

**MONUMENT OF DIVINE MERCY**  
**Biography of the Servant of God**

**Fr Augustine John Ukken**

**(1880—1956)**

By

**Paul Pulikkan**

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# INTRODUCTION

The Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken was a great son of the Archdiocese of Trichur. He was a noble priest, an able administrator, a visionary and a social reformer. He is the founder of the Congregation of Sisters of Charity. Above all, he was a man of God, one who experienced the divine presence every day.

Fr John's legacy is to be transmitted faithfully to the next generation. What is this legacy? Our first answer would be his humanitarian service, his yeomen service for the orphans and for the poor agricultural labourers who were exploited in those times. It is true. At the same time, he was not a social reformer in the ordinary sense. In his reform initiatives, he was always moved by an extraordinary zeal for God's will and his design.

Fr John reflected on God, the great merciful and loving Father. Without reserve, he acknowledged the depth of divine mercy that he experienced in his life. His spiritual diary abounds in his thankful reflections on the ever protecting hand of God. This ideal of mercy he handed over to his generation. That was the virtue of charity, something that far excels the human sense of doing good to others. Christian charity is a noble ideal where you do good to others because of your dedication to the ever loving God. And that is why Fr John sincerely taught the sisters: "To love is your duty; let no one surpass you in loving".

His love sought great length and breadth. He was a champion of ecumenism. Far ahead of the II Vatican Council, he lived the lessons of practical ecumenism. He loved all people, irrespective of caste and creed. He pleaded for the cause of those who were denied justice and equality.

The story of this noble son of the Church must be known throughout the world. So far we did not have a biography in English on the life and message of the Servant of God. Fr Paul Pulikkan's biography "Monument of Divine Mercy" fills this void. I congratulate Fr Paul for having written this brief and yet illuminating biography, using the personal diary of the Servant of God and the Conferences that he gave to sisters.

Let us pray that Fr Augustine John Ukken would be soon worthy of the veneration of the altar.

Mar Andrews Thazhath  
Archbishop of Trichur

May 1, 2012  
Trichur



# A WORD OF APPRECIATION

The legacy of Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken (1880 – 1956) is truly a treasure given to the Universal Church. The Servant of God lived among us not long ago, and showed us how to be saint here today. In all his struggles, Fr John was convinced that he was led by the Providence of God. He was ordained priest in 1907. The Blessed Sacrament and Crucifix were his great passion and strength during his priestly life. A lover always works better when the beloved is with him. Fr John knew that a priest was a being in soft clay and that he has to keep pure, the treasure of God's love implanted in him. And so, he was full of love of God and of fellow human beings. His only wish was to become another Christ. Though he was very successful as a priest and was a personality of high calibre, he forged ahead with total determination and zeal to make the life of the poor a better one. That is why he moved into the most backward conditions of Chowannur, renouncing the high positions and seats of security with such an ease, which others would have found as impossible. He responded to the current social realities around his world with such social sensitivity and this led him to found the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity just 12 years before his death. This was to continue Christ's vision and mission especially among the poor, marginalized and abandoned. He never turned away those who approached him seeking food, shelter, clothing or even money. For the people of Chowannur he was divinity in human form. His loving heart touched many and he is remembered with gratitude and affection even now by many. It is just a matter of time before he would be acknowledged by the Church as saint.

**Monument of Divine Mercy** –a Biography of Fr. Augustine John Ukken in English- is an accomplishment fulfilled by Rev. Dr. Paul Pulikkan, the Postulator of the Diocesan Phase of the Cause of Beatification of Fr. Augustine John Ukken, the Founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity (CSC)-Thrissur in 1944. We, the CSC Sisters sincerely appreciate his goodwill and congratulate Fr Pulikkan for undertaking the task, despite a very busy schedule. I am sure *Monument of Divine Mercy* will be of tremendous help to promote the Cause especially outside Kerala. I wish the readers to be inspired by this book and enjoy a deep God-experience. I hope the words of Fr. Augustine John Ukken, **‘I am a monument erected on the compassionate love of Jesus’** will strengthen us and fill us with love of God and of fellow human beings.

**Sr Dr Asha**  
Superior General CSC

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Fr Augustine John Ukken, a great model of sanctity and commitment towards God and fellow human beings, left us more than half a century ago. The fame of his holiness continues to spread far and wide. This priest from the Archdiocese of Trichur led an exemplary life, with a harmonious blending of spirituality and active apostolate.

Throughout his life, Fr Augustine John Ukken tried to grow and live in the love of God. John resolved that he would not seek any human love and that he will be fully committed to the love of God. If we love God, there will be a faithful response from our part, he firmly believed. Fr Augustine John's personal holiness, love for the church, his pastoral ministry, founding of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity (CSC), and an engaging social apostolate were all clear examples of such a response. His whole life has been summarized by his oft-quoted motto: "To love is your duty; let no one surpass you in loving".

This is a modest attempt to present a biographical sketch of Fr Augustine John, together with the spiritual vision that he gave to the church and society of his day. There have been several books in Malayalam on Fr Augustine John Ukken but none in English. The main source of this work has been his personal diary. We have also referred to some of the *Conferences* he gave to Rev. Sisters as well as some written testimonies and other sources.

I thank Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath who gave ready encouragement throughout the Archdiocesan phase of

the Cause of Beatification of Fr Augustine John Ukken which was concluded on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012. I also thank him for his enlightening introduction for this book. I thank Rev. Mother Asha, the Superior General of the CSC who showed a real interest in the writing of this book and offered steady support. I also thank former Superior General Mother Sila who first told me about the need of an English biography and gave valuable suggestions. I also thank Srs Keerthana, Evulalia and Maria Litty the former and present Superiors of the Atmadarshan Prayer house, the office of the Cause of Beatification during the Diocesan phase. I express my gratitude to Sr Lawrance CSC whose biography on the Servant of God *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi* has helped me in the writing of this book. I thank Dr. Davees C.J. of St Thomas College, Trichur for his patient reading of the draft and suggesting several improvements in style and content. I thank also Fr Shiju Chiriyankandath who gave help with regard to the study of archival papers in Rome. May I thank my colleagues at the St Mary's Minor Seminary, Madonna Nagar, Trichur. My sincere gratitude is due to all those who in some way or other helped me to write this biography on the Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken.

**Fr Paul Pulikkan**

May 15, 2012

## Chapter I

# CALL TO GREATER CHARITY

*Lord, you yourself teach me that I may exercise these virtues namely fortitude, zeal, prudence and discretion. LMMR I, 174 (tran.) 17.12.1903.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

The Servant of God Augustine John Ukken (1880-1956), a pioneer of the apostolate of charity in Central Kerala in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a diocesan priest belonging to the Vicariate Apostolic (later diocese and archdiocese) of Trichur. He is the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity in the diocese of Trichur. More than half a century has passed since the death of this illustrious son of the Church. Already in his lifetime, the holiness of this noble priest had been attested by many, both Christians and non Christians. This is a short biographical study on the life and work of Fr Augustine John Ukken.

The name Ukken in Malayalam means *powerful* or *forceful*.<sup>2</sup> Alengad, in the northern part of the erstwhile Travancore Kingdom, had been a settlement of the St Thomas Christians from a very early time. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *Mathilakathu* family, rich and aristocratic, and loyal to the Church, lived in this place. In the official records, it is stated that this family originated from the Mahadevarpattanam, (an old name of Cranganore), the capital of the Chera dynasty in the first millennium and the centre of St Thomas Christians till 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that Ukken is the offshoot of Mathilakathu family.

Neither Mathilakathu nor Ukken families reside any longer in Alengadu. The invading army of Tippu Sultan plundered the lands of Alengadu and Paravoor in central Kerala in the years 1790-1792, destroying many churches and church properties. The Christian population was scattered from the traditionally strong Christian areas of central Kerala. It is said that many left for Thathampally in the south and some others

went to Edakulam in the North. Among those who settled in Edakulam in the erstwhile Kingdom of Cochin, Mr. Anthappan of the Vadakoot branch of Ukken family came to live in the village of Punnamparambu, suburb of Edakulam. Even today, the predominant family in Edakulam is Ukken.

## **The Syro Malabar Church at the time of Fr John**

The split in the Church of St Thomas Syrian Christians after the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653 was the result of the revolt of the Syrian Christians against the Portuguese intervention in the affairs of the Church. Since their arrival at the Malabar Coast in 1498, an extreme latinization had been promoted by the Portuguese, with whom the native Christians had dealt with in high respect in the beginning. In the aftermath of the split, Rome sent Carmelite missionaries in 1600.

The Catholic St Thomas Christians were now divided under the Portuguese Padroado and the Propaganda administration. The struggle for indigenous bishops who would uphold the East Syrian heritage was continued by the St Thomas Christians in the 18-19 centuries. The Padroado rule among the St Thomas Christians came to an end, as the Metropolitan see of Cranganore under Portuguese was suppressed in 1886. On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1887, Pope Leo XIII established the Apostolic Vicariates of Trichur and Kottayam by the bull "Quod jam Pridem". The Catholic St Thomas Christians were now called as Syro Malabar Church. The same Pope reorganized in 1896 the existing two Apostolic Vicariates into three, establishing new Apostolic Vicariates of Ernakulam and Changanacherry and retaining the existing Trichur to continue. In 1923, the Syro Malabar hierarchy was established by Pope Pius XI by the Decree "Romani Pontifices".

## Birth and Childhood

Anthappan's sister Acharunny was married to Chiramel family in Parappur, a village 14 kms northwest of Trichur. Later, Anthappan also came to Parappur and settled there, buying a plot of land which later came to be known as *Ukken parambu*. Anthappan married Annamma Chalackal from Thoyakkavu. A child was born to these happily wed couples – and he was named John. But to everybody's deep grief, the child died after 2 years.

Parappur is also an ancient parish in the archdiocese of Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala. This village borders on the Mulloor lake on one side and the little river Kadamthodu on the other, with surrounding paddy fields, coconut trees and areca nut plantations etc. The parish has given birth to bishops, many priests and nuns. The majority of the people are farmers.

Anthappan was a devout Christian. The local tradition has it that Anthappan was a good reciter of the Puthen Pana, a poetical rendering of the lamentation of the Blessed Mother on the death of Jesus, written by the German Missionary Jesuit priest Ernst Hanxleden, popularly called Arnos Padiri.<sup>3</sup>

Anthappan saw God's mercy shown to him when a second child was born on Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1880. According to family tradition, the child was baptized in the ancient parish church of Enammavu, which was also the parish church of his mother. Although the parents christened the child with the name John, they used to call him Augustine, because the name John might have evoked sad memories of their first child (However, officially he was called John and we have used this as his first name).

John was their beloved child and they looked after him as the apple of the eye. However, he could not enjoy maternal love for long as Annamma died when he was just two and half years old. Anthappan did his best to bring up the child, not



allowing his son to feel the absence of his mother and the privations of any sort.<sup>4</sup> Little John learned from his family the virtues of love, generosity, kindness and fear of God, utter trust in Him and the lessons of hard work. The child grew up in age and knowledge, in good standing before God and people. But tragedy struck the family again – Anthappan contracted cholera and was soon on his deathbed in 1886, when little John was just 6 years old. He gave his last advice to John, together with the documents of the land which he had owned and the keys of the money box. The benevolent father went for his heavenly reward soon afterwards.

At six, having lost both his parents, John felt the pains of loneliness and orphanhood, although he was to get sympathy from kith and kin. But indeed this was providential for John to understand the all embracing care of God the Father. He firmly believed that the good God never abandoned his faithful children. *For those who loved God, He worked everything into good* (Rom. 8:28).

## **Turning Point**

John's life, guided by God Almighty, but had made an abrupt turn. He offered himself to Jesus and his mother, loving them with the same love he had experienced for his parents. The bitter experiences of childhood helped him to trust in God ever more deeply. He believed fully in the divine providence of God and His great designs, preparing everything unto good for those who believe in him (Rom. 8, 28). This was indeed a school of training programmed by God for John as he was to become later the father of orphans, of those who were abandoned and rejected by their families and relatives. It was this early experience that helped him to write in his spiritual diary: "Today it seemed to me to hear Jesus telling to me: I will not leave you

helpless and orphans: For I am here to intercede for you and, turning to His mother, He cries out to her, *Ecce, mater, filius tuus*. Then I offered myself to my mother entirely.”<sup>5</sup>

We shall see that the special regard to orphans constituted also part of the charism of the Congregation which he later founded. The sense of being protected and guided by God during his orphanhood was always present in the spirituality of Fr Ukken. He writes again: “Contemplation on the love of God gave me great consolation with tears, when I recollected on the personal gifts of my infancy and boyhood when my parents abandoned me according to this of David, “*pater et mater dereliquerunt me, tu autem suscepisti (sic) me*” [cf. Ps. 27:10 - Father and mother abandoned me, but you however protected me - sic]. It seemed to me that God raised me above my station and deserts..”<sup>6</sup> Later on the occasion of his Silver Jubilee of the priestly ordination, he would recall this again: “When in tender years my parents dying, I was stranded on the wide world, *pater et mater dereliquerunt me, tu autem suscepisti (sic) me*, my education, entry into seminary and pleasant life there, priesthood and so many countable posts in the diocese, even held in honour now, Jubilee celebrations..”<sup>7</sup> We can see that in the young John, the virtue of utter trust in the providence of God and in His fatherhood and motherhood is clearly visible. The invisible hand of God guided him amidst all the trials of this world. The sense of being an orphan in the world and the experience of the fathership of God are frequent themes in his diary.<sup>8</sup> He asked for the intercession of his heavenly Mother: “Mother, forget me not, I am an orphan, Oh forget me not”.<sup>9</sup>

The care of little John was undertaken by Acharunny, his aunt, sister of Anthappan. She belonged to Chiramel family. Acharunny sent John to the primary school up to fourth

standard. John's schooling stopped with the fourth standard. The School register noted that John quit studies due to family responsibilities.

He had to break his studies and to help out in the shepherding of the cattle and the various household chores and do manual labour. Slowly, the orphaned John began to experience the bitterness of growing up in an environment of neglect and poverty. While he was still a child, he went for the marriage celebration of a relative, without wearing proper attire but just a little loin cloth. He was asked to leave the celebration, and this incident left a deep scar in his memory. This event has been recounted by himself to the sisters. However, these painful memories moulded the saint in him and he harboured no ill will towards the aunt. He later wrote: "I shall feel happy when I have to serve and if I am left in the background then shall know that I am becoming similar to my master. I shall not back when I have to suffer in any way, how much it costs me or how miserable I am; but how I am becoming similar to my most sweet master and mother".<sup>10</sup> Later, while being a seminarian, John could say that "I am simply an effect of divine mercy, I am saved by an all powerful effort of divine mercy".<sup>11</sup> In course of time, the family members of John rectified their past behavior; they would solemnly celebrate his First Mass at Parappur in 1907.

