

The Guidelines for the Formation of the Youth as Reflected in the Chavarul (Testament of a Loving Father) by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Benny Nalkara

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru

Abstract

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara dedicated his life for the total liberation and holistic renewal of the Kerala society in the nineteenth century. We are privileged to receive the manifold dimensions of his contributions. St. Chavara wrote the *Chavarul* which reflected the cultural, familial, pastoral, and the contemporary social context. The *Chavarul* appeals to our families and educational institutions to be a space that helps our children to ‘walk in peace with God and fellow human beings.’

Keywords. *Chavarul*, Family, Youth, School

Introduction

One of the great contributions of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the *Chavarul* (The Testament of a Loving Father), a set of guidelines that is full of practical wisdom for the smooth functioning of the families. The *Chavarul* which contains 40 precious instructions written to the parishioners of Kainakari remains as a relic of the sacred memories of the saintly life of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara. It was a letter written by St Chavara on 13 February 1868 reflecting the vision of an ideal Christian family.

“... I bequeath to you this document in my own handwriting. This script will not perish even when I am dead and gone. So, I entrust this cherished treasure to you, my children of the Kainakari Church.

This is my last testament (will) given to you, my siblings and family members, and children both in the order of spirit and flesh. Let this be a mark of the fact that you are my successors. The countless favors God has bestowed upon you are not entirely due to your meritorious lives but earned also by the true love and trust of your forefathers. Hence, you must ensure that you do not lose it! Do remember that I came into this world and that I left it by copying this testament by as many as possible to preserve and perpetuate it in your homes. Keep the original locked in a box in the chapel. On the first Saturday of every month, all of you shall come together and read it; this shall be a commemoration of my death anniversary; there is nothing else you need to do to remember me.

Lastly, every month, after you have read this testament, you may whisper a short prayer on my behalf: “O! Lord, keep the soul of thy servant also in the abode of the just” (Chavara, 1868, pp. 7-8).

Often people try to keep their memories alive through monuments and souvenirs. However, St. Chavara expressed his desire to be remembered through a non-perishable script that enables its reader the power to stand firm amidst all adversities of life. Subhashchandran, one of the contemporary writers of Malayalam literature writes:

“I am not sure whether there was the *Chavarul* among the list of miracles that were sent to Rome for the process of his canonization. We may tend to think that it may be a little miracle like the healing of deceased. But I do firmly believe what makes St. Chavara different from other saints is his wondrous deeds like the *Chavarul*” (Subashchandran, 2017).

The *Chavarul* completed 150 years of its existence on February 13, 2018. It clearly discusses how to face the contemporary challenges of the families in the light originating from the gospel. The *Chavarul* stands as a guideline for the renewal of the families and the upbringing of the children. The major portion of it contains the directions with a farsighted vision to the parents in upbringing the children. Out of the forty guidelines, the last sixteen focuses on the upbringing of the children and the formation of the youth. The parents, pastors and those

who are in the ministry of education shall read these sixteen guidelines with utmost care. In a context where the recently held bishop synod with the theme “Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment” for its reflection the re-reading of the *Chavarul* has got the utmost relevance. How shall we read and reflect a text which was written in the nineteenth century and is still relevant even today? I would like to approach the *Chavarul* in three dimensions.

The First Reading of the Chavarul

First of all, we shall try to read the *Chavarul* in the social and cultural context of its origin. When St. Chavara wrote the *Chavarul*, the Kerala society was highly affected by the patriarchal domination at the background of social customs. Women belonging to the lower castes were looked down as mere objects of sex to gratify the carnal desires of upper-class men. It was the time of the beginning of the social and cultural renaissance in Kerala. When we closely read the text of the *Chavarul*, we could sense the confusing situations in the matters of morals and customs. When the *Chavarul* emphasizes the need of charity, humility, good conduct in relationships, hard work, helping the needy, justice, fear of God, forgiving one another and the habit of reading good books, we get a picture of the challenges faced by the families and the children of that time. The people though bonded by blood relationship lacked the bond of love and though they lived together lacked communion. In such a context, the families might have lacked the loving relations among its members and the cases due to the conflicts and misunderstanding might be a usual phenomenon in the families. The society might have been suffering from the sickness of extravagance, laziness, comfort-seeking, injustice, and narrow-mindedness. In this context, St. Chavara prepared the set of instructions for the families to save the families from the clutches of the evil influences of the world and he wanted the family to be the space of peace and solace by the personal renewal of its members and the molding of their personality. The youth and the children of those days might have lacked badly a spiritual environment which would enable them to grow in fear of God and love for the fellow human beings. The *Chavarul* sheds light on the areas that may cause moral degradation. When St. Chavara writes to respect the dignity and freedom of the grown up in choosing one's state of life, we see an expert psychologist or a practical sociologist in him. According to him “in a world where lying, cheating, or playing the tricks for the sake of expediency etc are

regarded as the way of the world” (St. Chavara, 1868). Prudence and alertness are the hallmarks of these directives in general.

