

# *Chavarul* of Chavara: A Precious Gift to Families

**Thomas Mampra**

Director, Nirmalgi Novitiate, Punaloor, Kerala

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### *Abstract*

The *Chavarul* written by St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is considered as the final testament which needs to be adhered to without any alterations. St. Chavara has left an ineffaceable mark on the social, spiritual, and educational fields in Kerala, and believed in empowering children through education. He considered the family as the basic unit of the Church and community and asks them to follow strict timetable in their daily life for prayer and spiritual reading with the children.

*Keywords.* *Chavarul*, Family, Healthy formation

### **Introduction**

It has been 150 years since St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara wrote his *Chavarul* to his beloved parishioners of Kainakari whom he calls his kith and kin. As a professed religious he had no material things to give them nor had many occasions to be with them as he was in the thick of activities beneficial for the entire church and society of Kerala. However, sensing his approaching death, he wanted to give this precious gift- his last will- to his beloved parishioners. Parents live and work their whole life for the benefit and well-being of their children. Sensing that they may not be around for much longer, they give all that they have to their children by the document called- last will, testament etc., of which St. Paul also speaks. The last will of the father of the family is to be strictly

adhered to. Nobody is entitled to make any change in it. As the final gift of their father, the children also consider that it is to be honored and kept through life. St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara gave this precious collection of his thoughts on the family as his last will to his beloved parishioners of Kainakari.

### **Family as the Basic Factor**

St. Chavara considered family as the basic factor of the Church and society (Mundadan, 2008). A reading and analysis of his writings bear witness to this fact. The first two or three chapters of ‘*Athmanuthapam*’ (Compunction of the soul) his autobiographical work, give some insight into the development of the concept of family and its importance in his life (CWC II, 2014, 1-16). The sweet and loving care and concern he received from his mother and siblings impressed him the most. The way he was disciplined by his mother, never by hands but with her eyes, the way he cared for day and night, the manner he was gradually introduced to the three persons of the Holy Family of Nazareth and slowly to the Trinitarian family etc, gave him a deep and strong impression on the family. As he was slowly brought to the Church and the worshipping community and their welcoming and encouraging interaction provided a wider concept of the family and himself as a dear young boy of the larger family. His idea about the family got a boost when he was introduced to the village school ‘*Kalari*’. He came to realize that he was also a beloved member of a still larger family, the village family.

His life in the seminary at Pallipuram and later as a professor in the seminary both at Pallipuram and Mannanam shed deeper insights into the concept of the family. As a professor of the seminary, he got a chance to read more books in different languages and learn more about the Christian mysteries of the creation of the world and man, man’s sin, Jesus’ incarnation, His life on earth, His redemptive death and resurrection. To St. Chavara who is considered as a great scripture scholar of his time which is evident from his biblical quotations and allusions found in his works, this provided a much deeper insight into the God-man relationship and the tremendous love of the divine family for the human family. St. John wrote in his Gospel that “God so loved the world that He sent His only Son into the world, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). During the conversation with the disciples after the Last Supper, Jesus told them that: “Greater love has no man than this, to lay down one’s

life for his friends” (John 15:13). A little above Jesus told them, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I loved you” (John 15:12). That unconditional love and forgiveness to one another is the rule of life for the disciples of Jesus. There is no love without sacrifice. Jesus showed the breadth and depth of His love for us by accepting all the sufferings and death on the cross- the most ignominious death of the time as He ‘loved us to the very end’. This biblical picture of the value of humans as the partakers of the restored ‘divine sonship of God’ and co-heirs with Jesus (John 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:4-7; Eph 3:4-6; 1 John 3:1-2) forms the background of the worth and dignity of the human family. That is why he focused all his activities and those of the congregation which he established on the vibrant and flourishing life of the families whether it was Sunday homilies or preaching retreats in parishes, educational apostolate, printing press, the founding of a religious congregation for women, empowerment of women, and social apostolate (Kochumuttom, 2014). It is from this sublime concept of the family that St. Chavara vividly had that we have to look upon his ‘last will’ and a testament to his dear ones’, friends and parishioners of Kainakari written on February 13, 1868.

