human society either to promote its growth or to bring about its destruction. Posterity looks back to these persons either with gratitude or with hatred, depending on the kind of part they played in shaping the human society at large during that time.

Another important characteristic of our society is that it is very slow in understanding and appreciating the significance of the role played by its great personalities. The honour and esteem which Mahatma Gandhi receives today all over the world is a typical example of this attitude of the people. A scientist-theologian, Père Teilhard de Chardin, was considered to be almost a heretic when he was alive during the first half of this century. But now his theology has been exercising a great influence on Catholic theology so much so that the Pastoral Constitution on the church in the modern world can be said to draw its inspiration and orientation from the teleological and cosmic thinking of this great theologian.

When we think of Chavara and consider the kind of honour and admiration he gets today more than a century after his death, we feel that the same is true about him as well. It is not only that the society of his time

1. Kuriakose Chavara (1805-1871) was a Catholic priest and one of the founding fathers of the congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC). He reformed the Church and Society of Kerala, in India through his assiduous prayer and prophetic action. In 1986 Pope John Paul II declared him Blessed.

did not fully understand the role played by him during the 19th century in the history of the church in Kerala; we have all been very slow in appreciating the many contributions he made to the church in India, especially to the church in Kerala. It is heartening and encouraging to note that, of late, we have started thinking and reflecting for ourselves, and we have also begun to appreciate that our cultural and religious identity has a contribution to make to the total well-being and growth of the human society. It is within the larger framework of this self-awareness and self-respect that I would like to present the personality of Chavara as a great leader of the church in the 19th century.

When people speak of Chavara, it is customary to enumerate his qualities, his many achievements, his many undertakings in pastoral and social areas, such as education, press apostolate etc. Chavara, however, was more than anything else, a prophet of his time, and a prophet for all times. In fact, it was his prophetic personality which made him what he was then, and what he is today. The prophets of the OT were no more than ordinary persons, and when they carried out their ministry, they were sometimes discredited for their enthusiasm for propagating religious values. Some of them were seen as 'trouble makers' by a society that was given to religious indifference. But later generations began to study the role they played for the good of the society. Their oracles were preserved and codified, and so we have in the prophetic books one of the richest contributions of OT theology. Now the prophets of the OT are seen as the true defenders of the Hebrew religion, a role which they played not on account of the official religion controlled by the kings and the priests, but in spite of them, though they were the ones supposed to be the true leaders and defenders of the covenant religion of Israel.

To understand the prophetic personality of Chavara, we should start by examining the very meaning of the word 'prophet.' A prophet for many of us is a 'fore-teller.' This is not what a prophet is, at least, in essence. The Greek word 'prophetes' is the translation of the Hebrew '*Nabi*' and it means either 'one who is called' or 'one who calls.' Hence a prophet is one who is called by God or one who calls in the name of God. What is essential here is the God-perspective of the prophetic personality. His role is not a hereditary one as was the case with the kings and the priests. Rather, this came about by the direct intervention of God when certain individuals were urgently called and asked to speak in the name of God. There was a call and a mission at the same time. They were

called in order to be sent. Chavara was a prophet of this kind, a man who was called and a man who was sent into a society to speak and work in the name of God. Just as Jeremiah was called at a very young age, Chavara also ~~had to start his mission~~ at a very young age, and thanks to ~~the awareness~~ he had of his task and responsibilities, he was faithful to the call he received.

A prophet has three major qualities which need to be analysed to see how well all of them fit the person of Chavara. The three major qualities of the prophets of the OT were :

- a) Close intimacy with God.
- b) Sense of history.
- c) Total involvement in the destiny of the people.

a) Close Intimacy with God

All the genuine prophets of the OT had a profound intimacy with God. They always remained on the side of God and evaluated things from a God-perspective. For them everything was derived from God and everything was destined to move towards God. They had no secular understanding of the world ; for them the whole world moved in a divine milieu.

This God-perspective of the prophetic personality was very often implied in the very names the prophets bore. Thus Elijah means 'Yahweh is El' ; Hosea means 'Yahweh is salvation.' The baptismal name of Chavara was Kuriakose, which means in Greek 'one who belongs to the Lord.' He was one who pertained to the Lord of the New Covenant and from his writings we know that he kept up that union with Christ throughout his life. It is this sense of belonging to the Lord that prompted him to work so hard for Christ and for his church.

b) Sense of History

The second major quality of a prophet of the OT was his sense of history. The word 'history' does not mean here 'record of the past.' Rather, 'history' means the dynamic process of interaction between the past, present and the future. Every moment we live through very soon becomes a reality of the past, preparing itself for the present and opening itself up to the future. This interplay and interaction between the past, present and future make history one of the most important realities for the progress of humanity. What is absolutely important is for everyone to

develop a 'sense of history,' a certain sense or capacity to see the present in the light of the past and in relation to the future. In this age of pragmatism, many people do not have this sense of history and it is a real tragedy of our times.

The prophets of the OT were characterized by their tremendous capacity to see and understand the past, present and future in their relatedness. They had *their faith in the past, their love for the present and their hope about the future*. Their faith in the past enabled them to see the past as something precious, as something created and guided by God. Their love for the present compelled them to critically evaluate it in the light of the past. In doing this they had to condemn many things which were not in tune with the ideals of an authentic community. They had to condemn the externalism in the cult, the practice of social injustice and the overall breakdown of the covenant of religiosity. For this the prophets were disliked and often persecuted by the people as well as by the official custodians of religion. But their love for the present emboldened them to face such oppositions. They never practised opportunism, they were never prepared to make compromises on vital issues. Rather they were prepared to stand on the side of God and suffer with the assurance that God was with them.

This bold stand to uphold the authentic in the present was possible for them precisely because of their hope about the future. The future is that which is born out of the present. It is shaped by the present. But for the prophets, God is the author of the future and we can look forward to it only in the optimism. They did what they could to shape that future to be more and more in tune with God's plan about his people. In other words, they were not onlookers of the future. They were collaborators, doing what they could and leaving the rest to God for him to act in his good time.

Looking at what Chavara did for the church and his people in Kerala during the 19th century, one could very well say that he had this profound sense of history. He knew only too well that the church in that part of India had an authentic apostolic tradition, and a genuine spiritual wealth, which got blurred and confused through the historical vicissitudes of the 16th and 17th centuries after the arrival of the Portuguese. The Kerala church was in need of a renewal and revitalization. The clergy needed to be updated. Christian families had to be renewed from within. Chavara

took up the challenge and did whatever he could to bring about a lasting renewal of the church in Kerala.

More than anything else, it was the Rochosian schism which brought out the real prophetic role of Chavara. Though he was fully aware of the need for maintaining the identity of the St. Thomas Christians and their cherished rite – for which a bishop of their own rite was the ideal – he was more concerned about keeping the unity of the church under the Roman Pontiff rather than falling a victim to the thrill and enthusiasm that was created in Kerala through the arrival of Thomas Rochos. It was in his fight against this schismatic bishop that Chavara proved his real zeal for the church, something similar to the fight of prophet Elijah against the Canaanite gods. Chavara gave more importance to universal values and was ready to sacrifice special, narrow interests for the sake of the common good. This is a lesson which all of us today have to learn from Chavara, especially at a time when there is so much energy spent on exercising and establishing one's own identity at various levels.

The prophetic vision of Chavara enabled him to relate himself to all the various aspects of the life of the Christian community and to adopt ways and means for educating and revitalizing it from within. His pastoral vision was so comprehensive that no aspect of Christian life was left out in his all-embracing commitment to transform the society. Thereby he tried to restore the authenticity of an ancient church in matters of discipline, worship and spirituality. Through this he expected to create a better Christian community, a better clergy, better Christian families and a better church. If today about 70% of the vocation to priestly and religious life in India is from among the St. Thomas Christians, it is because of the renewal of the Christian families Chavara accomplished in the 19th century.

c) Total Involvement in the Destiny of the People

The third characteristic of the prophets of the OT was their total involvement in the destiny of the people. This is something that resulted from their sense of history. The prophets were not only spiritual leaders of the people in the restricted meaning of the term but they were also concerned with every aspect of the life of the people. Thus prophet Amos fought against the social injustice in the Northern kingdom, Prophets Micah and Isaiah did the same. Taking refuge in the externalism of the cult in any form was for them a mockery. Isaiah pleaded for justice to be practised

which consisted in "correcting oppression, defending the fatherless and pleading for the widow" (Is 1:17). Chavara knew only too well that the progress of a community greatly depends on growth from within and assistance from outside. For achieving the former he launched a process of education at various levels, such as theological education and formation of the clergy, education of the children through schools attached to all parishes. For helping the latter he started the medium of press apostolate, to accomplish which he had to work very hard. The ministry of the Word of God was another important means through which Chavara tried to help the people of God to become authentic Christians.

The Religious Communities which Chavara founded, both of men and of women, were to take up this prophetic task of building up the Kingdom of God, not only in the tiny geographical boundaries of Malabar but also throughout India and, as far as possible, in other parts of the world. For us living during the latter part of the 20th century all what Chavara planned for a meaningful apostolic community is evident. But the fact that more than a century ago he launched all these apostolic activities implies nothing less than a profound prophetic vision and a radical commitment to the cause which he had set before him. While remaining grateful to him for all that he has done and bequeathed to us, we should all take up as something precious the challenge of his vision and mission.

In the Book of Numbers we read the story of Moses exclaiming before his people: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them!" (Num 11:29). It would also be the prayer of Chavara as he now sees his sons and daughters spread far and wide, that they be all prophets like him, that they all display a prophetic vision and carry out a prophetic mission in the world of today, that they think and act in the present with a sense of the past and a vision into the future, that they do not remain satisfied with the given and the established, but rather that they transcend the limitations of the present to live into the future, that they develop a broad vision about their mission and become available everywhere and to everyone in this vast world to transform it into the Kingdom of God.