One may see the shades of the prejudices of the time in these family guidelines. It might seem to be a set of prohibitions and a line of devotions. When St. Chavara writes about the dress code of girls with an approach of caution, we may tend to think that at least some instructions in the *Chavarul* look so conservative and narrow-minded. When we read “children should not be allowed to stay in their relatives’ home and their relationships with the elders are to be with caution”, we may tend to think that St. Chavara does not respect the human relationships and the natural evolutions in the relationships with the opposite sex. The relevance of his words needs to be reflected in the present context of the society given the numerous accounts of child abuse being reported. The above-mentioned prejudices may seem to be genuine when we read the *Chavarul* with the aids of psychological and sociological tools. But, when we listen to the experiences of the contemporary world and the sharing from the counseling centers, we realize the St. Chavara was not a conservative or prejudiced man. In addition, the present day family challenges and challenges in the upbringing of children, we cannot but wonder at the farsighted vision and practical wisdom of St. Chavara. It was long before the development of the behavioral sciences, he wrote it with such practical wisdom. Even after 150 years of the origin of the *Chavarul*, they have a lasting impact and they admonish our times as well. The theme of reflection in the recent Bishop’s Synod held in October 2018 “Youth, faith and the vocational discernment” is very well reflected in the *Chavarul* and it shows St Chavara’s farsighted vision.

The Second Reading of the Testament of a Loving Father

The *Chavarul* shall be read and reflected at the background of social and familial context. We live in a situation where the families face many a challenge and often are in crises. In a world where globalization, consumerist values, and materialism prevails over, our society is guided by the principles created by them. Those motives and principles do influence the thinking and vision of the life of our children and young people. Certain motives and principles that some people follow which negatively affect the present society can be summarised as follows:

1. When one’s words and deeds don’t agree with each other
2. Grabbing the fruits of others labor

3. Relationships are based on pragmatism
4. Love and mercy are not genuine. Pure love is celebrated as erotic pleasure
5. Use and throw culture of the globalized world is creeping up in our society.
6. The members of the family shut their hearts and minds to the needs and sorrows of the neighbors. 'I, my wife and my children' this becomes the mind of the majority.
7. The selfie culture that celebrates the self-love is a sign of the conscious forgetfulness of the other.

To lead a simple life is considered as a grave crime in our times! The world around us becomes more and more greedy and luxurious in its nature. Malayalam writer U. K. Kumaran's story 'A Family meditates on the railway track' gives a hint about the complexities of the new generation families. A family is sitting by the side of a railway track. They have decided to commit suicide. Though many trains have passed by, they are sitting there. At last, the little boy asked his father, 'Papa, we have come to suicide, but though many trains have passed by, we have not completed our task.' Father replied, 'all the trains were passenger trains. We are waiting for Rajadhani Express to commit suicide.' Even in death, though it is suicide, we are strict that too is to be done in a royal way!

The inconsistencies and exploitation in the working places and the huge increase in the number of refugees and migrants create a lot of social and economic issues in the society. Cultural multiplicity becomes more complex due to the migration of the younger generation to the cities.

Our educational system fails to make human beings humble and the other oriented. Albert Einstein formulated an equation, $E = MC^2$. The educational system that should energize the whole of humanity could be found in relation to the equation. $E = MC^2$ that means education is equated with money, career, and chair. An educational system that is closely related to money, work and position lead the children to an unhealthy competition and they are forced to think that they are on a battlefield.

When the educational institutions focus more on excellence and standard, we lack focus on the human values in the formation systems of the children. Charity does not get a space in the field of quality and excellence. Often quality replaces charity. Though we claim that

our educational institutions are to be unique and different, is it not a matter of examination of conscience? Can we succeed in transmitting the basic values through our ministry of education?

Information technology has become guests at first and then host within no time. New age media and social media have trapped the younger generations with their mesmerizing visual shows. The numbers of those who are buried in the cyberspace are at the increase. The educational centers have lost their sense of romanticism and value-based politics. The creative and reflective nature has disappeared and the responses are limited to mere likes, dislikes, and trolls. The responses of our younger generation are limited to two levels – either silence or violence.

