

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Holistic Vision of Formation

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Abstract

Priesthood was mainly cultic and sacramental in the past centuries. In the formation, the prophetic and pastoral dimensions were overlooked. St. Chavara felt the need for a revamping in the present formation of priests and religious. Thus, he stressed the need for systematic formation in the backdrop of a community. Priests shall be men of wisdom, sanctity and social grace. The seminary he founded at Mannanam became a landmark in the field of the formation. St. Chavara saw beyond apostolic functions and emphasized on inner transformation and its exterior expressions in attitudes, values, behaviours, and dispositions.

Keywords. Transformation, Formation, Holistic vision

Introduction

St. Chavara, with his prophetic and holistic vision could touch and transform the society, Church and community in a significant manner. Though, he parted us by 1871, his thoughts, actions and the rich legacy he bequeathed hang in the social life, human formation as well as spiritual formation. Despite the fact that we don't have much material or information regarding the formation style and functioning of the seminary, it is know that he felt the need for a radical change in the

old system *malpanate* – a tutoring mode by staying with the *Guru*. St. Chavara wanted definitive changes sensing the need of the hour. He looked for learned and holy priests for the Church. St. Chavara's vision on the formation and religious life, the researcher mainly drew from his circulars and his testament.¹

Self and Wholesome Formation. The word “self” is being used with all its varying meanings and implications today. The self, referred to here is the unique identity of a person as a subject with a natural unity of body and soul. This unity itself is an integration of physical, chemical, biological, psychic, intellectual, spiritual, and volitional properties. It is endowed with freedom, intelligence, moral power, and the power of transcendence. Hence it requires a continuous integration to maintain the essential unity of the self. The self is capable of growing and developing in many varied ways. Christian or religious formation makes use of this inherent power of the self to grow and change. All through the changes and growth, an identity - an unchangeable ground - is kept which we term as self. The self is rooted in the sinfulness of humanity and is open to many deformations². One's choices, beliefs, actions, thoughts, habits and ignorance all can distort and deform the self in destructive ways, hence the need for formation. Though St. Chavara was not a psychologist, he had a foresight into the nature of human self. This insight regarding the fundamental nature of the human person and the life of grace that nurtures the divine life was part of his life and faith. This vision led him to be a formator by pioneering new movements in the seminary formation.

Reservoir of Formative Energy. Every organism needs the energy to move, act, and accomplish. This energy for various actions is inbuilt in the human organism. All humans have a definitive amount of energy in the system. However it is directed and employed depending on their personality and worldview. Because our system can hold only a limited amount of energy, everyone is called upon to make use of this energy in the best possible manner for the self-realization. The given energy is channelized in a different manner based on the life purpose, sense of mission and values. Thus, people focus on the physical/material may manifest their life energy to achieve and acquire worldly comforts and pleasures. Psychological needs want and fulfilment arouses psychic energy in that direction. Psychoanalysis speaks of libidinal

¹ See *CWC* Vol. IV. *The Letters*, Trans. Leo Mary CMC, 1990.

² Bernard J. Tyrrell, *Christo Therapy*, 163.

energy which is sexual in nature as the source of human actions and motivations. A spiritual perception of life, sense of mission and purpose direct the energy through a different channel. People who are connected to their spiritual self can transcend their limited reservoir of energy because, spiritual world and its potentials are unlimited, but being an embodied spirit, still it experiences limitations. Our human energy is directed towards desired goals based on our perceived values, physical, psychological or spiritual, hence we are in need of spiritual goals and desires. St. Chavara cherished a reservoir of spiritual energy during his formative years and he was imparting the same to his candidates in formation.

St. Chavara always cherished personal and intimate feelings towards God, which he expressed in the word *appa* [Father] or *ente appa* [My Father]. His vision on formation is based on the *Abba* consciousness and the subsequent filial experience. Similar endearing words appear more than thirty times in his works³. In *Dyanasallapngal (Meditation Colloquies)* his religious mind is best expressed. His childlike innocence and natural bond to God are reflected there. Jesus and God are addressed as *ente appa*. It is the natural, simple and endearing way of addressing someone so close. St. Chavara preferred to use the everyday language of his mother tongue to refer and experience his relation to God. By using the word *ente appa* he is referring to the same *Abba* consciousness Jesus referred when addressed to the Father. Whenever he used it, he felt he is loved, accepted, chosen and belonged to the family of God. This has been the reference point of his Christian formation and religious formation. In fact, this *Abba* consciousness was the reservoir of his energy. Embracing God's love is not done with our heads but with our hearts.⁴ It is not mainly about understanding but instead about purely receiving. Perhaps one may spend a lot of time trying to figure out how God can love us and what that means. But, all we really need to know is that He does love. The ability to trust this profound truth unleashes a reservoir of energy and enthusiasm to proceed further in the process of becoming whole.

Identity and Wholeness in Formation. In an ideal whole, components are not only all there; they are in an arrangement of harmonious integration and balance. What we witness in the life of St. Chavara is this harmonious integration and balance. It is this legacy he has

³ See CSK Vol. III, *Atyalmika Krithikal*, ed. Z.M. Moozhoor, 1981.

⁴ Kelly Gerth, *You Are Already Amazing*, 12.

handed over to the formees, formators and to his new seminary, monastery and convent. The first man was a whole person. He was in perfect harmony with nature and was at ease with himself and in right fellowship with God. To be whole, one must be fully in relationship with the Transcendent and must be alive in mind, too. The Divine order for wholeness is spirit over mind and mind over body. Hence, spiritual practices enjoyed a special place in St. Chavara's life and formative journey.

Finding wholeness gives meaning and purpose in life. St. Chavara earned this sense from the early period of life. His holistic understanding of life has its roots in his sense of identity: Who am I? It is a perennial question that human tends to ask. This pertinent question is answered in the Bible that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. The vision of St. Chavara was embedded in the life of Jesus. Jesus knew His identity at the age of twelve. When He was missed and found in the temple, He responded to Mary and Joseph in a succinct way of expressing His identity. "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I should be in my Father's house?" (LK 2:49). Jesus refers here to His divine Son-ship and His need to be with his Heavenly Father. Every formation should start with this sense of identity and have to deepen this sense of one's true self by deepening prayer life. St. Chavara, having found his true self at an early stage of life, joined the seminary to nurture this identity. As the result, he could rightly feel his place later in the Trinitarian Family. His newly dawned sense of spiritual identity is well revealed in the motto he adopted, "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure" (Ps 16:5).

Systematic Training. The first indigenous congregation for men is coupled with the foundation of the first formally organized seminary in the Syro-Malabar Church of Kerala.⁵ Unlike the *malpanates*, the new seminary in Mannam conducts formal training program with more than one priests and this was found effective. Christian formation and religious formation helps one to consolidate beliefs, values, and moral certitudes as a standard for judgment and choices in any situation. In order to develop convictions and values, one needs to study in these areas sincerely. St. Chavara, who had a special affinity with Teresa of Avila, stuck to her counsel: "This is not for believing everyone, belief in only those whom you see modelling their lives on the life of Christ... believe in the teaching of the Holy mother church. You may

⁵ Saju Chakkalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, 36.

then be quite sure that you are on a very good road.”⁶ As the purpose of one’s life is to serve God and serve others the fundamental criterion of life shall not be anything else but the love of God and neighbour. Forming an interior locus of control guided by the intellect and desired by the choice of the will are an essential part of the formation. For this purpose, St. Chavara felt an urgent need of proper seminary formation.

Though the *malpanate* was not great in contrast to the modern seminary system, St. Chavara under the direction of holy and erudite Fr. Thomas Palackal made the best out of it in his formative years. St. Chavara as a young cleric realized that an uneducated priest is not only inefficient to do any pastoral work but maybe even detrimental to the salvation of souls.⁷ With his farsightedness, he could see the need of holy, educated and well-disciplined priests in the Church. In opening the seminary he himself designed the formation program. The new seminary system had its own facilities and a team of priests to teach and train them. The Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly was impressed by the new venture and instructed St. Chavara and his conferrers to start more of such seminaries attached to the newly found monasteries.⁸

St. Chavara was a visionary who could integrate and inculcate the context stressed in the Post Vatican period for education and formative endeavours. By promoting Sanskrit languages study among Christians and priests he was opening a portal for cultural as well as religious exchanges. In his innovations, he wanted to have the best of Indian culture and values to be imparted to the seminarians. This humble start-up mission fully bloomed when the seminary was shifted to Bengaluru and it became a centre of Indian spirituality and dialogue.

Wholeness by Life and Example. St. Chavara was a real *guru* who trained candidates by preaching, teaching and by life example. As a genuine *guru*, he felt the need of casting away the darkness of ignorance from his subjects as is perceived in Indian spiritual traditions. One of his priorities in developing publishing houses was to bring out more classical spiritual books to nourish spiritually the religious candidates. He employed holistically different paths to help seminarians in spiritual realization. He was not imparting bookish knowledge but experiential knowledge. As a *Karma yogi*, he imparted the importance of doing

⁶ Theresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 21.

⁷ Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 6.

⁸ Mathew Kaniampampil, “Blessed Chavara and His Unique Contributions to the Church in India,” 4.

one's duty without the desire for the fruits of actions. He was making his own life as a book to the religious candidates. Above all, in his formative vision the path of love and devotion – *bhakti marga*, enjoys a prominent place. Belief in a personal God and surrender to this loving God as well as manifesting that love in surrender through continuous devotional practices are very much part of *bhakti marga*. This kind of *bhakti marga* he stressed in the seminary and religious life. The shift in focus of seminary formation instructed the seminarians to practice all virtues like the simplicity of life, obedience, accountability and transparency and genuine concern for the poor. He also promoted devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and Holy Family.

Fr. Leopold, in his short biography on St. Chavara, writes- Fr. Prior fulfilled his priestly and religious duties more by good conduct and virtuous practices than by words and deeds. All are impressed by his deep humility, unparalleled charity, and spirit of submission to authority. Therefore, they not only respect and love him but also unquestioningly trust his words.⁹ In his testament to his fellow religious, he instructs them to render as much help as possible to the family of Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal, who appropriated the monastery's property illegally and who also filed a criminal case against St. Chavara.

He was an authentic shepherd after the model of Jesus, committed to the care of sheep, proving that love dispels all fear. In addition, in his spiritual writing, he highlighted the possible pitfalls in priestly and religious life. It is his brotherly concern for the well-being of all whom he was in charge that is emerging here. The Creator has blessed everyone to attain the final goal of life *Moksha* – liberation from pain and misery and attainment of bliss through means of *Bhakti Marga*, *Karma Marga*, and *Jnana Marga*. The genius of St. Chavara was that he could synthesize all these three in his life like many *Rishis* [saints]. The lotus in the Indian tradition is a beautiful symbol of the core of goodness in every human being. Each of us has a latent capacity to reach and grow with strength and beauty. St. Chavara envisioned a formation which has the potential for transformation in every one, going beyond the genes and environment which we inherit.

Human Formation for Wholeness. The letters St. Chavara wrote to the religious community of sisters integrated all aspects of committed religious life. The letters are a vivid portrayal of his vision of life

⁹ Leopold Becarro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 12.

in the new congregation.¹⁰ As a *karma-yogi*, he acquired the habit of *nishkamakarma*- selfless service. He encouraged his subjects to integrate prayer and work harmoniously without losing one for the other. To be whole, one has to embrace the present moment and needs to be present here fully. We can experience God because He is the “I Am Who I Am” (Exodus 3: 14). Formation is a journey towards wholeness, accepting, and acknowledging God’s will always and everywhere like St. Chavara.

St. Chavara gratefully acknowledges that the Congregation was established, nurtured and made to grow by God’s gracious acts. The Congregation shall bear fruit therefore through the personal virtues of the members. “The strength of the monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls but in the religious zeal and the virtues of their inmates.”¹¹ He emphasizes the strength of their virtues that really matters, not the size of structures or the strength of numbers. He envisions here authentic virtuous people who can reflect wholeness. To St. Chavara, everything is related to one’s holiness. He does not see holiness as a separate entity apart from everyday life.

In a letter he wrote to the Vicar of Mannanam monastery, Kuriakose Porukara he reminds that the superior of a community is called to be a partner with God in tending his sheep. He continues, the community does not exist for the sake of superior, but he exists for their sake. He must love them as his own children. He must be concerned about meeting their spiritual and body needs. Let not any religious be sad not even for a moment. God is not pleased with the service rendered in sadness.¹²

The most critical area in a formation is the area of personality integration. Personality integration is the blending of our human faculties and gifts into a harmonious whole. It is a harmonization of our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual gifts. These gifts have to be allowed to grow and develop to its full potential. Psychologist Philomena Agudo says that the capacity to cooperate with grace is depend upon the individual’s personality integration. Integration takes place when both behaviour and attitudes are purely motivated by love for God and service for his people.

¹⁰ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 349.

¹¹ CWC IV, *Letters*: 65, 94, 95.

¹² Valerian Plathottam *Malankara Sabha Matavintee Oru Veera Santhanam*, 373-374.

Wholeness and Maturity. For an authentic and whole life, being, having, and doing are to be fully integrated into the right proportion. It is like a triangle where each side supports the others.¹³ Being-ness is the experience of being totally present to oneself and at rest within oneself. Having-ness is the ability to allow and accept things and people in our lives and developing good relationships. Doing is movement, an activity that lets the creative energy flow from you to others and from others to you. Values, desire, ideals, dreams, temptations, all shall be integrated to produce a harmonious whole personality. Life is a gift from God and what you make out of this life- your wholeness, by the expanded consciousness and proper integration- become your gift to God. To make one whole and thus make a supreme gift to God we are given certain faculties namely intellect, freedom, and will that are unique human giftedness.

The freedom and will of human beings are finite, not that of a creator. Psychology and other social sciences have a role in formation that they can heal and restore these faculties. They can help them to trace out problems buried often in the unconscious and be a help to deal with them without defences. Formation period stresses on these faculties and their optimum use in earlier days. These faculties cannot be overlooked in favour of the self-fulfilment theories. By fully exercising these faculties' human beings make their life meaningful and whole. The ability to transcend one and to strive for a higher goal or a phenomenon larger than oneself is a necessity for human beings for self-realization and wholeness.¹⁴ This self-transcendence is achieved by the faculties of intellect, freedom and will. The power of transcendence is translated in everyday life in the form of detachment. It is this kind of detachment that is witnessed in St. Chavara's life. A person has both actuality and potentiality. He can be more than what he is at present and, hence, the significance of formation.

St. Chavara and Accompaniment. In any form of life, formation is necessary, and each individual engages in the process of formation knowingly or unknowingly. A person achieves life goals gradually and progressively. To become good priests and religious, one needs to develop a lifestyle and values in a time-bound and goal-oriented manner. In the process of this becoming, accompaniment and guidance are imperative. Formation calls for deeper understanding of the

¹³ Benedict Groeschel, *Stumbling Blocks and Stepping-Stones*, 7.

¹⁴ Mathew Maniampra, *Spiritual Vision to Wholeness*, 26.

adolescent characteristics, both constructive and destructive. An adept formator would be able to accompany the young formee through this sphere of life without endangering their identity as a called one with all the humanness within them. St. Chavara founded modern seminary system for this kind of proper accompaniment. Every accompaniment has to be interactive, and it has to be reciprocal. It is by entering into a reciprocal interaction with the formee, the formator would travel to the inner self of the formee. St. Chavara, being a good accompanier, encouraged a gradual and progressive development towards wholeness in his seminarians and candidates.

St. Chavara as rector (*malpan*) was a constant accompanier. In the Gospel, we see how Jesus accompanied the disciples by tutoring, correcting, and affirming them as and when it is required. Jesus followed them closely in their inward journey and spent time exclusively with them manifesting his interest and concern for them. St. Chavara could imbibe a deep sense of belongingness as the seminary was more like a family. To grow responsibly and mature humans need a sense of belongings and a sense of security. It is more the paternal mind than the legalistic mind that helps people in transformation. St. Chavara had realized this simple psychology by his experience and wisdom. St. Chavara saw that there shall be a conducive environment for spiritual growth. Having had no self-fulfilment theories and personality development theories in vogue at the time he paid attention to cultivate virtues like love, compassion, sacrifice, service, simplicity, forgiveness, and generosity.

Training for Meaningful Priesthood. St. Chavara, a man of God, out of love for his Church and society, pioneered new movements with courage and insights and thus, far-reaching changes effected in his contemporary time. The positive and affirmative action he took is still yielding results touching generations after him. He was a major force in liberating the narrow-bound cultic priesthood and its training to a more inclusive one by founding seminaries and monasteries for a new priesthood in the changing society. He wanted to elevate Christianity from its cultural and institutional constraints so that it may be more universal.¹⁵ As an ordained priest of the Catholic Church, he was carrying the eternity in his soul and was concerned about the spiritual well being of the faithful concerned. As a man of holistic vision, he could not bind himself in the narrow confinements of the inherited understanding of

¹⁵ Debashis Chatterjee, "Forward" to *The Life and Legacy of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, iii.

human persons. Being also concerned with the 'here and now' of the people entrusted to his care, he felt the need for a new generation of priests for which he committed himself by opening new seminaries. He wanted to impart a whole formation without losing the spiritual essence. Thus the style and content of the seminaries he conducted naturally reflected his holistic vision. He was giving a new sense of direction to Church and society by founding modern seminaries of priestly formation.

As society is becoming increasingly complex and already now living in the global market and global village, formation needs new direction and paradigm shifts. What we need is creative minds, flexibility and courage for new shifts and emphasis in the absence of which seminaries and formation houses become inadequate and outdated to produce good priests and religious.

Conclusion

Formation is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitude of the Son in the hearts of young men and women (*VC* 66). The location, the environment and the lifestyle of the candidates shall reflect the reality of the people around. In Mannanam seminary, he saw that they follow a simple life reflecting the reality of the lives of people around. The formative spirituality he envisioned was centred on the gospel way of life reflecting the mind and heart of Christ. Greater emphasis was placed on silence, solitude, and contemplation in order to promote greater interiorisation. St. Chavara was keen about the process of self-transformation through a holistic integration of spiritual, human, pastoral and intellectual dimensions of priestly and religious life.

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