Providence was leading John through unknown ways. Fr Ouseph Kuttikatt, the parish priest of Parappur, was struck by the deep dedication of John to the spiritual life, his earnestness for study and his sense of obedience and sacrifice. He invited him to stay at the priest's residence and attend the upper primary school. John readily agreed. Fr Kuttikatt recommended him to the preparatory priestly training in Trichur. The authorities there

were touched by John's deep fervour for spiritual life and his nobility of character and intellectual acumen. The seminary authorities allowed him to complete his school education. He won the appreciation of both his teachers and classmates.

John wanted to respond to the call of God to priesthood. The environment in the seminary helped him to grow in the practice of virtues and other qualities, spiritual, moral and intellectual that would befit him to priesthood. He took a firm decision to become a priest: thus, he would quench the thirst of Jesus for human souls.

His stay in the Minor Seminary was an opportune time for fostering the devotion to the Holy Eucharist, Sacred Heart and to Our Lady. Msgr. John Menachery, the new Vicar Apostolic of Trichur, decided to send John to Kandy in Sri Lanka for studies to priesthood. Usually the priestly candidates were sent to Puthenpally seminary in central Kerala and only exceptionally talented seminarians were sent to Kandy. John entered the Papal Seminary at Kandy on 17.4.1898.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> The personal diaries of Fr Augustine John Ukken, written in English (partly also in Latin) have been preserved in the Archives of Maria Bhavan CSC Generalate, Kolazhy. They consist of 4 parts. 1. *Lights from Meditations, Monthly Recollections* Vol I (reflection in the Year 1902-1903). 2. *Resolutions*, Vol. I, December 11-20, 1903 3. *Lights from Meditations, Monthly Recollections* Vol II – 16.7.1904 – Christmas 1904 4. *Resolutions*, Vol. II, 1905-1932. The first three were written while John was still a seminarian. The fourth one is predominantly Fr John's resolutions in his priestly life.
- <sup>2</sup> Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi* - Malayalam – translated as "the Active Mystic Beyond Time", Mariabhavan Generalate: Kolazhi, Trichur, 1994, pp. 2-4. We have also quoted from Fr John's

*Conferences* with the sisters, kept in the archives of Mariabhavan Generalate. One can find some sayings in Sr. Trifonia (ed.), *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, ('From the Treasure Box of Father's Sayings'), Maria Bhavan Generalate: Kolazhy, Trichur, 2001. These are the sayings collected from the notebooks of Srs. Pauline, Rosily, Serpheena, Florence CSC who attended the conferences. We have also used the notebooks of Sr. Alberta CSC, Sr. Rosily CSC, Sr. Corthuna CSC, Sr. Seraphina CSC.

<sup>3</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi* p.5

<sup>4</sup> According to Msgr. Thomas Moothedan, Anthappan later married a woman from the parish of Kandassamkadavu, and had a son from her. Msgr. Thomas Moothedan, *Upavi Sahodarikalude sabhayum Sthapakanum* (The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity and the Founder), Trichur, 1977, p. 6. However, no evidence has been found elsewhere to support this view.

<sup>5</sup> *LMMR* I, 50, 21.5.1903.

<sup>6</sup> *Resolutions* Vol. II, 30, Annual retreat 1922; PS 27,10.

<sup>7</sup> *Resolutions* Vol. II, 61, 19.12.1932.

<sup>8</sup> *LMMR* II 16, 30.7.1904.

<sup>9</sup> *LMMR* I 51, 24.5.1903.

<sup>10</sup> *LMMR* II 51, 27.9.1904.

<sup>11</sup> *LMMR* I, 153, 1.12.1903.



## Chapter 2

# A MONUMENT OF GOD'S MERCY

*Let Jesus be in your action, place Jesus always before you and look deep into him; let him be, as really is, your model!, LMMR I, 182 (tran.) 20.12.1903.*

The Kandy Seminary, known as the Leonianum, was established in 1893 by the Jesuits<sup>1</sup> for the students of India and Ceylon. The Seminary professors were predominantly Belgian Jesuits.

An important source to comprehend the spiritual depths of John is his spiritual diary. There are references of 12 years in this personal diary. However, the entries during the seminary life (1902- 1907) far surpass the priesthood days. We do not have entries from 1898-1902. It is possible that some parts of the personal diary have been lost. These personal reflections show the thorough Jesuit training in which Bro. John was formed. Jesuit spiritual methods, above all the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, constituted the backbone of the priestly formation he received at Kandy. The methods of meditation and prayer, the saints he emulated, the mottoes he embraced – all show a deep Jesuit overarching influence on the views of John. The personal jottings in these diaries were made by John for the spiritual progress of his personal life and for a periodical evaluation of the ideals that he kept in his priesthood. He fervently prayed: “As you have given me to write down these, grant me your most efficacious grace to fulfil them, O My loving Father...”<sup>2</sup> As such, these personal notes are not rendered in perfect grammar and order. This is especially true in the Latin writings of the diary; one may also note that while he wrote this diary, he was still a seminarian.

From the very first day of his formation, John surrendered himself to God’s hands. “I thank him and ask him for the grace for walking in the “Novitiate of Life”.<sup>3</sup> He stated: “The end of my existence is to know and love God”.<sup>4</sup> He was convinced: “To praise God, to revere Him, to serve Him and thus to save my soul is my end”.<sup>5</sup> In this direction, he could explain all that happened in his life. If something positive happened John would



say, “this is the work of God”. On the other hand, if something disagreeable took place, he would write in his diary, this God willed in order to sanctify him, and to render glory to God.<sup>6</sup>

His thirst was to form himself in the pattern of the Good Shepherd, to be a priest after Jesus’ own heart. He wrote: “Jesus proposes His meek Heart to our imitation; ...”.<sup>7</sup> “My only resolution is to become *“alter Christus”*.”<sup>8</sup> He further wrote: “always let God be in your intention, for we are made to praise and love God, therefore we should have him in intention”.<sup>9</sup> He further prayed to Mary that he be made like her Son. The Young seminarian prayed: “From the depth of my heart, I give you thanks Lord, for my vocation and again I say I am not worthy, but strengthen me and give me perseverance”.<sup>10</sup>

John was beadle (leader) in the seminary - we do not know whether of his batch or of the whole seminary. He told himself that being beadle was no reason to neglect his spiritual duties, which could ‘prevent him being a saint’ – and seminary studies. He ought to combine ‘active life with contemplation’.<sup>11</sup> John tried to be a priest filled with the love of God and love of human beings. He stated in his diary on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1903 that “Jesus requires from His vicar not riches, not learning, but love”.<sup>12</sup> To be trained and moulded as a priest of Christ, John submitted himself to all the hardships of training. He never wasted a minute but used all opportunities for human as well as spiritual formation. In these endeavours, he always sought the intercession of Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>13</sup>

John was successful in his seminary life, especially in his studies. He won the appreciation of his professors as well as classmates. Among the seminary professors, Fr Groshen and Fr Duppo had a great influence on his life. He wanted to prepare himself as Jesus did for the ministry. Reflecting on the thirty

years of preparation which Jesus made before his public ministry, he wrote in his diary: "Jesus did not preach; wrought no miracle; yet He sanctified those years! Employed very well those years: How was it? Mary my dearest mother, you were always with your beloved Son, teach me to spend my remaining 4 years well".<sup>14</sup> "So my soul, well understand the time well spent in the service of God, for glorifying Him, is not a loss for your studies. He is the fountain of science, from Him flows every knowledge".<sup>15</sup>

John prepared himself like Mary with prayer and sacrifices to receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> "The Holy Spirit appeared in the form of fire to illuminate and kindle the apostles, who in their turn may do the same. Come and illuminate me and dispel darkness and warm my tepid heart. As tongues, [he came - sic] to enable them to speak and teach. Oh give me also to speak correctly and as I ought, spiritually".<sup>17</sup> John gave himself earnestly to the study of English, Latin and French. He understood the extraordinary role of English in his future life.<sup>18</sup> As the purpose of his study, he wrote the following:.. "to sanctify myself and direct others; to lead many to the knowledge of Jesus; so grant the light to my intellect, my God and creator! Make my memory capacious and retentive to hoard up many things, move my will and heart efficaciously to put in practice all that [I] know".<sup>19</sup> He very well knew that by our natural strength and light, we cannot attain the sublime truths of God. Thus, in his theology studies, 'he would pray to the Father of lights rather than rely on his intellectual power'.<sup>20</sup>

John received cassock on Dec. 22, 1900. With great devotion and sense of commitment, he spent his years of formation. Setting his gaze on Mother Mary, and following her example, John observed: "On the presentation of Jesus, Mary

pleased God very much, perhaps the most: (a) for she submitted herself to the law of purification. (b) She offered such a precious gift! (c) Delivered her son to bitter torments (d) with so great a resignation..”!<sup>21</sup> The life of the seminarians, according to John, is like that of Mary among the apostles. “She prayed and taught others to pray: Oh mother, pray your Holy Spouse to dawn upon all the “ordinandi” and clothe us with virtue proportioned to our high obligations”.<sup>22</sup>

Bro. John grew in personal relationship with Jesus. “Our Lord in the Holy Communion told me, “*beatus homo qui amicum fidelem invenerit*” [*blessed is the man who shall find a faithful friend- sic*] and told me all carnal and earthly friendships shall not last, they will abandon, disappoint, will be displeased. So to choose him, him alone and when others make me sad by their desertion, remain with him in B. sacrament”.<sup>23</sup> Throughout his seminary years what he wished was this: “As I live, I wish to be like you, with you”.<sup>24</sup>

## **Devotion to Eucharist**

Devotion to the Eucharistic Lord was indelibly imprinted in the mind of John. John wrote that one has to be responsive to Jesus’ love in the Eucharist by constant visits and by a worthy reception of the Sacrament. To be insensitive of this Eucharistic presence was considered as a sign of ingratitude. The spiritual communion was esteemed by him as the most precious treasure in his life.<sup>25</sup> John wanted to be fully immersed in the Eucharistic presence, like the one looking at the sun cannot see anything below.<sup>26</sup> He particularly wanted that the central event of each day should be the reception of the holy Eucharist. Later, he would spend long hours in silent meditation before the Eucharist, which had been quite edifying to his fellow priests.<sup>27</sup> He was determined that each day should be started with Holy

Mass. He believed that by receiving the Eucharist, the human person gets reconciled with God.

He saw the Eucharist as a great banquet. As he believed that disrespect and desecration of the Eucharist takes place during the night, he wanted to spend long hours at night before the Eucharist.

## **Devotion to the Sacred Heart**

His spiritual diary bear witness to his ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart. "I implore you, either make me a good priest after the Heart of Jesus or reject me, make me die now".<sup>28</sup> His notes give ample testimonies that his heart experienced the mystical union with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "Nothing can be done to please Jesus than by kindling that fire. Let me first kindle it in myself by repeated ejaculations to that sweet heart and by self abnegations and in others by my example and my words. Let me work with you, dearest Jesus and kindle that fire".<sup>29</sup> We can later see that Fr John tried to spread the Sacred Heart devotion among other priests,<sup>30</sup> specially by joining with the eminent preacher Fr Matheo Crawly.<sup>31</sup>

John wrote:<sup>32</sup>

Why does He ask for my heart? (1) Otherwise to whom shall I give it? If I will not give you my sweet Saviour I will lose it! (2) Today Jesus asks from His children reparation. Behold this Heart.... at least you my child give me your heart: Oh adorable Heart, I give not only my heart, but me entirely to be consumed in the fire of Thy Sacred Heart. Would that I was master of all hearts to offer them all to you!

John dwelt long in the Sacred Heart and exhorted his faithful to do the same. To foster this devotion, he encouraged Eucharistic devotion in the month of June, celebrated the feast

of Sacred Heart, promoted First Friday Devotion etc. in his pastoral life.

Later, he always asked his sisters “not to grieve the Sacred Heart”.<sup>33</sup> He also resolved to observe a vigil of one hour adoration on the first Friday of every month. His spiritual diary ends in profound meditation of the Sacred Heart: “Manifestation of the Heart, seat of love was the great design of God... It is as the Ark of Noah; the strong and impregnable fortress, wherein soul that fear the world, distressed and disgusted with world can enter, like the dove into the ark. How many souls are forcibly drawn, specially warmed up, daily perfected. I must be one of them”.<sup>34</sup> In a deep mystical relationship, John calls Jesus as his Spouse.<sup>35</sup>

## **Marian devotion**

His spiritual diary, especially of the seminary years, is a clear testimonial to the filial devotion Fr John had towards the Holy Mother. He addressed her as *my dear mamma*. Since he lost his mother at a very early age, he adopted Mary as his own mother. On the meditation of Ave Maria, John wrote: “I am a sinner... clothe me and all men by sanctity, keep us under your cloak, refuge of sinners” ... “I will be so weak; mother you come, win my cause; I hope you will be my defender..”.<sup>36</sup> Through Mary, he wanted to come to Jesus and for this he fostered a staunch devotion to rosary. It is because of this strong devotion to Mary, that later he always asked his sisters (CSC) to grow in this devotion. In his pastoral life, he started Marian sodality in many parishes. He particularly wished that all the sisters must dedicate themselves totally to God as Mary did.

John made a special retreat on the golden jubilee of the apparition at Lourdes (1854-1904). His Marian devotion can be amply attested from his diary.

Extolling her role in the incarnational act, John writes: "Mary is not at all concerned about her virginity, her Son's safety etc. For she knows God has care for her; He as a good Father has greater desire to give than she to receive!"<sup>37</sup> With theological insight, John noted: "As soon as Mary was praised, she attributes every good to God as to the source: She says let my being be a hymn of praise to God, my intellect, will, heart etc. She was in the habit of referring everything to God".<sup>38</sup> On the intercessory role of Mary, John finds the following reasons. "a) As she obeyed the Father so exactly, He will not refuse her anything. b) As Mary refused nothing to Jesus, He will be too glad to pay his debt. c) As she kept her whole heart to her Spouse so jealously, Holy Ghost will think it an honour not to be outdone".<sup>39</sup>

On the devotion to rosary: John writes at the beginning of the month of October in 1903. "Holy church invites her children to say Rosary with more fervour and consecrate this month to the Mother of God. How I rejoice to give a second month entirely to the mother of God. I will recite my beads with attention and as time permits me, I'll say extra ones to relieve poor souls and to extend God's Kingdom".<sup>40</sup> He recalled that as in rosary, he has phases in his life, that of sorrow and joy.<sup>41</sup> 'how many graces, vocations..... through this Rosary-devotion!' .... 'promise and ask to bolt out from the face of the civilized world the error and impiety by holy Rosary, and ignorance and superstition to dispel from pagan world of India'.<sup>42</sup>

John asked for the protection of Our Lady in the last moments of his life. "I ... implore you to be by my side to soothe my aching brow and anxious heart when my last moment draws nigh and to render me all assistance, which a mother's ingenuity is capable of. Mother, do assist all of us sinners now and at the hour of our death".<sup>43</sup> In heaven, the angelic choir

will sing Magnificat. John imagines that while she left the world, she went to heaven singing Magnificat.<sup>44</sup> John had later exhorted that the religious communities must be dedicated to Mary.<sup>45</sup>

## **Devotion to St. Joseph**

We can also see in John a loyal devotion to St Joseph. “He stood proxy to God the Father and the Holy Ghost.... ask him to take you as his client. What a happiness to serve him. His glory should be great above, for honour of those with whom he is in relation; his power also, for Jesus cannot refuse him anything since Joseph refused him nothing”.<sup>46</sup> Further, John saw St Joseph as the “shadow of the Eternal father”. He also felt that there was a great similarity between the vocation of this great saint and that of himself.<sup>47</sup>

He further wrote: “St. Joseph has only an indirect part in the mystery of incarnation: He had to screen the Mother of God and protect and foster the child; he did that as became a shadow of the Eternal Father and Political Spouse of Mary and representative of the Holy Ghost”. He prayed to St Joseph to protect the Church in the midst of persecutions.<sup>48</sup> He also prayed that St Joseph, the patron of good death come to his aid at the last moment of his life.<sup>49</sup> John specially observed the devotion of the month of March, dedicated to St Joseph.