In the growth of the children and the younger generation who are grown amidst inconsistencies and uncertainties, what is the significance of the *Chavarul* which was written 150 years back? The insightful instructions and guidelines of St. Chavara which are written without the aid of newly formulated sociological and psychological theories are still relevant today since it reflects his farsighted vision. Some instructions have to be reread in the context of today. In this view, we shall try to formulate a new vision for the formation of the young people from the reflections of the *Chavarul*.

The third reading of the *Testament of a Loving Father*

Today the testament of St. Chavara invites us for the third reading of *Chavarul*. The present-day social context is the focus of this reading. As parents, pastors and the Formator of the children and the young people, we are expected to have an in-depth understanding of this text seriously. The *Chavarul* is not only meant for the people of *Kainakary*, but it is in its nature an all-inclusive set of guidelines for all. It urges us to rededicate ourselves to the renewal of the families and for the formation of the children and youth. *Chavarul* can be instrumental in the spiritual reformation and the renewal of the families today.

Chavarul can have a great impact on Christian institutions especially in the context of character formation and personality development today. Educational institutions are channels of formation and transformation. But the formation of the children and youth becomes many a time a by-product of our educational apostolate. Application of *Chavarul* in the curriculum in spiritual formation and renewal of the students needs to be incorporated.

The Youth Synod in October 2018 had the theme “Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment.” It could be counted as a happy coincidence and a divine plan that we could celebrate the 150th year of the *Chavarul*. Let us rededicate ourselves to the children and the youth. Parents and formators are inspired to walk with the youth and imbibe the language of their hearts. They should learn to converse with their children like Jesus and St. Chavara through stories. They shall be given proper ambiance to have free discussions in matters that affect the core of the societal growth. Youth love participation more than being controlled. We should give a participatory role in the social functioning of our parishes and religious houses. We should work out plans to conduct the pilgrimages and prayers that attract the youth.

The third reading of *Chavarul* reminds us to develop a new lifestyle and a character which resembles the spirit of *Chavarul*. We should be able to teach them the management lessons to handle both money and time prudently. Pope Francis inspires us on the need of accompaniment of our youth. The market-driven society, globalization and media revolution has a great on today’s youngsters. It is a need of the hour that the Church and the society take appropriate steps to facilitate a proactive formative process for the new generation. There are implications from *Chavarul* that social commitment and protection of the environment is also our duty. In addition, we must aim at creating an academic formation that focuses on the openness to the other, empathy towards the fellow men and a cooperative mentality.

The instructions like ‘keeping bad books are like hiding fire in haystacks and good books are the precious treasure to be given to the children’ (St Chavara, 1868) are still relevant today even in this cyber age. Further, the third reading of *Chavarul* once again reminds us of the importance of extending pastoral care to the cyber generation. The Lord has called all of us to be His witnesses in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and to the ends of the Google.

St. Chavara had solicited all the churches to have a school (*pallikkootam*) attached to it. In his writing, he motivates the teachers and parents to nourish their children with spiritual sustenance. He writes very sincerely ‘to give nourishments of prayer and remembrance of God to the soul, as we nourish our body.’ Today, he silently speaks to us ‘to have churches attached to every school’ which would impart a spirituality that nourishes relationships.

The vision of *Chavarul* often empowers us to integrate the spirit of *Chavarul* in the character formation of children. St. Chavara speaks to parents, teachers, and pastors, “Dear siblings, children are sacred treasures entrusted to you by God...” “If any of the children are lost to hell, because of your fault, what a big hindrance will it be for your salvation?” (Saint Chavara, 1868). As the *Chavarul* underlines, let our educational institutions be a space that helps our children to ‘walk in peace with God and fellow human beings.’

Conclusion

Pope Francis in his message to the Youth during the Synod reminds the young people to go back to their roots. He says that the youth can’t do anything in the present, or in the future, if we are not rooted in the past, in our history, in our culture, especially in our family. St. Chavara who was the champion of the family had already handed over these spiritual riches through his *Last Testament* to the future generation. It is a source of inspiration for developing a formation programme for the youth and children with a contextual approach. The current day reading of *Chavarul* should create ways and open paths for the youth for a value based life. Moreover, it should be a blueprint for the animators and trainers of youth and children in their mission.

Reference

- Subashchandran. (2017). This Page shall not perish. In J. Mannarathara (Ed.), *Light on the Burnt Horizon: Chavara the Reformer Saint*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 306-309.
- Saint Chavara. (2018). *In Testament of a Loving Father* (1868) (S. Chackalackal, Trans.). Chavara Hills, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat.