

BOOK REVIEWS

A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, pages: xx + 525, ISBN: 978-81-89958-16-9.

This is a biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), whose contributions to the reform movements in the 19th century Kerala, both within and outside the church, are being increasingly recognized. Of all the biographies of Blessed Chavara, this is the most exhaustive, scientific, and documented one. Being a fitting tribute paid to the Blessed Chavara by the mellowed church historian Mathias Mundadan, the book is all the more creditable. Majorarchbishop Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil and the superior general of the CMC Congregation, Mother Edward, in their messages and the prior general of the CMI Congregation, Antony Kariyil, in his foreword are all praise and appreciation for the book and its author. Here below we shall first have a summary of its contents, drawing mostly on the author's own words appearing in the introductory section and in the beginning of certain chapters.

The "Introduction," that precedes the 12 chapters, presents the physical, political, socio-cultural, and religious features of the Kerala society from the late 18th century to the late 19th century, which, according to the author, is important to understand the person, life, and mission of Chavara. It also gives an overall view of the subject matter covered in the book and a look into the methodology employed.

In Chapter 1, "Advent of a Great Sage," taking into account the fact that the environment in which one is born and brought up in the early years of one's life plays a definite role in shaping one's personality, the author gives 1) a brief description of the place and time at the birth of Chavara, 2) his family line, and 3) his early childhood. Chapter 2, "The Divine Call," first discusses in detail the time and the manner of Chavara's call to priesthood, speaks about the great sage and teacher Malpan Father Thomas Palackal, and Blessed Chavara's seminary life in Pallipuram under his able guidance. These two chapters, thus, describe Chavara as a saint and prophet in the making. The childhood and early education at home under the pious parents, and the priestly formation in the seminary under the paternal care of Malpan Palackal laid a firm foundation for the emergence of the saintly and prophetic personality of the Blessed Chavara.

The next three chapters deal with the vital role Chavara played in the foundation of the congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate

(CMI) and its dynamic growth into a spiritual movement enshrined in a charismatic community committed to the renewal and building up of the church and the society at large. Chapter 3, “Foundation of CMI Congregation,” briefly discusses the following: 1) Christian religious life in India before the CMI congregation was founded, 2) the saintly trio Father Thomas Palackal, Father Thomas Porukara and Blessed Kuriakose Chavara and their involvement in the foundation of the CMI, and 3) the foundation that was begun at Mannanam in 1831. Then, the author raises the question whether Blessed Chavara can be considered one of the three founders, and convincingly answers it in the affirmative. In doing so, on the one hand, he refuses to give the credit of founding the congregation exclusively either to the elderly Fathers Palackal and Porukara or to the young Blessed Chavara and, on the other, argues that all the three of them are the founders.

Chapter 4, “Leadership of Chavara and Growth of the Congregation,” deals mostly with the eight new foundations: Koonammavu (1857), Elthuruth (1858), Plassanal (1858-59), Vazhakulam (1859), Pulinkunnu (1861-66), Ampazhakadu (1868), Mutholy (1869), and Chettippuzha (1870). It ends with an account of the high-handedly effected interim affiliation of the congregation to the Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD) and the latter’s failed proposal to make it an OCD province. Chapter 5, “An Ideal Religious and Superior,” is a persuasive narrative of Blessed Chavara’s religious authenticity and leadership qualities.

Chapters 6 to 9 discuss in detail Blessed Chavara’s concern and direct services to the church and society. A major service he rendered to the church in Kerala was the heroic fight against the Rocco’s schism which had seriously threatened the unity and integrity of the church of Malabar. It was precisely as the only effective means of handling this critical situation that the Vicar Apostolic of Varapuzha appointed Chavara as vicar general for the St. Thomas Christians. He, with his fellow religious, fought against the schism with courage and holy determination, and marvelously succeeded. This great undertaking is described in chapter 6, “A Staunch Defender of the Unity of the Church.”

Chapter 7, “In the Service of the Society,” gives a profile of the projects Blessed Chavara pioneered for the renewal and reform of the church and the society. They included preaching and retreats, formation of an enlightened clergy, schemes to meet the financial needs of the church, and reform of liturgy. He was equally concerned about the problems of

illiteracy, inequality, and discrimination among the people, especially against the poor, the sick, and the neglected. To ameliorate their desperate condition, he took initiative to establish institutions and certain social action programs. “Foundations of CMC-CTC Congregations” is the title of Chapter 8. It tells the story of Blessed Chavara, with the collaboration of Father Leopold Beccaro OCD, founding the convent at Koonammavu. It is seen in the context of the pathetic condition of women in the 19th century. The convent was meant to lead them to the frontline of the society and to empower them spiritually and culturally. Those joining the convent were presented with the contemplative ideal of Carmel as the goal of life. While striving to realize it they were also to serve the society by educating girls and, thus, to become a great source and force in the renewal and reform of the church and society.

Chapter 9 describes Chavara as an “Apostle of Christian Literature and Print Media.” He was well aware of the crucial role of knowledge in reforming the society. For its dissemination he opened education institutions. He gave equal importance also to the production of literature and print media. He himself wrote volumes and established printing presses. All his life, especially during the last decade of it, he wrote in prose and poetry. This chapter presents and reviews his writings which reveal his personality.

Entitled as “Last Journey to the Father’s Home,” Chapter 10 is a moving portrayal of Chavara’s last days. They were days of intense suffering. He had many physical ailments from the seminary days. But they never stood in the way of his equally intense prayer and undertakings. In the last year, from end of 1869 to the end of 1870, his health hazards became severe. Still he carried on his duties. Finally, he was on his deathbed for about three months, suffering much pain and discomfort. The heroic patience and sweet smile on his face were marvellous. Early morning on 3 January 1871 he breathed his last at St. Philomena’s monastery, Koonammavu, surrounded by his fellow religious and friends, grief-stricken and praying. The next day, he was buried in St. Philomena’s church. The funeral was attended by a huge and overflowing crowd, all admirers of this humane person.

Chapter 11, “To the Honours of the Altar,” describes the canonization process and its successful end. Already during his time people looked at Chavara as a saint. After death, this esteem was manifested by many in different ways. Father Leopold, his spiritual

director, after describing the death briefly in his diary, prayed as follows: “O holy and graceful soul, pray for me!” Biographies of his edifying life and deeds were composed in 1871 itself. However, years passed before the canonization process officially started. Requests for it came from different quarters. Finally, on 9 December 1955, the Cause was introduced. It culminated on 8 February 1986 with the declaration of his holiness pope John Paul II at Kottayam that Chavara be called Blessed.

Chapter 12, the final chapter, “Personality of Chavara,” is the heart and culminating point of the work. It unravels the multifaceted and integral personality of the Blessed. Presenting in detail the prophetic, physical, humane, moral-ethical, especially Christian, and prayer-contemplative dimensions of the Blessed, the author has successfully depicted an impressive portrait. The last dimension, the prayer-contemplative one, enshrined in the spirituality of this *karma-yogi* is the pivot, the focal point, around which the whole of his life and mission are anchored. That the book has established it beyond doubt is Mathias Mundadan’s real achievement. For it, the readers certainly owe an immense debt of gratitude to him, indeed.

With its scholarly approach and simple style, the book appeals equally to the academic and the laity. It provides an intellectually solid as well as spiritually inspiring reading. It also gives a complete bibliography on the subject matter and an elaborate index of words, facilitating easy and quick reference. The broader perspective in which the life and works of Blessed Chavara has been treated makes the book interesting not only for the members of the congregations founded by him, but also for the students of the history and socio-cultural traditions of Kerala. All the same, the author does not claim to have said the last word on all questions related to the life and mission of the Blessed. He thinks that the study goes on, and invites suggestions and directions to improve the work further.

Finally, the book has been beautifully laid out and artistically brought out. However, there have crept in a few printing errors of rather technical nature, which hopefully shall be corrected in the next edition. As the author himself admits, some chapters were written in isolation from others, which accounts not only for the repetition of certain discussions and references to the same events and texts, but also a rather pluriform way of presentation. Avoidance of such stylistic defects, minor as they are, would render the book still more elegant. We wish the book a wider readership and circulation.

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