## **Guardian angels**

Fr. John Ukken’s spiritual heritage also is a pointer to the devotion to the Angels, especially Guardian Angels. “God’s goodness is indeed great to supply our weakness by his princes, by such bright and powerful creatures... I will respect my angel as a token of my thanksgiving...<sup>50</sup> God asks his angels “to watch over us and thus more than sufficiently supply our weakness”.<sup>51</sup> John’s humble and earnest prayer was: “my good

guardian angel show me the new way. I may walk in it safely under your guidance: inspire me what I should change and what I should undertake".<sup>52</sup>

## **The Final Year in the Seminary**

On Dec. 22, 1906, Bro. John received diaconate. He made the retreat between Dec. 14-23 under Fr Berrewaerts. Remembering that this was his final year, he resolved to pay attention to three things. 1) Humility 2) Chastity 3) Zeal.<sup>53</sup>

On Humility he told to himself that he should have more esteem for the superiors; regarding his equals, he should not prefer himself to them but rather should be their servant 'seeking to render them any service, not to exaggerate their defects, excuse intention and never to be harsh and think himself better'. He would specially meditate over the humiliations of Jesus, make weekly confessions, make also every month the preparation for death by making a monthly confession, receiving Holy Communion as viaticum. He would ask himself: "are you ready to die now; are you such as you would like to find yourself at the moment of death"?

On Chastity, his resolution was to keep a better modesty of eyes and restrain the imagination. Being cautious in his relationships was always an important concern for him. So he wrote that he shall not be 'too tender', and that he shall not seek affections. In order that the worldly affections do not conquer him, he readily submitted himself to the love of Jesus and his mother. This was also needed for being faithful to the vow he had made to God before the whole church on his (minor) orders.

On Zeal : "My zeal for God's glory should consist in my sanctification and in my studies". He would do his studies



cheerfully and conscientiously. Since he was the leader of the class, he should do that duty, 'loving and esteeming my brothers, saying a word to them, either to exhort them to better or to amend something'. John noted here that he wanted to promote unity among brothers; in fact, he hoped 'to get other priests later, so that more work for souls may be done by many'. As the leader of the class, he would consult with his superiors and obey them in all things; he would be very polite to those under him.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout that year, John made special efforts to deepen his dedication. He wrote: I should "try to be fervent and observe rules even the least, to prepare myself for the ordination, to spend the holy month of May well, and to edify all as an apostolate in the last months of my seminary life".<sup>55</sup> In June 1907, he again wrote: "these 6 months before my ordination should be principally to sanctification, then to pick up every bit of information useful for my ministry".<sup>56</sup> In August, we read again in his diary: "Obstacles to a strict observance of rules are: 1) pride which wishes to follow its own lights and counsels. 2) Sensuality and love of ease, which frets to the subject. 3) Inconstancy which seeks changes".<sup>57</sup>

He made a recollection on Sep. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1907 under Fr Dom SJ where he meditated on the virtues of Jesus. Jesus' laborious life, long hours of prayer, lasting even the whole night, fasting, the oppositions and calumnies, allegations – all these he faced with patience and prudence. We are also called to do the same.<sup>58</sup> In the recollection on Oct. 6<sup>th</sup>, Fr Dom told John to accept St. Paul as the perfect copy of the Divine Master, in his preaching and sufferings.<sup>59</sup> He always wanted to be a good priest and nothing else.<sup>60</sup>

John, whose parents had already gone from the earth and who could not count many as his dependable relatives, was disheartened, when he thought of his state of forsakenness, his poverty etc. while going back to Kerala. However, in his last recollection in the seminary, he won over this thought.

I was very much distressed by reason of my poverty and powerlessness to provide the necessary articles of clothes for travelling. But today I abandoned myself into the hands of my Heavenly Father. He took care of myself (so) long... now I prayed long and made many acts of contrition and shame, acts of hope and purposes for the future! My God show me what I should do to please you; lead me to the work you are preparing; henceforth I desire to die to cease to sin: If I live only for your glory, for the accomplishment of Thy Holy Will.<sup>61</sup>

## **Prayer for Ordination**

The retreat for priestly ordination was preached by Rev, Fr. Vanderda. John wrote fervently:

Knowing well my utter unworthiness and unpreparedness, with great confidence I entered the most sweet Heart of Jesus to be purged there in the purifying fires of divine love, to be illumined by the lights of the same Heart and to be strengthened by the strength of the same Heart and to share the glories of the Divine Heart; remained under the mantle of Mamma to be modelled by her upon the Sweet Heart of her Divine Son...Let your most Holy Will be accomplished in me my God and my Father and let me know your holy and loving designs over me in as much as I, knowing them, do my part faithfully that you may be... better glorified by me and in me, vile creature and ungrateful child.<sup>62</sup>

John wrote the following as the ideals upon which he would form his priestly life. 'Priest is another Christ, the fragrance of Christ'.<sup>63</sup>

The day John longed to see and for which he had been preparing for the last decade was born on 21<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1907. On

this day, John was ordained by Dr Clement Pagnani OSB, the bishop of Kandy. Among the Ordinandi were Fr Varghese Payyappilly who founded the Sisters of the Destitute (and who is now a Servant of God) and Fr John Kizhakoodan who founded Congregation of St Martha. On the next day, John celebrated his first Holy Mass, with great gratitude that filled his heart. He recalled how God had guided him, an orphan, to the sublime rank of priesthood. He thanked all those who had helped him to reach the altar. John received *cum Laude* for his philosophy and theology examinations.<sup>64</sup>

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Seminary was moved to Pune in India in 1955. Cf. Carlos de Melo, *The Papal Seminary of Kandy-Pune: A Hundred Years of History*, Pune: 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> *Resolutions II*, 7, 1906.
- <sup>3</sup> *LMMR I*, 35, 1903
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR I*, 63, 1903
- <sup>5</sup> *LMMR II*, 82, 9.12.1904.
- <sup>6</sup> *LMMR II*, 93, 9-17.12.1904.
- <sup>7</sup> *LMMR II*, 5, 1904.
- <sup>8</sup> *Resolutions I*, 16, 20.6.1904.
- <sup>9</sup> *LMMR I*, 181, 1904 (tran.) 20.12.1903.
- <sup>10</sup> *LMMR I*, 171 (tran) 16.12.1903.
- <sup>11</sup> *LMMR I*, 44, 7.5.1903.
- <sup>12</sup> *LMMR I*, 66, 29.6. 1903.
- <sup>13</sup> *LMMR I*, 48, 14.11.1903.
- <sup>14</sup> *LMMR I*, 65, 27.6.1903

- 15 *LMMR I*, 184, 1903.
- 16 *LMMR I*, 50, 22.5.1903
- 17 *LMMR I*, 149, 19.11.1903
- 18 *LMMR II*, 111, 25.6.1905
- 19 *Resolutions I*, 15, 11-20, 12. 1903.
- 20 *LMMR II*, 44, 5.9.1904.
- 21 *LMMR I*, 47, 13.5.1903
- 22 *LMMR II*, 72, 9.11.1904
- 23 *LMMR I*, 3, 1902.
- 24 *LMMR I*, 117, 22.9.1903.
- 25 *LMMR I*, 176, Dec. 1903.
- 26 *LMMR I*, 129, 9.10.1903.
- 27 *AJUT*, (Augustine John Ukken Testimony, Mariabhavan, Kolazhy),p. 9. Hereafter referred as *AJUT*.
- 28 *Resolutions II*, 19, 6.10.1907.
- 29 *LMMR I*, 55, 3.6.1903
- 30 He wanted to form a group of priests for a community life with a focus on the Devotion to the Sacred Heart. Retreat resolutions of 1925, *Resolutions II*, 37.
- 31 *AJUT*, p. 52. In 1939, Fr Ukken attended a special retreat led by Fr Crawly. Fr Paul Chazhoo, his Assistant for 3 years at Chowannur, testifies to the fact that Fr John had an ardent devotion towards Sacred Heart.
- 32 *LMMR I*, 63, 19.6.1903.
- 33 *AJUT*, p. 53. Sr. Lawrance, "Sthapaka pithavinte Jeevithadarsam" (the Life Vision of the Father Founder) (no pages), in Sr. Ruth (ed)., *Congregation of Sisters of Charity, Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, Nov 21, 1944-Nov.21, 1994, Trichur, no year.
- 34 *Resolutions II*, 62, 19.12.1932.

- 35 *Resolutions I*, 3, 11-20, 12.1903.
- 36 *LMMR I*, 23, 1903.
- 37 *LMMR I*, 151, 25.11.1903.
- 38 *LMMR I*, 152, 29.11.1903.
- 39 *LMMR I*, 53, 28.5.1903.
- 40 *LMMR I*, 123, Oct. 1903
- 41 *LMMR I*, 125, 3.10. 1903
- 42 *LMMR II*, 53, 2.10.1904.
- 43 *LMMR II*, 22, 7.8. 1904.
- 44 *LMMR I*, 91, 15.8.1903.
- 45 *Conferences* 1946.
- 46 *LMMR I*, 25, Ash Wednesday, 1903.
- 47 *LMMR I*, 27, 2.5.1903.
- 48 *LMMR I*, 41, 1903
- 49 *LMMR II*, 139, 28.10.1904.
- 50 *LMMR I*, 104, 1.9.1903
- 51 *LMMR I*, 124, 2.10.1903.
- 52 *LMMR I*, 35, 1903.
- 53 *Resolutions II*, 10-13, 14-23. 12.1906.
- 54 *LMMR I*, 11-12, 1903.
- 55 *Resolutions II*, 14, 28.4.1907.
- 56 *Resolutions II*, 15, 20.6.1907.
- 58 *Resolutions II*, 17, 1.9.1907
- 59 *Resolutions II*, 18, 6.10.1907
- 60 *Resolutions II*, 19, 6.10.1907
- 61 *Resolutions II*, 20, 3.11.1907.

<sup>62</sup> *Resolutions II*, 21, 13-22.12.1907.

<sup>63</sup> *Resolutions II*, 22, 13-22.12.1907.

<sup>64</sup> In the French/ Belgian tradition in those times, *Cum laude* was the one normally given for praiseworthy performance. *Magna cum laude* was rare and *Summa cum laude* was given exceptionally.

### Chapter 3

## IN THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD

*The priest in his apostolate is obliged to attract like the Lord, seeking out all, particularly sinners and the little ones. LMMR I, 172 (tran.), 17.12.1903.*

## Vision of priesthood

With great dreams to spend himself in the vineyard of the Lord, and after a decade long study in a foreign land, Fr John returned to Kerala after his ordination in 1907. Deep personal commitment to the Lord and the zeal to work for the people, especially the marginalized and the abandoned, guided him. The visionary in John had set out the ideals of priesthood already when he was a seminarian. These thoughts are spread across in his dairy.

John sincerely believed that his vocation came only from God. "You did not choose me but I chose you" [Jn 15:16]. 'God chose not because of my talents, but He taking pity attracted me'. John knew that there could be many delights in the church with high status and honour. He asks himself why he became a priest; was it to enjoy these 'Or to be possessed by God and possess God. This is what I want ultimately, but other things also come my way, Lord what can I do'.<sup>1</sup> As a seminarian, he was aware that if a priest exposed himself to grave sins and caused damnation of other souls, he would be a thief and robber instead of a good shepherd. He humbly prayed: "Oh my Jesus, you know my infirmity and fragility and evenso call me to this sublime ministry, strengthen me and in you I can [do] everything".<sup>2</sup> In the vein of critical self reflection on the priests, he asks: "How many shepherds of Israel, salts of the earth have become useless and pernicious, scandalizing and ruining their charges".<sup>3</sup> He asks how many among the priests love labour and are zealous. Many seek rest and their own convenience.<sup>4</sup>

On the pitfalls which the priest has to be cautious of, John deals with in detail:

The devil knows his job well: He has his tactics well calculated to overthrow the priest. First then he gets him (priest) to be attached to many external things. Then makes him live at ease,



with sensible pleasures eating, drinking much, then naturally the flesh lusts and the miserable mass falls into sins of impurity... In this state he neglects sacraments....To crown all when he is called to task by the Bishop, he sets his order at nought! His sins are more heinous, more horrible, of serious consequences to himself and souls committed to his charge.<sup>5</sup>

On the dignity of the priesthood, John gives this reflection. The priest has the dignity of the kings, and of the angels and other riches. "Therefore, O! priest fulfill your office in such a way that let there be gravity in your gestures, let there be fire in your words, let there be fervour in your heart."<sup>6</sup> On the goal of priest, he had this to say: "...a priest by his essence is meant to be between God and man, to meddle, as it were, when God strikes,... On the other hand he is born like others in sin, by his conduct sinful like others etc". John felt disheartened by his unworthiness but the next moment he became encouraged with the thought: "the useless instrument brings more credit to the skilled workman and ascribes nothing to itself"<sup>7</sup>. A priest by his office should ask blessings for his flock, and reconcile the guilty.<sup>8</sup>

This zeal did not die down in Fr John even after many years of service in priesthood. He writes in the Jubilee year. "Zeal of souls – It is the principle or rather the only duty of a priest or qualification"<sup>9</sup>. The priest will look at what is not yet done like St Francis Xavier.<sup>10</sup>

## **Pastor of Christ**

From Sri Lanka Fr. John came to Thrissur and met Mar John Menachery, the Vicar Apostolic of Thrissur. The bishop was impressed by the young erudite priest whom he had sent ten years ago to Kandy. With his blessings, John set out to Parappur, his native place. He asked for Fr Ouseph Kuttikatt who had given John protection and guidance in his childhood

days. He came to know that Fr Ouseph had joined the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, the first indigenous Congregation of the Syro Malabar Church. Since Fr Ouseph was living at the monastery in Elthuruth, near Thrissur, he set on foot to meet the revered priest who was his model and strength.

John waited for Fr Ouseph in the parlour. After some time came an old monk, whose eyes spoke of the depth of holiness in him. But he could not recognize John. John fell on his feet and said it was Ukken John whom he had helped to grow up. It was a moment of great joy for both. Fr John invited him to join the First Mass at Parappur. Fr Ouseph sought the permission of his superior who graciously asked both the priests to stay that night in the monastery and travel to Parappur by the bullock cart of the monastery next early morning.<sup>11</sup>

In the wee hours of the following day, at 3.00 am, they started to Parappur, his native place, where a multitude of people were there to receive the young priest. Fr Ouseph and the parish priest concelebrated with Fr John. Fr Ouseph blessed John specially, offering his prayers to him. Fr John received a cordial reception from his mother's parish Enamakal also. God's providence was always visible in all these events. Soon John approached Mar Menachery to know his plan for him in his future apostolate.

## **Assistant Manager at St Thomas School**

Fr John's first appointment in 1908 was at St Thomas School in Thrissur as its assistant manager.<sup>12</sup> He assisted the Rector and Manager Fr Ouseph Chirayath. The chief duty of the assistant manager was to look after the moral and catechetical formation of the students. Fr John befriended the students with

his ready wit and loving kindness. He gave a special emphasis to the catechetical and ethical instruction; for this, he brought catechism texts in English from Bombay. He would be present every day at 4 pm in the catechism class. He taught them the basic prayers in English and ended those classes with a Marian hymn. Thus, he paid a great attention to the faith formation of the students. This was one of his resolutions even while being a seminarian.<sup>13</sup>

Fr John instilled in the students a deep devotion to the Sacred Heart, to the Holy Eucharist and to Our Lady. He organized prayer meetings on the First Friday. This was also one of his resolutions he had made in seminary life. He took special care in the syllabus of the students. He showed a special regard to the weak students. He asked them to be earnest in their studies, motivating them for success in their future lives, for which the study at St Thomas would help them greatly. He sought their overall development, making facilities for mental and physical leisure.

John was a loving father and brother to the students but this did not prevent the young priest from correcting their errors, mistakes and even their sinful ways. Without fear or favour, he corrected them steadily and prudently but always with great sensitivity and calmness. In this way John won respect and trust from his students.

## **Parish Priest at Kandassankadavu**

The first parish he served was Kandassankadavu, a village 15 km west of Thrissur along the Arabian Sea coast. He came there in September 1909 (his first signature in the Minutes book of the church is Sept. 29, 1909) and was there only for a couple of months.<sup>14</sup> He had also the charge of Vatanappilly parish.

John set out to work in all earnestness. He started family visits, meeting each one of his sheepfold. He understood the situations of each house, understanding their problems, both spiritual and economical. He helped the parishioners to grow in holiness by making them participate more fervently in the daily Mass. For this he spent long hours before the Eucharist. He always asked the parishioners to come regularly for the Mass and to receive sacraments.

The success of Fr John in Kandassankadavu was based on making the people a vibrant liturgical community around the Eucharist. His offering of the Holy Mass was an example of spiritual fervour and edification. It was marked by great faith and humility. He wanted to build a chapel of perpetual adoration and as the parish record show, he obtained permission from the bishop for the same. He also started an association to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi.<sup>15</sup> He organized novenas in preparation of the different feasts. He asked his parishioners to observe the special months in honour of St Joseph, Our Lady and Sacred Heart. Seeing this exemplary priest, many non Christians were drawn to Christian ideals. They felt that Fr John was their father too.<sup>16</sup> He organized the catechism classes systematically.

There were a number of poor people in the parish. To none who came to him for help, he showed an empty hand. He used to help them from even his own pocket; he also exhorted the rich members of his parish to help the poor and the needy.

If there was anywhere discord and quarrel in the parish, he would soon enter the scene with a message of reconciliation. There were many such incidents in those times – the disputes especially due to quarrels on property, land etc. He strongly drove home the message of Christian forgiveness. He always

preached that forgiveness must be a basic virtue among Christians.

During this time he took special care to keep the church and its premises in cleanliness. Parish records show that he built a part of the presbytery at this short time. He also kept the cemetery tidy and saw that a pit was constructed in order to put the remains of the deceased of the parish. Fr John sought the help of the laity for different projects in the parish and formed different committees. This is attested from the parish minutes book.

John was very earnest in the progress of the parish and village. He got the permission of the bishop to build a school in the church premises and with the generous help of the parishners he achieved his objective. The parish registers also attest to the fact that John sought the financial stability of the parish. For this, the parish started a Kuri in 1910, which continued for many years\*. His concern for the local development is evident in the decision of the parish committee to expand the village market, which had been owned by the church.

In all these we can see the intellectual acumen and organising skills of Fr John. The records kept at the church show amply that Fr John did all the innovations and initiatives with

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\* A *chitty* or *Kuri* is basically a contract between the foreman (organizer) and the subscribers. The subscriber remits a fixed amount of money every month for a number of months. The total of the periodic subscription, called the chitty amount, will be given out as “prize money” to the person who bids by allowing for the maximum reduction in the prize money. Thus, one who is in urgent need of money could benefit from chitty. The organiser also gets a certain percentage as commission. Cf. <http://www.ksfe.com/chitty.htm>, 2.5.2012. In several cases (like ours), the organizer donates this amount (commission) for charity.

the necessary permissions from the civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

## **Minor Seminary Rector**

In January 1010, after a brief period of pastoral work at Kandassankadavu, Fr John was appointed Rector of the Minor Seminary.<sup>17</sup> He assumed this office, relatively at a very young age of 30. He was a good father and mother, teacher and friend to the Seminary.<sup>18</sup> He led a simple life and was available to the seminarians, even when, many responsibilities such as the duties of Secretary to the Vicar Apostolic came upon him. In the seminary curriculum, great importance was given to prayer and study. He helped the seminarians to grow in deep faith in the Eucharistic Lord. He taught the basic lessons of the meaning of the devotions to Sacred Heart, Our Lady and St Joseph. He asked them to learn the humility of Jesus, and the utter trust of Our Lady. He taught them also grammar, etiquette and other subjects that were necessary for formation.

Fr John liked to crack jokes (he calls it even as 'irregular appetite for humour').<sup>19</sup> During recreation, it is said that Fr Rector would join the students and be one among them. In this way, he could win their confidence, which in turn helped him to correct the seminarians with regard to their ways of behaving and method of studying. He would attend to all the personal needs of the student. It is said that while on a picnic, as they had to stay in a house, Fr Rector was the last to go to sleep after making sure that all the seminarians got well settled and were comfortable.<sup>20</sup>

Fr John as Rector was attentive to the spiritual and physical needs of the seminarians, even getting to know the details of their families. Although he was a fatherly and motherly figure to them, he was firmly engaged in the work of formation,

intended for the seminarians. He was convinced that it was not simply information but a formation that would lead them to a personal transformation.

He would ask the seminarians to come and to talk to him regarding their problems in personal life and spiritual endeavours, as well as community life. He seems to have been a patient listener as was clear from his own words. "... if we find few good conversationalists, there are still few good listener(s)" ...<sup>21</sup> Since he was convinced of the role of English in India,<sup>22</sup> he asked the seminarians to be fluent in the language which was all the more important than in British India, as it is now.

He taught them also the first lessons in homiletics. The notes he had collected during his seminary days were useful to him in this regard. Already as a seminarian, he had quoted in his diary, the words of famous preacher Rev. Canon Mackey which came in *Dublin Review*: "Profane histories to be occasionally but sparingly made, joining with them, if possible, some passage from the fathers; citation to be short and well brought out; examples, to be beautiful, authentic, appropriate; to reasons you must join, as far as possible some good comparison, as our Lord in the Gospel, and after him St. Chrysostom and St. Francis de Sales. A fund of affections and exclamations to be provided, the enunciation to be distinct and slow, and the greatest care to be taken to speak in a natural voice and with variety of intonations".<sup>23</sup>

The only existing entry in his diary in this period (28.9.1913) speaks of a priest, full of sensitivity to the minute details in life, of a man with a clear conscience and a solid priestly identity. He resolved that he should be a zealous priest, just in financial dealings and will not seek inordinate love from anyone.

Each day I should be like Christ by offering myself fully to God and always working for the salvation of souls. A lesser perfection does not suit me a priest. Therefore, when I celebrate the sacraments, it should be with zeal. I should be just in financial dealings and act according to the conscience. I should not seek any special affection; nor shall I for that purpose touch anyone nor allow myself to be touched by anyone.<sup>24</sup>

He also gives his daily time table:

5.15 am Rising

5.30 am Meditation

6.00 am Holy mass

6.30 pm return after day's work

9.30 pm to bed.

It was at this time Varunny Alappat (future bishop of Trichur, Mar George Alappat) was a minor seminarian. Bp. Alappat would always recall with gratitude the intense and fruitful formation he received from Fr John. At this time, Fr John had also the charge of Vijayapuram parish. In 1913, he had the charge of Chiralayam and Chowannur parishes for four months, when he would get acquainted with the region of his later pastoral work in the last phase of his life.

### **Secretary to the Vicar Apostolic Mar John Menacherry**

Fr John also held the responsibility of secretary to the Vicar Apostolic Mar John Menacherry from July 1913 to January 1917.<sup>25</sup> He was the bishop's prominent consultor and in this capacity, was available to all those who approached the curia. It was during this time that Fr John, as the emissary of the Vicar Apostolic, blessed the first house of the Congregation of the Holy Family at Puthenchira on September 23, 1913, founded by Blessed Mariam Thressia (1876-1926).



Fr John's tact in dealing with the tough situations came to the fore at the Aranattukara East church cemetery issue.<sup>26</sup> A number of Hindus belonging to the lower castes were brought to the light of the gospel, with the work of the CMI monastery at nearby Elthuruth. The superior of the monastery asked the permission of the bishop to use the cemetery of the neighbouring parishes for these poor low caste Christians. The bishop allowed that they could use the cemetery of Aranattukara East Church. However, a great many in the parish opposed Bishop's decision. These were the times of sharp caste distinction even among the Christians in Kerala.

Once there was the death of a child, belonging to the lower castes, and the burial in Aranattukara East Church cemetery was rejected by the parishners. The church was closed by the order of the bishop and the parish priest was withdrawn from the service. The parish did not have the regular spiritual activities and was under a deep spiritual crisis. The threat of Mellusian schism loomed large.<sup>27</sup> It was at this juncture, Fr John Ukken used his good influence to prevail upon the bishop to withdraw the order. Due to Fr John's tactful intervention, the bishop withdrew his order and the parish priest came back to the church. Peace was restored to the whole parish.

In all these, Fr John always sought the support of divine help. He called on Blessed Mother who "crushed all heresies, protected the church against her material and spiritual enemies".<sup>28</sup>

It was also at this time that the Priests' Home was started in Thrissur in 1915. Fr John had been very instrumental in the establishment of this Home for senior priests. He was in charge of the Thope institutions and prompted the bishop to start the Priests' home. This shows Fr. John's concern and sense of solidarity towards his fellow priests.<sup>29</sup>

Mar John Menachery totally trusted in the spiritual, administrative and intellectual capabilities of Fr John. In 1915, it is said Mar Menachery considered to recommend him to be his auxiliary. But the Delegate Apostolic Zaleski thought that Fr. John was very young and without experience in administration and ministry.<sup>30</sup>

## **Cathedral Parish Priest**

He relinquished his office as the Rector of the Minor Seminary in 1917. He was parish priest of the Cathedral from January 1917. In this Mar Menachery might have been motivated by the charge of some people that Fr John did not have enough pastoral experience. In the vast Lourdes cathedral parish, Fr John readily entered into the pastoral work. He visited the families, encouraged those who were seeking reunion with the Catholic Church from the Mellusian schism. He effectively organised catechism classes. He constructed the presbytery at the parish. Even during the busy schedule of his pastoral work, he visited the slums at Kokkalai at the southern side of the town. Many of the slum dwellers lived in abject squalor and often this led them to immoral lives. Fr. John celebrated Mass at the chapel at Kokkalai twice a week. It was John himself who suggested the name of St Augustine to the chapel here. Thus, John paid great attention to the spiritual renewal of the poor in the slums. One notes the extraordinary courage that John had in order to work among these people, as in those days slums had been entirely neglected by the pastoral workers as well as by civil authorities.

## **Kottappady Parish Priest**

On Dec.21, 1918 December, on the eleventh anniversary of his ordination, Fr John was transferred to Kottappady, a parish, some 30 kms away from Thrissur, barely after 2 years

in the Cathedral. The sudden transfer was supposedly the result of a misunderstanding by the Bishop. Fr John met with the visiting Apostolic delegate Archbishop P. Biondi and discussed with him during his visit to the cathedral matters for the improvement of the mission. But Bishop Menachery perhaps thought that Fr John spoke to the Apostolic delegate regarding the issues that were affecting the administration of the Vicariate.<sup>31</sup> This misunderstanding could have been a shock to Fr John but he accepted it with great resignation to the will of God. He had, at this time, also the charge of Arthat parish, near Kunnankulam. The pastor in him got ample opportunities for a meaningful shepherding function in this rural parish. He visited the families of the sick and tried to reconcile the families that were living in enmity for a long time. He also made catechetics classes more efficient and regular. By his noble behaviour and powerful words, John won the hearts of many, irrespective of caste and creed. He used to go to Mattom, another old parish in the diocese, in order to help the parish priest there. Thus, he was practising what he had once written in his diary on the ideal of collaboration with his fellow priests. "I must then seek friendship with my good brothers to be able to carry out the work of my Master". As we have seen earlier, he had also thought of forming a priests' union. He had written in his diary: "I must love 'Union' and be a good member with the hope to get other priests later, so that more work for souls may be done by many".<sup>32</sup>

## **Manager St Thomas College Trichur**

Mar Menachery died on Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1919. The new Vicar Apostolic was Mar Francis Vazhappilly who assumed charge on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921. He was the Manager of St Thomas College at that time. Fr John was appointed the College Manager in his place. The previous school had risen to the status of an

important college in the kingdom of Cochin in 1919 under Madras University.<sup>33</sup>

St Thomas is one of oldest catholic colleges in Kerala. Fr John taught Latin and French in the college, the two languages he had mastered while at Kandy. Fr John held the managership of both the college and the school at this time. At the beginning stage, the college had 5 professors, prominent among them being Msgr. John Palockaran (principal), Chev. Joseph Petta, and Prof. Sankaran Nambiar (Vice principal) who had proved their mettle in English and Malayalam literary circles in Kerala. St Thomas High School was one of the largest schools in the then Malayalam speaking territories (Kerala was formed only in 1956). The High School boasted of 1116 students. The college had 100 students. Fr John wanted to bring high academic standard to the College. He wanted the students to grow up, thoroughly formed in morality, ethical values and spiritual ideals, as testified by Fr Joseph Chungath, who was a student in the College.<sup>34</sup> Fr John teamed with Msgr Palockaran to bring up the College into excellence in academic and extra curricular activities. It was Fr John Ukken's visionary leadership that helped the College to start Science group in the College at the Intermediate level. Thus, St Thomas under Fr Ukken became one of the few colleges that taught Science subjects in the whole of Kerala in the early 1920s.

Fr John wanted to make St. Thomas a First Grade College where degree courses could be taught. The permission was granted by the Madras University to start the degree courses and St Thomas became the first First Grade College in the erstwhile Kingdom of Cochin. There were prominent students who studied in this college, who later gave leadership in Kerala and national politics. St Thomas was also the bedrock of the freedom struggle in Central Kerala. Patriotism and national

integration were values promoted by Fr John Ukken. Mahatma Gandhi visited the College and addressed the student community here in 1927.<sup>35</sup> It was Fr John who started in 1924 a college magazine, which kept high standard, comprising of the literary creations of the staff and students.

In these years, Fr John was the Chaplain of the Sacred Heart Carmelite convent in Thrissur. While he was the Manager of the St Thomas College, he also helped the construction of a wing of the Convent and the Sacred Heart School which the sisters managed. He made it possible that a good amount of money as well as materials were donated from the College.<sup>36</sup> He also managed an orphanage in a house that belonged to St Thomas College and in this, he was helped by the Carmelite sisters. He contributed personally to the maintenance of the orphanage.<sup>37</sup>

Although he was steeped in the hustle and bustle of the academic life, he was aware of the need to grow in holiness. He practiced acts of self discipline and wore the thorny chain on Fridays and Saturdays on a regular basis. He was also very faithful with regard to the real sense of obedience. During the college days, it seems that he had to face some opposition from his own colleagues.<sup>38</sup> He wrote: "I find [it] difficult to spare my views with those of my superior. I should at any cost try to tally them. Superior holds God's place. He is alone responsible to God regarding the things ... He is guided by the Holy Ghost".<sup>39</sup>

He wanted to do 'reparation by penance and real works of zeal and avoid every wilful sin against chastity, charity and obedience'.<sup>40</sup> He remarks that in 1923 and 1924, while preaching to the sisters, he made his own retreat.

It was during this period that he seriously considered the mission work at Kunnamkulam. The town of Kunnamkulam,

some 25 kms north of Thrissur, was a Jacobite centre and many of its suburbs were rather poor. "I will with permission of H. Lordship our Bishop, try to enter a Religious Order or choose a humble post".<sup>41</sup> If the permission is not given, his plan was "to open a Home for the aged and sickly in Kunnankulam near the hospital and have Mass and other services regularly conducted there, thus to make a breach in the heretical fortress".<sup>42</sup>

He wrote in 1924: "my idea is to sever my connection with college and go to Kunnankulam and there conducting a small church, pave way of opening an orphanage, asylum for aged, workshop, press etc. If possible to form an Association of Priests, Brothers and Sisters."<sup>43</sup> For achieving these objectives, he sought the prayerful support of Blessed Euphrasia (1877-1952), who resided at the Ollur Convent.<sup>44</sup> He wanted to form a union of priests of the Sacred Heart in order that the priests could give themselves generously to missions, to seek and save the gentiles, visit hospitals, conduct catechumenates, orphanages, industrial schools and press etc.<sup>45</sup>

Evidently, this period was a transition in the life of Fr John Ukken. Gradually he realized that his mission was to make a committed apostolate for the poor and the abandoned. Already as a seminarian, he had resolved to "try to love the poor, less attractive: The rich will have many others". This was a result of his reflection on Christmas, where the shepherds were chosen as the messengers of the great news. Jesus had predilection for the poor.<sup>46</sup> Jesus gave us great example by identifying himself with the poor. "Jesus knowing very well our weakness, cupidity, set a life-long example of poverty! He chose a poor mother, poor foster-father, poor stable, poor Nazareth, poor profession, poor apostles, lived poor without a home wherein to rest his head in his public life, was stripped of even the last shred of linen before his death!!".<sup>47</sup>

For the work among the poor, Fr. John wanted to grow in prayer. It .."seemed to me so very reasonable that I thought of retiring to shut myself up somewhere and praise God in secret".<sup>48</sup> During this time, we also see that he tried to grow in the devotion to Sacred Heart and spread the devotion around him.

## **Mattom**

In November 1925, Fr John moved to the St Thomas Church at Mattom, another ancient parish in the diocese. In this vast parish, Fr Ukken steadily entered into an active parish ministry. He worked for the families that they be rooted in deep Christian love. Above all, his charitable works for the poor and the needy attracted the attention of the whole population. In Mattom, he founded the Sodality of the Immaculate Mother. The motto of the movement was "through Mary to Christ". Likewise, Fr. John tried to deepen the devotion to the Sacred Heart in the parish. On First Friday of the month, there was a solemn holy hour. He also celebrated solemn Holy Mass whenever possible. He also devoted the month of June for special devotion to the Sacred Heart. Fr John promoted the Altar boys so that they may fervently assist at the Mass and set an example for other boys. From Mattom, he also helped to build up the Koonammuchy parish which was started in 1924.

One of the important areas of his apostolate was catechesis. He knew that to enliven a parish, a sound foundation in catechesis was a must.<sup>49</sup> His sense of justice is evident as he increased the wages of the parish labourers here.<sup>50</sup>

Fr John also promoted religious life in a special way. He was instrumental in founding convents in a number of places. In Mattom, he started a house of Clarist sisters in 1926. In the blessing ceremony (the Servant of God) Fr Antony

Thachuparambil (1894-1963) was present. It was when he was the vicar at Mattom that young men came to the religious life for the first time in the parish. Thus, Fr Malachias CMI and Fr Justus CMI joined the Carmelite Congregation, with the strong support of Fr John, as both met with some opposition to their decision to follow religious life.<sup>51</sup> Fr John used his good influence with bishop Mar Vazhappilly and started a convent for the Carmelite sisters in Chiralayam near Kunnamkulam. He was also instrumental behind the new school in Chiralayam, whose foundation stone was laid in 1927. He served the parish till January 1928.

He wrote in his diary at this time that “mortification and penance should be undertaken to avoid sin and keep up fervour”.<sup>52</sup> His jottings in the diary show his arduous and great commitment to do his best for the glory of God.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> *LMMR I*, 160 (tran.) 12.12.1903.
- <sup>2</sup> *LMMR I*, 161 (tran.) 12.12.1903.
- <sup>3</sup> *LMMR II*, 13, 27.7.1904.
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR II*, 31, 17.8.1904.
- <sup>5</sup> *LMMR II*, 103, 9-17.12.1904.
- <sup>6</sup> *LMMR I*, 177 (tran.) 18.12.1903.
- <sup>7</sup> *LMMR II*, 84, 9-17.12. 1904.
- <sup>8</sup> *LMMR I*, 132, 13.10.1903.
- <sup>9</sup> *Resolutions II*, 67, 20.12.,1932.
- <sup>10</sup> *Resolutions II*, 69, 20.12.,1932.
- <sup>11</sup> J.C. Chiramel, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 9-10.



- <sup>12</sup> For the dates of pastoral work of Fr John in various parishes, cf. the Transfer Register of priests, Archdiocesan Curia Archives, Trichur Vol VII, 418.
- <sup>13</sup> *LMMR I*, 172, Dec.1903.
- <sup>14</sup> Sr. Donata (ed.), *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, (The good ways of the good pastor), Sacerdotal Centenary Souvenir of Servant of God Augustine John Ukken, Maria Bhavan Generalate: Kolazhy, Thrissur, 2008, p. 245.
- <sup>15</sup> *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, p. 245
- <sup>16</sup> Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 175.
- <sup>17</sup> Transfer Register of priests, Archdiocesan Curia Archives, Trichur Vol VII, 418.
- <sup>18</sup> Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 178.
- <sup>19</sup> *Resolutions II*, 27, 1922.
- <sup>20</sup> Narrated by one of his students Msgr. G. Akkara in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 3-6.
- <sup>21</sup> *LMMR II*, 216, 25.6.1905.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Copied by Fr John on 20.5.1904, cf. *LMMR II*, 110, 20.5.1904.
- <sup>24</sup> *Resolutions II*, 23-24, 28.9.1913.
- <sup>25</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 184.
- <sup>26</sup> J.C. Chiramel, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>27</sup> Patriarch Mar Joseph VI Audo of Chaldean Church sent bishop Mar Elias Mellus to Malabar in 1874. Rome did not approve this move. On 25 October 1874 Mellus was excommunicated by Pope Pius IX. The followers of Mellus are called "Mellusians". Now, they call themselves as the Assyrian Church of the East in India. See also, E. TISSERANT, *Eastern Christianity in India*, 106-118.
- <sup>28</sup> *LMMR II*, 48, 15.9.2004.
- <sup>29</sup> Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, p. 6.
- <sup>30</sup> Archivio della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali, Delegazione Indiana. Soriani del Malabar 1902-1921, Protocol No. 36545, petition

without date from Trichur to the Holy Father sent through Zaleski which was transmitted to Rome from Kandy on 2 April 1915. (abbreviated as ACCO, DISM 1902-1921); cf also <http://thottupuram.blogspot.com/2007/09/ich-9-towards-hierarchy.html>, accessed 11.3.2011.

- 31 ACCO, DISM 1902-1921, Pietro Fumasoni Biondi, Delegate Apostolic of India to Cardinal Niccolo Marini, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, on December 28, 1919, f.1.
- 32 *LMMR II*, 32, 18.8.1904; *Resolutions II*, 13, Retreat Dec. 14-23, 1906.
- 33 Cf. O.D. Varkey, St Thomas Collegum Ukkenachanum, (St Thomas College and Fr Ukken) in *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, pp. 156-158.
- 34 Fr Joseph Chungath, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, p. 63.
- 35 N.J. Francis (ed.), *Region, Religion and Culture in the Making of Higher Education in Kerala*, St. Thomas college, Trichur, 2010, pp. 110-116.
- 36 Sr. Cleopatra, Ukkenachanum Karmelitasanyasinisamoohavum, in *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal* pp. 161-164, 162.
- 37 *CMC Convent Chronicle*, Trichur, pp. 47-48.
- 38 *Resolutions II*, 27, 1922.
- 39 *Resolutions II*, 27, 1922.
- 40 *Resolutions II*, 36, 1925.
- 41 *Resolutions II*, 28, 1922.
- 42 *Resolutions II*, 29, 1922
- 43 *Resolutions II*, 34, 2-7.9.1924.
- 44 Sr. Cleopatra, Ukkenachanum... p. 162.
- 45 *Resolutions II*, 37, 1925.
- 46 *LMMR II*, 92, 9-17.12. 1904.
- 47 *LMMR II*, 3, 17.7.1904.
- 48 *Resolutions II*, 35, 1925
- 49 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 206.
- 50 *Minutes of the Mattom church* 1927, p. 194.
- 51 Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 38-39.
- 52 *Resolutions II*, 39, 2-8.9.1927.

## Chapter 4

# THE APOSTLE OF CHOWANNUR

*I am a pilgrim; a pilgrim does not forget his home, does not delay, does not take opposite direction. LMMR I, 59 (tran.)  
12.12.1903.*

## History of the St Thomas Church, Chowannur

Chowannur, a village 20 kms away North West of Trichur is the vineyard where Fr John worked for 25 years as the parish priest and where he started the Congregation of Sisters of Charity (CSC).<sup>1</sup>

Around 1775, Christians, coming mainly from 20 families, scattered around the villages of Chowannur, Panthalloor, Porkulam, Ayyamparambu, Marathamkode, Eyyal had to go to worship at the ancient Church at Arthat. The long distance to this church and the need to give catechesis to the children in their own parish prompted the parishioners to build a catechism hall with roof thatched with coconut leaves. While they wanted a new church, they sought the permission for the same from the then Cranganore diocese in the Padroado regime in whose jurisdiction came several parishes in the present Trichur archdiocese (with the erection of the diocese of Goa on 3 November 1534, the Portuguese Padroado jurisdiction began in India and with the Synod of the Udayamperur (Diamper) in 1599, the Padroado regime started among the St Thomas Christians). Because of the financial backwardness and the limited number of families, the permission was denied by the Padroado rulers and later by the new Vicariate of Thrissur. However, this led to some unforeseen events. Bro Iypu Mulakkal, whose mother hailed from Chowannur, was doing his priestly studies under the system of Malpanate. Malpan is teacher in syriac. Malpanate was a system of priestly formation among St Thomas Christians where under a holy and learned Malpan, officially recognized by the church, priestly candidates were formed. This was an adaptation of the Indian system of 'Gurukulam'.<sup>2</sup> It had been decided by the ecclesiastical authorities that all the candidates for priesthood should undergo

regular seminary training.<sup>3</sup> For some reason, Iype did not accept this decision and joined the Chaldean church (Church of the East). He could not say the First Mass in his own native parish Mattom. He caught hold of some leaders of the Chowannur parish and they decided to convert the hall into a church, and joined the Chaldean church under the leadership of Fr Iype in 1892. However, this caused severe split in the parish.

After 10 years, Fr Iype left Chowannur in 1902. This was a good occasion for the restoration of unity. The parish elders unanimously met Mar John Menachery, the Vicar Apostolic of Trichur who allowed the community to continue as a catholic parish, entrusting the pastoral care of this parish to Fr Geevarghese Chungath Parekkatt, the parish priest at Arthat. He served there till 1911. Around 1914, a priest's residence was built and then on priests began to reside at Chowannur.

The inhabitants of Chowannur were poor agricultural labourers who struggled to keep their both ends meet. Many of them were spiritually indifferent and some of them morally weak. This was a stronghold of the Jacobite Church in the whole of Trichur district. Fr John came here in 1928 (as we saw earlier, he was here briefly in 1913). The parish priest here had also the charge of the nearby Chiralayam parish. In Chowannur, the Mass was celebrated only on Sunday.

Fr Ukken regularly visited the families and witnessed the pathetic spiritual socio economic situations of the people. He wanted that the families that he visited should have a deep spiritual renewal. He especially saw that the many family disputes, property litigations, boundary issues were settled amicably as far as possible. His continuous contact with the people through house visits was an important point of his charism that he later imparted to the CSC.

In his work at Chowannur, Fr John tried to eradicate caste system that was rampant in the area. He also did his best to root out superstition and to free the people from the clutches of sorcery, witchcraft and fatalism. His prayer, as we saw already, was to root out error and impiety by the medium of Rosary, and to dispel ignorance and superstition.<sup>4</sup> In his seminary days, he had prayed through the intercession of St Peter Claver who had worked for the emancipation of the slaves: “obtain for me and our priests a spark of that true charity that we may strive to alleviate the sufferings of our poor pulayas and to ameliorate their condition, to bring them up to the equal social condition! Jesus our Master came to destroy all slavery and establish brotherhood”.<sup>5</sup>

In his seminary days, John was convinced that his future role would be to work for the racial justice and equality. “How *Mary* moved to pity by the misery of the Christian slaves under the moors, appears, at once to St. Peter Nolases, St. Raymond Pentafort and King of Aragon, asking them to found an order, whose object is to redeem the slaves, even if necessary by taking their place! How she is the mother of mercy! ... Ask her to destroy the slavery in Malabar, of the pulayas”.<sup>6</sup>

Fr John also worked for the uplift of the poor agricultural labourers who were exploited by the rich and unscrupulous landlords who often confiscated their title deeds and the land. He taught the people, irrespective of caste and creed, the duty to treat others as the children of God. Thus, he tried to get the title deeds of these poor tenants from the rich farmers and help these downtrodden people to earn their own living by sincere and strenuous efforts in their land. He helped the unemployed to find a source of livelihood by making it possible to start some small industries and business. He also had a tender heart for

the orphans, the widows and the poor women. People used to call him by many names like “Achen Thampuran” (Lord Priest) “Valiya Thampuran” (Great Lord) etc. Because of this popular approval, Fr John was appointed the village court judge and Panchayath President of Chowannur by the civil authorities. It was Fr John’s effort that made possible the Ayyamparambu - Chowannur road.<sup>7</sup>

John was always moved by the merciful heart of Jesus. He saw that because of the dismal economic situations, there were many orphans and uneducated women in the land. The women who were neglected by the society led miserable lives. He started a home for these poor people near the Chowannur church in 1929. On Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1930, he started a pious association for women who would be specially committed to help these poor women. This was a distant beginning for the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity. Seven noble women joined the association. Fr John offered them all to God on this day, Nov. 21, the feast of the dedication of Our mother. He wanted that all the members grow in the love of God and love of fellow human beings; they should be humble and available, always reaching out to the people.<sup>8</sup> He sought the help of the Carmelite sisters for their formation. They grew up in holiness and humility and with an apostolic fervour to do charitable works. Fr. John’s work for the uplift of the women was at a time when women met with near total neglect in social and educational fields. This pious association did not have any constitution and was a great boost in the social revival of women in the village. However, this initiative went through many difficulties.

Fr John wanted to bring up the situation of the people by raising their educational standards. He built the foundation for the school in Chowannur. Temporarily he started the classes on the verandah of the church building. But due to some technical

problems, he could not continue with the project of school. At this time, he was the common vicar in Chowannur, Chiralayam, Arthat, Anjoor, Vellarakad.<sup>9</sup> His apostolate helped the poor in these surrounding areas.

## **Fr John, a True Missionary**

Fr John was a great missionary, with great zeal and earnestness. It was his life's desire that "all missionaries should have lot of patience and expect Lord's visit...pray for all engaged in fishing souls the world over in the freezing zone and scorching tropics!"<sup>10</sup> He explains that the zeal of souls or *the holy jealousy* as follows:<sup>11</sup> It is "[a] great desire, coupled with labour even in spite of difficulty. It is an ardent burning desire for the glory of God by the expansion of God's Kingdom through the salvation of souls. Also the determination to down all the enemies on the way, (world, devil... passions of men...).. so God is jealous; but in us jealousy implies powerlessness to put down the rivals and competitors - in God, not" .. "Zeal may cost us something, sufferings, death". According to Fr John, this is a "a great virtue from the object, (souls glorifying God)". For this missionary task, one has to study, prepare himself, do all that one can to save more souls, without looking for one's glory. "To have a zeal one must be animated with, actuated with perfect love of God, well persuaded, intimately and practically penetrated that God alone is good, He alone can satisfy the human heart". John tells himself that even after the conversion of the whole world, one cannot be satisfied, because God is infinite and glory afforded is nothing. For this , the seminarians must pray for their future field of work and pray for the church, its persecuted members and the special needs. John always said that one has to give prime importance to catechesis in schools. He sent



catechists to the neighbouring parishes. The religious were to take catechesis as their important task.<sup>12</sup>

John looked at how devoted Jesus was to his Father and the mission entrusted to him by his Abba. This mission was for proclaiming the message of liberation for all the poor in the world. He asked for the same missionary zeal as Jesus had.

Since the world was wallowing in sins, Jesus' delight was to be with His holy parents, but He quits them for attending to the things of His Father! Am I also in such sentiments? Today I will leave some satisfaction for that purpose....Don't you know that I am to be in the things of my Father? Jesus was to teach us by His whole life, not only at 13. He is our model, yet 13th year directly engages Him in the Mission. Is it not too late for me? Oh Heart of Jesus, give me some zeal.<sup>13</sup>

John constantly meditated on the sending of the apostles by Jesus. He sent them two by two: it was "(t)o be mutual help, consolation and to be sure of witness of the doctrine they taught" .... I must then seek friendship with my good brothers to be able to carry out the work of my Master".<sup>14</sup> John's heart was aglow with missionary zeal and he wanted to reach out to all the needy people in the world. He prayed that his fellow priests also be filled with the same zeal. .. "many are still in the shadow of death. Oh give me and to all priests a little of thy charity, zeal." He lamented that "19 centuries have glided away since the work of redemption, yet how many sit in darkness! Increase the number of zealous missionaries".<sup>15</sup> These reflections from the seminary times were practiced by Fr. John in his priestly life. The apostolate is to be continued till the end of the world. And thus his prayer is for the increase in the number of zealous missionaries.<sup>16</sup>

John wanted to send the members of the future congregation that he planned of founding, to all parts of the

globe. He saw St Paul as the perfect copy of the Divine Maser, his preaching and sufferings as continuation of Lord's preaching.<sup>17</sup> Like St Francis Xavier, he wanted to go to the whole world with the work of evangelization, despite hard labour, dangers, sufferings, saying like the Saint "*amplius Domine*" (More, Lord).<sup>18</sup> The missionary work must be done, without hoping for any compensation and expecting any gratitude.<sup>19</sup> Yet, he was realistic. If you do not succeed in the work of conversion, do not lose your peace.<sup>20</sup>

The church which is missionary by nature (II Vatican Council, AG 2), is called to be a sign in this world – a sign of unity, reconciliation. There are vast areas in the world where people have not heard about Christ and Fr John prayed fervently for genuine vocations to priestly and religious life. He wanted the grace to do the missionary work the church needed. Underlining the role of the Oriental churches in the mission in India, John prayed for Syrian dioceses and Syrian bishops so that they become instruments of salvation to many.<sup>21</sup>

Fr John's resolve to care for the spiritual needs of his flock is well known. Eyyal is a neighbouring village with a fewer number of Christians. Fr John bought a plot of land and built there a small church and offered Mass. Years later, on a feast day at Eyyal, Fr John was to offer a solemn Mass there. Some officials of the State, it is said, came up with prohibition orders, as they were moved by some communalist interests. But Fr John immediately sprang to action. Within hours he got the prohibitive order vacated and had the permission to say Mass. This incident is narrated to underline the missionary steadfastness and fervour, seen in Fr John.

Fr John was a good preacher. As a true missionary, he was well versed in the Sacred Scriptures. He prayed for the gift

of preaching the gospel in accordance with the signs of the times. He prayed for himself and for his fellow workers so that they may 'dodge the poisoned arrows of the iniquitous' and to give sound doctrine in a simple way, looking only to procure God's glory by saving souls'.<sup>22</sup> He asked for '(k)nowledge of Scriptures, of languages, courage to preach and suffer cheerfully, to preach the Word of God clearly, forcibly and sweetly'.<sup>23</sup> He studied in depth the commentaries of Bible so that he might be able to teach the faithful and later the sisters. The main source of his instruction to the sisters was Holy Bible. He had received permission from the bishop to read English Bible, - such permission was necessary in those times. His spiritual diary is an ample proof of his familiarity with Bible.

His significant resolutions made in the Retreat of 1925 speak of his missionary zeal: "To give missions; to seek and save pagans in and out; to send out missionaries if possible".<sup>24</sup> The same fervour is seen in his work as catechist. He made Catechetics as an inevitable part of the curriculum, in schools where he was the manager. He made catechesis compulsory in all the parishes that he served. He gave prizes for the children to study catechism. We may remember that Fr John was also a catechism teacher himself when he was Assistant Manager of the St Thomas school. He wrote in the diary that one of the important duties of the priest of the Sacred Heart is to conduct catechism classes.<sup>25</sup>

It is the missionary zeal that prompted him to join the 'Confraternity of abandoned souls in monteligion'.<sup>26</sup> In the history of the church, there were prayer movements and works of atonement to obtain liberation for the most needy and abandoned souls in purgatory by the celebration of many Masses. One such was founded in 1884 in the parish of La Chapelle-Montligeon, France.<sup>27</sup> Fr John is probably referring to this.

## **Fr John, A Great Ecumenist**

It is true that Fr. John chose Chowannur as the chief locality of his work as it was 'a fortress of heretics' and he came with a great missionary zeal. We must remember that this was a time when ecumenical movements were unheard of in Kerala. After coming to Chowannur, he met with many Jacobite brethren. Kunnamkulam and its surroundings were the strongholds of these Christians of Antiochene tradition. He befriended these Christians who were convinced of Fr John's sincerity for the unity of the churches. Fr John even presented them a picture of Our Lady of Fatima.

Another incident also shows the ecumenical mind of Fr John. In Arthat, a nearby village, the catholic and orthodox churches stood side by side. The latter did not have direct access to the Kunnamkulam Guruvayoor Road. The Orthodox parishioners requested bishop Mar George Alappat for a plot of land so that they would get direct access to the road. It was Fr John who signed the petition, saying that this would facilitate the reunion. In the spirit of the reunion movement, initiated by Mar Ivanios,<sup>28</sup> Fr John gave shelter to Fr Kakku Panakkal who had expressed his desire to be reunited with the Catholic Church, and supported him throughout his life. Fr John, long before the II Vatican Council, had engaged in close collaboration with non catholic Christians. His advice to the sisters is noteworthy: "Respect all the churches, the Holy Church has recognized. Do not say bad things about them nor deprecate them".<sup>29</sup>

### **A friend of the poor:**

One of the special charisms of Fr John was the care of those in the deathbed. According to him, we should prepare those nearing death, like a mother: "show thyself a mother to

them”.<sup>30</sup> He prayed daily for those who were at the point of death. One of the resolutions of Fr John in 1925 was “to run or at least visit hospitals”.<sup>31</sup> He used to visit government hospitals and help the people with money and medicine. He wished that there should be a dispensary connected with each convent and the sisters should visit the sick in their homes and offer the first aid.<sup>32</sup> It is said that once, when two sisters returned from their house visits and reported of their experience of visiting a sick man in abject poverty, who did not have even a mat to rest, Fr John asked the sisters to take the only table in the convent and donate it to him. Once he received a very sickly old man and allowed him to dwell in his residence where he died a week after.<sup>33</sup>

His option for the poor is visible in the readiness to dedicate his whole life for the poor: Recollecting on the parable of Good Samaritan, he wrote in his diary: “...(L)et me also have compassion for the weak and do similarly to ameliorate their condition, specially when I will be the innkeeper as a priest”.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly Fr John planned many schemes for the poor. His concern was directed to the children abandoned by the parents, those children who lost their parents, the elderly who were denied of the care of the home. He created small scale employment opportunities so that the women and youth may be oriented towards the goals in life. Thus he started a spinning wheel unit for women. He helped the unemployed with the help of some financial support<sup>35</sup> to start small businesses. Also he gave the youth moral instruction so that they were not led astray by the numerous negative influences and ideologies. He also tried to get land for the landless labourers from the rich and reclaim the land which was due to the poor farmers, from unscrupulous landlords. His concern for the poor is also visible as he collected herbal mineral medicines at the Convent in Kokkalai for the

distribution of the poor.<sup>36</sup> St Annes orphanage at Trichur was started with the good help of Fr John.<sup>37</sup>

## Good Shepherd

We can see a compassionate heart in Fr John towards the sinners. His dearest gospel was that of Luke, which contained many passages of divine mercy. Already in his seminary life, his resolve was “to save those in the well of sin”. He had a heart of the good shepherd. In those days, the bishop sent to Fr John those priests who were troubled with some severe crises in their lives. They found a cordial reception in him who listened to their problems patiently and allowed them to stay in his residence. The priests went refreshed both spiritually and physically. This could have been one reason why Fr John used to be known in those times “as the bishop of the northern part (of the diocese)”.<sup>38</sup>

His diary has many references to the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Merciful Father. Recalling that there could be unworthy shepherds, John wrote in his diary of his obligation to be a good shepherd, a good pastor:

If you are my pastor, I am your sheep, let me inherit your qualities, I am to become a pastor myself! Oh, make me meek and humble!... ‘I know them that are mine and I lay down myself for them’! Jesus knows me, with all my difficulties, weaknesses! Oh, save me from the wolf of devil, from the thief of self--love, from the mercenary of the world. The attachment of the shepherd is such that death alone can separate him from them..... Oh mother of Good Shepherd, give all pastors the same charity, zeal...”.<sup>39</sup>

Fr John understood his mission to be a merciful shepherd.

He described the way a sinner is received in the divine presence, as he comments on the parable of the prodigal son.

The Father looks for him and sees him already from afar. When they meet he falls upon his neck and embraces and permits him not to finish his confession. What is better calculated to inspire us with confidence? Yet how often we yield to distrust and wrong divine goodness! We in our narrow-mindedness set boundaries to the infinite goodness of God and represent him a severe judge... A great Feast! Everything best; the fatted calf, ring... The robe of baptismal innocence was given back, the ring - the pledge of friendship. The sheer to be steady for the future and the Eucharistical banquet! Not only all the sins are forgiven and forgotten but he is reinstated with all the former privileges!"<sup>40</sup>

It was this merciful heart that later led him to undertake missions of mercy. We would later see that Fr John helped Fr Andrews who had fallen to immoral life, even abandoning sacraments. Fr John invited him to his residence and allowed him to stay there. By constant guidance and correction, given in love and trust, he could win back the priest. Fr Andrews repented over his sins and came back to sacramental life. Fr John also showed his resolve to restore and rehabilitate those women, who by their decision or presumably by the pressure of the situations, had chosen a life, bereft of moral values.<sup>41</sup>

## **Ideal of Charity**

We already saw the earnest desire of John already in 1924 to start his work of charity: he would get rid of the academic career and start orphanages, asylums for the aged, workshop, press, all in view of practising the ideal of charity.

The ideal of Charity of the early Christians was the motto of Fr John. The early Christians shared what they had with the same heart and same spirit (cf. Acts of the Apostles 4: 32). His own orphanhood helped him to deepen this spirit of selfless service to his fellow brothers and sisters. He regarded a life of charity as the greatest occasion to thank God. We see a number of references in this regard in his diary.

Love your God with your whole-heart, that is the greatest and first precept. Oh how easy to love! It is not to obey or mortify that God asks, but to love and for that he has disposed our faculty or heart! Who can love anything else when he knows the worth of God! This is the beginning and final end of everything! If we love here below, our life in heaven only a continuation. .... The second.... Love your neighbour like yourself! I do not wish any evil to me! prosperity is always welcome! Oh how many saints loved their neighbours more than themselves! Give me my good God, true charity for my brothers! ... In this the whole laws and all the prophets are contained! How easy the construction of our spiritual edifice! Only look at these two! Let me begin to live according to these precepts.<sup>42</sup>

Fr John led all the people, especially the downtrodden to this love. He gave unemployment to the jobless, gave shelter to the homeless and care for the sick. He was an able and patient intercessor for those who flocked to him in disputes and he was able to settle their differences. To continue his mission of love he started the Congregation of Charity and gave them this instruction: "To love is your duty. Let no one surpass you in Love".<sup>43</sup> It was the Eucharistic love and life of sacrifice visible in the Eucharist that helped him to be an instrument of love.