As I started writing this short article I was suddenly reminded of another small book written by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) of Kolkata. Burning of zeal for reforming his native Hinduism of the time, he avidly read and studied the scriptures of different religions including Christianity which was rather new in Bengal during his time. Of all the teachings of various religions, he found that the Biblical teachings of Jesus were the best suitable for achieving eternal happiness. So he got them printed under the title ‘The Precepts of Jesus.’ ‘The Guide to Peace and Happiness’ in 1818 and distributed free of cost that people may read and live accordingly. Roy was interested in the peace and happiness of his fellow men. That is why he made this small book available to all free of cost. There is no reference anywhere that St. Chavara had heard about Raja Ram Mohan Roy or his works of reform in Kolkata. But here is St. Chavara writing his thoughts on the family for the benefit of his near and dear ones of Kainakari 50 years after Roy’s booklet in 1818.

One of the things that immediately strikes the reader of St. Chavara’s letter is its systematic presentation. It speaks volumes on the systematic training he received at Pallipuram seminary under Malpan Thomas Palackal and also of the long years he was teaching at the seminary at Mannanam. The stories and anecdotes he mentions also give some

hints about his wide and varied reading and apt choices. Coming to the text of the letter he gives a general introduction to Christian families and the rest is divided into two: the first part speaking in terms of the characteristics and mode of conduct of a good family in 24 points, and the second part exclusively dealing with a spiritually balanced and morally healthy upbringing of children in 16 points.

### **A Programme for the Family**

In the introduction itself, St. Chavara gives a sound definition of a Christian family involving its social, spiritual and interpersonal dimensions. For him, the Christian family is a replica of the heaven itself where the members are intimately related among themselves, and each one is ready to behave according to one's status in the family, each one respecting and loving each other and readily serving each other with love. The importance is given to the divine dimension, affective and reverential attitude to the parents, mutual love and respect among siblings and decent and respectful dealings with others are mentioned. The beautiful definition and description end with a clear orientation on the goal of life namely to receive eternal bliss in heaven. On the other hand, when people start forgetting this dimension, then such life will become miserable.

The very first number highlights the need for practicing charity, generosity, and forgiveness in mutual dealings. Everyone has his/her limitations and no one is perfect. By bickering about others one neither grows nor helps others to grow. Whereas when one accepts the limitations of others, and if they can help the other, then we all can grow together and build up a new beautiful world. Therefore the question is about one's attitude to others and to life itself. One can see a reference to St Mathew 5: 43-48. In *Chavarul* No.3 he speaks about how we should keep Sundays as holy days and not merely holidays. Remembering God our creator, Jesus who redeemed us by his salvific sufferings, death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us we should be grateful to the triune God for which Sunday may be reserved. St. Chavara reminds us of our obligation to be always grateful to God for his tremendous generosity and love of humankind in general and to each one of us and to our families in particular. *Chavarul* No.6 gives us a very wise and practical advice on how to live within our means. This piece of advice may appear to be a bit stringent. The example used beautifully and picturesquely proves the point. If you light up a heap of straw there will be a strong fire spreading a lot of light and

heat. But that remains only for a short while and then it is gone forever. Instead, if you light a lamp and give sufficient oil it will continue to give you welcome light for a long time, which will be beneficial to you and all around. How to be modest and moderate in our behavior is explained by St. Chavara, by giving a story of a man who got his son married from a family far beyond his means. The net result was that the daughter in law persistently persuaded her husband to abandon the father and the poor man became a beggar, it is said. St. Chavara exhorted his parishioners not to pollute the sacred environment of their homes by speaking ill of others or gossiping about other people. The space of one's home is sacred because Jesus is present in their midst and that holy place is to be continuously kept sacred. He also speaks about the dignity of labor and exhorts everyone to do whatever they can and not to lend any space to the evil spirit by being lazy. This was also a thought which St. Chavara and Fr. Porukara had put into practice during the establishment of the monastery at Mannanam. It is said that they also used to work along with other workers whenever necessary, and praying the Psalms. We must also remember that the fathers did so when in India and Kerala a lot of discriminations existed between castes, and work was also assigned based on caste differences. However, St. Chavara and others upheld the dignity of labor and practiced it against all odds. He also emphatically advised to keep away from both stinginess and profligacy. He placed special emphasis on choosing one's friends who need only be people of quality and fear of God. He considered devotion to God as the greatest treasure of the family. That is why he exhorted that at least one member of the family must go to hear the Mass daily and receive blessings of God for the whole family. He knows that it involves sacrifice, but he also wanted to convince his friends and relatives that one had to make sacrifices and continue to keep a close relationship with God and receive his abundant blessings, as the Psalmist says (Ps 111:10).

St. Chavara being a person who had tremendous faith in the Providence of God asked also his dear parishioners to put their trust in God even when the going is tough. He placed great importance to reading good books which will help one to lead an upright life serving God and helping people. On the contrary, keeping bad books and reading them is like keeping the fire in the hay. Slowly but surely it will flare up and destroy everything- a piece of advice which was important yesterday and very relevant in our times when any and every piece of information can be kept in a smartphone and put in one's pocket.

Finally, he recommends all families to keep certain timetable for their daily life giving due importance to prayer, work and spiritual reading which will help us to keep our relationship with God and others fresh and pure and guide us to reach our eternal destiny.

### **Good Upbringing of Children**

In the second part of his letter, St. Chavara speaks of parental duty of bringing up their children as spiritually strong and mature persons. First of all, he speaks of the responsibility of the parents to whom the children are entrusted by God to pass through the early stages of their life till they become mature persons. In the early stages of their life, children are totally dependent on their parents and what they receive at that stage impress them strongly and very often they are guided by those impressions. Though St. Chavara lived at a time when Psychology had not been developed as a branch of Science or philosophy, he speaks with the insight of a Christian philosopher or psychologist on this matter. It prompts us to believe that he was a keen observer of the society and evaluated it in the light of Christian teachings (Kadankavil, 1994).

According to St. Chavara, children must be considered as treasures entrusted by God so that they may be brought up, trained and disciplined as mature citizens both of this world and of the world to come. Thus parents have a great role in the spiritual, intellectual and social formation and transformation of their children. The first stage of formation is the family, especially the mother is the most important person who plays a significant role. She is the one to whom the child is coming into loving and caring contact. It is her responsibility to instill in the child the idea of a warm mutual relationship. Gradually the child is brought into a warm relationship with the other siblings and the father. The family becomes the earliest and most significant school of formation of the child. Every action, gesture, and word the child grasps is imprinted in the child and the variety of impressions the child receives becomes the foundation or bedrock of its formation. Hence St. Chavara places a great responsibility on the family for the healthy formation of the child as a member of the family, society and the family of God. Therefore he insists on the spiritual formation of the child from the time he/she is able to grasp ideas. He mentions how to introduce the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and some spiritual nourishment along with bodily nourishment.

In its impressive years, the child learns everything from the people he/she comes into contact with. Hence special attention is to be given in

selecting companions. Gradually the child is to be sent to school for education. St. Chavara was always aware of the need of education for humans. An uneducated person was considered to be spiritually blind by St. Chavara. But he insists the parents that they should from time to time inquire about their studies, behavior, friends, and check what they have studied.

The meticulous detail which St. Chavara notes in the formation of the youth reminds us of the modern concept of ‘accompaniment’ of the young. Since man is a social being from early childhood he comes into contact with other humans. St. Chavara insists parents ‘accompany’ their children in their formative years so that they may be groomed into mature citizens and children of God. He also states about the necessary freedom they have to enjoy in choosing their state of life.

### **Conclusion**

Hope is a key concept that St. Chavara tries to inculcate in parents as they bring up children who are the future of Church and society. Pope Francis also talked about hope in line with this during the recently held Youth Synod. He suggested that hope can “broaden our horizons, expand our hearts and transform those frames of mind that today paralyze, separate and alienate us from young people.” Though written hundred and fifty years ago, St. Chavara’s penetrating eyes, keen observation and sharp intellect combined with a love for dear and near ones have given us the ‘testament’ which is so precious and valid even today.

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