With this great ideal of love, Fr John could act with great magnanimity to those who had gone astray in their lives. He had a compassionate heart to those who were broken by the economic hardship and financial debt traps. It was the love from the heart of Christ that John tried to imbibe everyday in the Holy Mass and Eucharistic meditation.

## **Prophet of the Times**

Fr John lived before the Second Vatican Council but he lived very much the ideals of this greatest church event of renewal in the recent history of the church, especially its vision of engagement with the world, reflected in the Pastoral



Constitution *Gaudium et spes*. He actively encouraged the sisters to enter in the social field. In 1940s, one may remember that it was not quite common that the religious sisters took to the social apostolate fields. On many occasions, we see John's intense desire to work for the eradication of the evils of Caste System and untouchability which were very rampant in Kerala society of those times. As we saw already, John ardently prayed for the emancipation of the dalits and hoped for an equal treatment of the marginalised people.<sup>44</sup> He fought against the Caste System where the high caste Hindus who were the landlords unscrupulously exploited the tenants who were from the lower castes. In 1930s, the adult franchise was given on the basis of the payment of the land taxes and thus only the high castes were eligible to vote.

## **Leader of the People**

John was readily available to the ordinary people. The Catholics and Jacobites, non Christians and people of different ideological persuasions could meet him in times of need. When there arose disputes and quarrels, it was Fr John Ukken whom people of Kunnamkulam area approached for settlement of such issues. This is shown by an incident called *Kavadi Case*. Once during a Hindu festival, while Kavadi procession (Kavadi, decorative art work honouring the deity carried by people in Hindu procession, with dancing) was proceeding before the Church at Chiralayam, there was tension between Hindus and Christians. Those who carried Kavadi would normally stop dancing before the church, respecting the sentiments of the Christians. But one year, those who carried Kavadi, did not stop dancing before the church. This infuriated the Christians who attacked those in procession. This reached to a communal flashpoint and became a court case. Fr John directly came to the chamber of the judge and made an amicable settlement

possible, thereby bringing communal amity between the two groups. His sagacious advice was quite to the point: "When you have serious matter to decide, don't take the decision by the urging of the passion, wait after a good sleep, imagine yourself on your death bed and what would you think at that time about and taking or giving such a thing....".<sup>45</sup> According to him, it is erroneous to think that it is always wrong to get angry. Following Jesus, we too are obliged to show courage by virtue of our office.<sup>46</sup>

## **Respect for the Ruler**

When the King of Kochi came to visit Kunnankulam in 1935, Fr. John who was the vicar of the Chiralayam church, garlanded the king.<sup>47</sup> He showed his obeisance to the legal rulers of his day and systems of law and order. This is also shown in the fact that he was ready to serve as the village court judge and Panchayath President in Chowannur. In these times, the judge had official powers to settle disputes that took place in the village.<sup>48</sup>

## **Retreat preacher**

Fr John was a well known retreat preacher of his day. He prepared his speeches carefully and wrote them in great detail. There were speeches addressed to the general public, retreat sermons, especially to the religious sisters, and those conferences which he gave to the sisters of charity. He has preached annual retreat to priests. He prepared his speeches, thoroughly basing on Bible and theology. He had a good collection of theology books. Full edition of *Summa Theologica* adorned his collections. He spoke in a direct, simple, appealing style where he could touch the people and move them to inner conversion.

One of his favourite themes was Marian Devotion. His devotion was ardent and deep rooted. In his spiritual diary, many

times we see him addressing 'my dear Mamma'. While the statue of Our Lady of Fatima was being taken out in world wide procession in 1949, he gave an enthusiastic reception at Kunnamkulam which did not have many Catholics in its local population. He dedicated all, including the non Catholic brethren to Our Lady.

## Jubilarian

Jubilee is the time when one forgives all those who are to be forgiven and brings reconciliation in relationship, and regains what is lost (Lev. 25). 1932 was Fr John's silver jubilee year of priesthood and he spent two weeks in retreat, preached by Fr Heradew. We could see jubilee reflections in his diary. He meditated on the end of man and found himself as "atom drawn by God's mercy from abysmal nothing". Like Augustine, he regretted that he knew the Lord only late; he offered to know him better for 'the remaining portion of my poor life'.<sup>49</sup> He told himself "not to sit, eat and get fat, but to fish men: go in search of men...to bear fruit". In genuine humility and in a spirit of abnegation, John called himself 'a big stain in creatures, an ulcer' 'a villain against whom the whole world should take up arms!'<sup>50</sup> In the Jubilee year he thought over his personal sins and repented thoroughly, saw them rightly as "harm, ingratitude and disturbance of order in creation". And he trusted in the abundant mercies of God. He looks at Peter's denial of Jesus and later confession of faith: "But our dear Lord preferred to appoint as His Viceroy one who is conscious of his weakness".<sup>51</sup>

In the resolutions of the retreat, all the lines are filled with a deep gratitude for God's mercy which is 'superhuman'. He said he would sing God's mercies eternally. He felt that he has to avoid the evils like "impurity....injustice ... pride and

insubordination, want of genuine charity to all without expecting return".<sup>52</sup>

On his meditation of the Holy Infant at the manger, John declared that he possessed many things, useful and comfortable. Now he made a 'voluntary surrender' of all these and acknowledged that he was not the Master of them. In fact, he had 'many things and possessed nothing'. He prayed for 'a real spirit of poverty and being destitute'. He lamented that some priests and monks tried to amass riches, using them for pleasures.<sup>53</sup> Fr John spoke of three types of people who were called to do God's will. Some people wish to do but never do; some partly do, not making full surrender; "Some quite thorough-going, abandon everything *hic et mea te* follow the Master." John made a resolution in the Jubilee Year with regard to his possessions and money... "I will soon dispose of some and pay debts and be free: The rest I will give to the institutions in project or to the Diocese unconditionally".

Throughout his life, and especially in his Jubilee year, John was aware of the unforeseen and often difficult ways God led him through but always under the shadow of His wings. We have already seen his words: "When in tender years my parents dying I was stranded on the wide world *Pater et mater dereliquerunt me tu autem suscepit* [suscepisti-sic] *me* my education, entry into seminary and pleasant life there, priesthood and so many countable posts in the diocese, even held in honour now, Jubilee celebrations.... *Quid retribuam...Benedic anima mea Dominum*".<sup>54</sup>

On the birthday in the Jubilee year, which was Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> and just two days before his ordination anniversary (Dec. 21), Fr. John prayed: "As a birthday present I begged of them (Father, S. Heart and Mary) never to permit me to sin mortally and

venially: Then with a heart to love and let my love flame into zeal for souls.”<sup>55</sup> He takes some important resolutions in the Jubilee year: 1. To be watchful over sensuality and do bodily penance 2. On Pride, insubordination, criticism. a). Give Reverence to those appointed by God. b). Never criticize, never join others. 3) Show charity to all, in thought, words and actions.<sup>56</sup> He wrote on Dec. 20. “Terrible temptations are in store for me, people will praise me in addresses etc. Then I think of that I am something whereas I am nothing. Then you will resist me! ..... Dissipation may set in...pray much, be recollected, and walk before God and [be] humble...”.<sup>57</sup>

His Jubilee was celebrated in Chowannur on 22 Dec. 1932. Thousands of people came to the Jubilee, including many Jacobite Christians, the public of Kunnankulam and civil and political dignitaries. This was a great occasion for Fr John to renew his commitment to Christ and to his church.

## **Hospitality**

Both from the Bible and his family tradition, Fr. John learned the virtues of hospitality and concern for the stranger. He was personally careful to arrange food, clothing, accommodation for the guests, even offering food that was kept for him. In the early days of the CSC, when there were financial hardships, many parents were tempted to bring their daughters back to their homes from the convent, at least for the time being. These parents were received in great cordiality by Fr John. They were very much impressed by his guidance to the Congregation and were convinced that Fr John would look after their daughters with great care. He always asked the sisters to set apart eighth of the meager ration of rice which was available to the sisters, to be given to guests. He insisted that the one in charge of Visitor’s room must have a cordial attitude and must always be

ready to attend the needs of the visitors.<sup>58</sup> He was a good listener and counselor, who could give the needed counseling to all those who came to him. He was also a good musician and one who possessed histrionic talents. He arranged that both parishners and sisters present biblical themes and topics from the life of the saints in small plays and skits. It is said that he used to take sisters to the nearby hillock in Chowannur (called *Narimada*) and lead them in praise and worship, glorifying the Creator of the beautiful universe.<sup>59</sup>

### **Chiralayam parish priest**

On June 12, 1933, besides the parish responsibilities at Chowannur, Fr John was also given the charge of the parish at Chiralayam which was 2 km away. He was also appointed as the chaplain of the Carmelite convent. He shifted his residence to Chiralayam. Since there was no daily mass at Chowannur, he also moved the residence of the pious association of women to a rented home at Chiralayam. Since Chiralayam also was a Jacobite centre, he could get many friends from among the Jacobites.

The School at Chiralayam was established in 1927. Probably at the request of the Carmelite sisters, Fr John used to come directly from Mattom where he was the parish priest and supervise the construction. He also helped construct the Bethany convent of the Malankara Catholic church (we already noted that in 1930, Mar Ivanios of the Orthodox Church was reunited to Catholic Church and a new church of Antiochene tradition was established in the Catholic communion). The Malankara Catholic bishops of Thiruvalla Mar Severius and his successor Mar Athanatius, met Fr John when they came to Kunnamkulam. He was indeed a great friend of the Malankara church.

A boarding was started for children at this time, attached to the Carmelite Convent. Due to an increase in the number of inmates, the sisters wanted to expand the convent. Fr John approached the bishop for permission but the bishop was not willing to give it. But, by God's providence it was possible later, when after a brief stint at Palayur church as the vicar, he came back to Chowannur. He was given the permission in 1943 to take up the project.

The chronicles of the convent state that when the Diwan of Kochi, Mr. Shanmukham Chetti visited Kunnamkulam on July 24, 1935, Fr. John submitted a memorandum to get the school upgraded to a lower secondary school.<sup>60</sup> One also sees that Fr John was behind the efficient running of the school, with its different achievements and celebrations etc.<sup>61</sup>

## **Vicar at Palayur**

On 25 January 1939, Fr John became the parish priest of Palayur, the cradle of Indian Christianity, acknowledging gratefully the gift of faith brought here by St Thomas the Apostle. He took charge as the Forane Vicar, Manager of the school and the Chaplain of the convent, still retaining the chaplaincy of Chiralayam convent. The centre for the pious union of women was moved to the old venue in Chowannur. This was a time John had to face a number of discouraging remarks as to the usefulness of this venture. But he trusted fully on God's providence.

While he was in Palayur, a terrible tempest and rain struck the entire Kerala on May 28, 1941. Palayur and its surroundings took the brunt of the mighty wind that destroyed entire buildings, and houses, with many casualties. Fr John was immediately active on the scene, offering medicine and reaching

out help by all possible means, especially building houses for the newly homeless, as narrated by his assistant Fr Paul Manjaly.<sup>62</sup>

Another incident of this time, also narrated by Fr Manjaly, showed Fr John's sense of justice. He gave the job of a teacher to a certain John from Vylathur who came from a very poor background. He gave him also a plot of land in the church premises to build a house. Someone jealous of the teacher spread a story that put Mr. John in poor light. As Hindu legends would have it, some serpents have diamonds in their mouth which they keep down, while they drink water! A boy took this diamond from whom allegedly Mr. John got possession of it, without giving anything back to the boy!. The boy's father, who was the one who kept a grudge toward Mr. John, filed a complaint against the poor teacher and took him to the police station. However, Fr John had the teacher on bail. The case was referred to Sessions court at Ponnani. The court officials came to Palayur and examined Mr. John. Only with the steady support of Fr John, who had a clear sense of justice, that the helpless teacher could escape imprisonment.<sup>63</sup>

*Shashtipoorthi* (60<sup>th</sup> year) of Fr John was celebrated while he was at Palayur.<sup>64</sup> There was a large public meeting. It was done with the involvement of his friend priests and parishners. The meeting was attended by guests from different religions. There were 5 *mangalapatrams* (Felicitationary Notes). These speak of the work Fr John did at Palayur. He started Holy Mass at Guruvayoor and Orumanayoor (now parishes). He showed great interest in establishing Catechism, Marian sodality and devotion to the Sacred Heart. The new school building built in the church premises and the different projects that improved the financial situation of the parish can be seen as his achievements. It was at this time that John invited Mar Severios



of the Malankara catholic Thiruvalla diocese to celebrate Mass at Palayur.<sup>65</sup> Fr John left Palayur in November 1941.

## Back to Chowannur

Fr John came back to Chowannur for a second time in 1941 where he served till his retirement in 1954. There he could continue his charitable works irrespective of caste and creed. He wanted to ensure justice to all, especially those who were deprived of their basic rights by the unscrupulous money lenders and cruel landlords. He helped many families to make their partition of inheritance and property in a just manner. He was in the forefront to settle the land border disputes and property issues. He built roads and homes for the homeless. As a village court judge, he could easily exert a considerable influence over the whole population.

With the rich fund of pastoral experience that Fr John Ukken gained from different parishes and church institutions, God was preparing him for an important step in his life. Trusting fully in God's providence, John fervently prayed that his vision of a society where people lived the ideals of Christian charity and compassion, might be realized.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> D. Chiriankandath, "Chowannur Palli, oru Charithravalokanam" in L. Vadakkan (ed.), *Navathi Smaranika, 1892-1982, St Thomas Church, Chowannur*, Chowannur, 1982, pp. 13-15.
- <sup>2</sup> C. Varicatt, "The priestly formation of the St Thomas Christians through centuries" in Pauly Kannukaden (ed.), *The Ministry and Life of the Priests of the Syro Malabar Church*, Kochi: LRC, 2004, 13-63.

- <sup>3</sup> In 1854 Bishop Bernardine Baccinelli, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly, suppressed all the Malpanates and sent the Syrian students to the seminaries run by the native Carmelites. T. PUTHIAKUNNEL, *Syro-Malabar Clergy and their General Obligations*, Ernakulam, 1964, pp. 79-80.
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR II*, 52, 2.10.1904.
- <sup>5</sup> *LMMR II*, 46, 9.9.1904.
- <sup>6</sup> *LMMR II*, 50, 24.9.1904
- <sup>7</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, pp. 213-218.
- <sup>8</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 219.
- <sup>9</sup> Fr. Paul Chazhoor, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 89-90.
- <sup>10</sup> *Resolutions II*, 59-60, 18.12.1932.
- <sup>11</sup> *Resolutions II*, 71, 20.12.1932
- <sup>12</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 261
- <sup>13</sup> *LMMR I*, 65, 25.6.1903.
- <sup>14</sup> *LMMR II*, 32, 18.8.1904
- <sup>15</sup> *LMMR II*, 20, 2.8.1904.
- <sup>16</sup> *Resolutions II*, 42, 11.12.1932.
- <sup>17</sup> *Resolutions II*, 18, 6.10.1907.
- <sup>18</sup> *LMMR II*, 77, 1904.
- <sup>19</sup> *LMMR II*, 33, 18.8.1904
- <sup>20</sup> *LMMR II*, 35, 21.8.1904
- <sup>21</sup> *LMMR I*, 71, 9.7.1903.
- <sup>22</sup> *LMMR II*, 34, 20.8.1904.
- <sup>23</sup> *Resolutions II*, 64, 9.12.1932
- <sup>24</sup> *Resolutions II*, 37, Retreat of 1925.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatorial\\_society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatorial_society), 13.3.2011.Cf. also *Resolutions II*, 48, 1932.
- 28 Mar Ivanios started the Reunion movement in 1930.
- 29 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 378.
- 30 *LMMR I*, 23, 1903
- 31 *Resolutions II*, 37, 21.8.1925.
- 32 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 234
- 33 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 235
- 34 *LMMR I*, 85, 7.8.1903.
- 35 Thus, e.g. he used to give Rs. 50 to many. This could come around Rs. 5000 in 2012.
- 36 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 239.
- 37 Sr. Cleopatra, Ukkanachanum... in *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, p. 153.
- 38 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 242.
- 39 *LMMR I*, 114, 17.9.1903.
- 40 *LMMR I*, 135, 21.10.1903.
- 41 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, pp. 244-245.
- 42 *LMMR I*, 108, 9.9.1903.
- 43 Conferences 1944; *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 249
- 44 *LMMR II*, 46, 9.9.1904.
- 45 *LMMR I*, 173 (tran.), 17.12.1903.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 as noted in the diocesan bulletin *Navajeevika*, September, 1935.
- 48 The exact period when he had these responsibilities is not known for us. Before Independence in 1947, eminent persons were appointed as Panchayath president and village court judges. The election by ballot to Panchayath comes at a later date.

- 49 *Resolutions II*, 41, 9-20.12.1932.
- 50 *Resolutions II*, 43, 11.12.1932 .
- 51 *Resolutions II*, 46, 14.12.1932.
- 52 *Resolutions II*, 48.1932.
- 53 *Resolutions II*, 50-51, 15,16.12.1932.
- 54 *Resolutions II*, 61, 19.12.1932.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Resolutions II*, 63, 19.12.1932.
- 57 *Resolutions II*, 65, 20.12.1932.
- 58 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 276
- 59 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, pp. 272-279
- 60 Cf. Sr. Cleopatra CMC, in *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, p. 163.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Fr Paul Manjaly in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, p. 49.
- 63 Fr Paul Manjaly, in *Adaranjali* (Tribute), pp. 49-50.
- 64 *Navajeevika*, Diocesan Bulletin, Jan. 1941.
- 65 Fr Loius Edakalathur, *Nallidayante Nalvazhikal*, p. 250.

## Chapter 5

# THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY (CSC)

*With affection and predilection, love those who are neglected by others namely, the poor and the sick. LMMR I, 166, (tran.) 15.12.1903.*

During his stay in Chowannur, Fr John was increasingly convinced of the need of starting a congregation for social apostolate to live out the ideal of charity in the ordinary situations of common life. The society in which he lived was beset with poverty, hunger and disease. Generally, the religious congregations that were existing then mainly concentrated on the educational field or the traditional parish work. The Second World War cast encircling shadow over the entire humanity, especially with the famines, economic hardships, epidemics which were rampant in the society. In these situations, Fr John wanted a religious congregation to dedicate themselves to the charitable work. He envisaged that he could form the pious union of women that he had founded into a religious congregation. With this in mind, he submitted a petition to Mar Francis Vazhappilly. But the bishop declined to give consent.

Bishop Vazhappilly passed away on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944, Mar George Alappat, one of Fr John's disciples at the Minor Seminary, was consecrated bishop. The Internuncio who came for the consecration called for the start of a Congregation that focused on the charitable activities. This could have been an added motivation for Fr John to renew his application to the bishop.<sup>1</sup> Bishop Alappat gave the permission. He appointed Fr John as the chaplain of the new congregation. Fr. John Kizhakooden, who later founded the Congregation of St Martha and was a close friend of Fr. John, as well as Fr George Kochuparambil, another friend, collaborated generously with him in the early days of the Congregation for its steady growth.<sup>2</sup> On Nov. 21, on the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, the Congregation of Sisters of Charity (CSC) was established by the order no. 787/44 of the bishop. Sr Kochuthressia, Sr Mary and Sr Reetha were the first three members of the congregation. These candidates received head dress on that day from Fr John.

The first house of CSC was the Presentation Convent in Chowannur. He dedicated all his children to Our Lady. He wished that the sisters grow in the missionary zeal to work for Christian charity.

By Fr. John Ukken's example and teaching, the charism of the CSC can be explained. Charism is a gift of God which is given to the particular founder so that he may build up the body of Christ by responding to the particular needs and challenges of his day and to lead others to become effective witnesses of Christ in the world. Here the founder particularly imitates certain life patterns and ideals in Jesus' public life. This charism of the founder is a legacy to the posterity. The members of the congregation have to meditate, understand, esteem and observe faithfully the basic spirit of charism and make it the touchstone of their future activities and apostolate. They should also make timely re-interpretations of the charism, in accordance with the signs of the times (GS 4).

In this sense, Jesus' merciful love is the basic source of Fr John's charisms. Some of the key texts from his spiritual diary attest to this. "I am simply an effect of divine mercy, I am saved by an all powerful effort of divine mercy..."<sup>3</sup> "I must see in my brothers the person of Jesus, then it would be easy, to perform acts of charity, for who would be so foolish to refuse an office, a service when Jesus himself asks it?"<sup>4</sup> John has explained the basic vision of his charism already in 1903.

Love your God with your whole-heart that is the greatest and first precept. ... Who can love anything else when he knows the worth of God! This is the beginning and final end of everything! ... The second (precept): ... Love your neighbour like yourself! ... Oh how many saints loved their neighbours more than themselves! Give me my good God true charity for my brothers! ...Let me begin to live according to these precepts!<sup>5</sup>

This exercise of love was not easy. It demands radical way of living from the Christian. John understood this and he offered everything to God's providence. He told the sisters: 'Imitate Jesus and give the spirit of the gospel to the poor and sinners'. It was constantly Fr John's advice to them: "Go where God needs you with discretion". For this Fr John himself parted with the comfortable lifestyle of a college manager and was ready to plunge in to charitable activities in the backward situations of Chowannur. We already saw his earnest desire, while he was the Manager of the prestigious St Thomas College, to choose Kunnamkulam as the venue of his future ministry and to start orphanage, asylum and install workshop and press so that poor could find some livelihood.<sup>6</sup>

For all these different tasks, he fully trusted in the providence of God. He earnestly prayed that God's designs might be clear to him. "...today I abandoned myself into the hands of my Heavenly Father. He took care of myself so long...now... My God, show me what I should do to please you; lead me to the work you are preparing; hence-forth I desire to die to cease to sin; If I live only for your glory, for the accomplishment of Thy Holy Will".<sup>7</sup> "He knows and loves me from eternity! I am known and taken notice of and become an object of love and tender solicitude of a God! In the course of time He created me and gave existence".<sup>8</sup>

Fr John was the chief formator for the sisters. He received the help of Sr. Gertrude and Sr. Baptista of the Carmelite congregation. The candidates from the very beginning of the formation got in touch with the different facets of the charity apostolate. They visited the sick at their homes, comforted the poor and the elderly, and acquainted themselves with the problems of the villagers. They consoled those at the deathbed.



They also supported those whom the society abandoned to suffer their lot.

Once, the sisters came after house visits and reported to the founder father that they saw a poor woman, abandoned, languishing in her hut with no medicine and food. Fr. John asked the sisters to immediately start for the house with the foodstuff, medicine, and a mat for her to rest. On several occasions, the sisters had to forego food. Fr John would give the money, kept for buying rice, to the hungry who knocked at the door of the presbytery. The sisters grew up in the love of God and the fellow human beings, in obedience, humility, poverty, punctuality etc.<sup>9</sup> He instructed them: “Charity is the ladder to perfection. Love is patient and kind. It aims only at the prosperity of others”.<sup>10</sup>

In no time, the number of the aspirants to the CSC increased. Fr. John explained to the candidates the challenging aspects of the charism and the difficult prospects of the Apostolate. Those who persisted, he allowed to join the convent. On May 3, 1945, Mar George Alappat came to the convent and gave the new habit of the Congregation to the first three sisters. He also gave headdress to 9 candidates.

The first canonical novitiate in the convent was supervised by Sr Agnes and Sr. Xavier of the Sisters of Destitute of the Archdiocese of Ernakulam. Fr John gave the sisters classes both in the morning and in the afternoon. He gave them basics of Bible, Etiquette, and English language. He insisted that the sisters write spiritual diaries as well as put into writing their defects so that they could correct themselves and improve in spiritual life. He drove home the idea that the sisters were to imbibe the spirit of charity as their heritage. They were to do the house visits regularly, show special predilection to those abandoned by the society, and to the poor and the sinners. He taught them how to give first aid so that they could be of

immediate help to the sick. The sisters started dispensaries adjoining to all convents. He sent two sisters, Sr Louisa<sup>11</sup> and Sr Genova for nursing studies to Besvada in Andhra Pradesh 1945.

The community grew in mutual love and concern, helping each other in growing spiritually. Fr John would take all efforts to this end. They were to forgive each other and correct each other's mistakes. Fr John was a loving father to his children and took great care in the well-being of each sister. He appreciated their talents and their achievements. He sought the help of others to teach them music and stitching etc. Fr. John also corrected their mistakes without delay and without harshness. In their sickness, the founder father was beside them, making sure that they got proper medical care. He would crack jokes – he always used to ease tension by doing so.

John also wanted to start asylums for the forlorn leprosy patients who were in a pitiable situation in those times. Mostly wanderers, these hapless people did not have a decent place to rest, nor were they provided with sufficient medical care in the existing hospitals. The medical science had advanced and John knew that with preventive medicines one could prevent leprosy, which was also called the Hansen's disease. To rehabilitate the lepers, he bought a hillock near Chowannur (which was later known as Ukken parambu). He sought the permission of Bishop Alappat to start a shelter for them. However, the bishop did not give permission for this venture as he was apprehensive of the financial future of the institution.

Msgr. Paul Chittilappilly, who was later the vicar general of the diocese (1957-63) and manager of the St Thomas College, was moved by the plight of the lepers in Trichur town and decided to commit himself for their uplift. With this purpose, he too brought a plot of land in Mulayam, near Mannuthy, 10

kms east of Trichur. He knocked at the doors of different congregations to send sisters to this bold venture but nobody was willing for it. Fr Paul came to Fr John and explained his plans. Fr John agreed to send some sisters. This decision by Fr John was seen by many others as an imprudent one as the CSC itself was struggling to find personnel for its own different convents. But Fr John was sure of God's providence. He openly talked to the sisters and underlined the extraordinary character of the initiative from Fr Paul.

Agreeing with their founder, Sr Cyril, Sr Ignatia, Sr Berchumens chose to go to serve the lepers. Fr John sent them to Mangalore for Para leper training. When they came back from the training, he personally took them to Mulayam (Later, when Fr Paul started the Congregation of the Samaritan Sisters, these 3 sisters joined it in 1964, with the approval of the authorities). Meanwhile, Fr John Kizhakoodan, Fr John's long time friend, had founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Martha in 1948. When the former requested the help of the CSC for the formation of the Martha sisters, Fr John readily helped them too. One may note here that, Fr John had contributed to the growth of all the congregations of the diocese at that time. We saw his contributions to the Carmelites and Clarists. We may also recall that it was Fr John who blessed the first convent of the Holy Family Sisters at Puthenchira.

## Conferences

These and *Exhortations* are the series of talks given by Fr John to the sisters on various topics such as the relevance of religious life, its purpose, challenges, the vows, different devotions etc. These are collected from the notes of the sisters.<sup>12</sup> We give below some of these sayings.

Faith and humility are two important themes here.

“Community life is martyrdom and one becomes a saint if she lives according to the rules of the community.

- Silence and solitude should have sufficient place in religious life. This is necessary to listen to the voice of God and to live in union with him.

- Tepidity.<sup>13</sup> The religious sister who lives a tepid life starts to drowse; gradually she falls into sleep. She lives in false pride moved by the worldly spirit. She does not cooperate with the divine grace. How terrible it is to lose one’s soul after staying in a religious house.

- Life of Renewal.<sup>14</sup> One, who is always calm, contented and upright, will be a good member of the church. Therefore, we need the renewal of heart. These are the ways of renewal. 1. Control of mind and reflection 2. Help of the superiors and the reading of the good books. 3. Trust in prayer and strong devotion.

On poverty: “If you do not want to experience poverty as a burden, you should love it”.<sup>15</sup> “If you wish to experience the real spiritual poverty, you should turn away from worldly things and fortunes of the heart and mind”.<sup>16</sup>

## **Final advices in the Novitiate<sup>17</sup>**

1. Why did you come here: why did you leave your family and land (St Bernard). I sacrificed all these to become a holocaust for Christ.
2. Do not ever yield to despair. It blocks our way to heaven.
3. Behave in your conduct with the superiors like a child of five years, in faith, obedience and sincerity.

4. Keep your peace when the exercise of a duty (with regard to humility, obedience or patience) becomes difficult for you, thinking that this is an occasion of grace.
5. Do away with self love
6. Do not say that you are not a saint in order to simplify your mistakes. You will be saint if you live according to the norms of the convent.
7. Do not waste a minute. Use your time to attain perfection.
8. Keep silence when you are criticised or rebuked, without making excuses.
9. Take the mottos of St Francis Sales in the spirit of faith. Live without wanting anything special.
10. Conquer your important vice by courage and power.
11. Resolve to root out the demerits of your character.
12. Do not think uncharitably about your sisters
13. Think that you are below other sisters and worthy to be at their feet
14. Try earnestly to be a prayerful person according to the norms of the congregation.
15. Do not forget that the spirit of piety and happiness is the rule of silence
16. Love community life and do not ask for special permissions
17. A religious sister should have true spirit in all things: her walk, demeanour, facial expression, voice, control of eyes, joys and sorrows.

18. Your convent is your parents, relatives and brothers.
19. Rejoice in the solitude of the convent
20. Have filial love towards the church, your mother. Show your interest in all her activities.
21. Be faithful in little things. If you are not careful in little things, you will not be careful in greater things. Attain perfection by little things.
22. Respect all the churches that the Holy Church has recognized. Do not blame members of other churches nor speak negatively of them.
23. Make an offering prayer and recite it thinking that that you are the victim.
24. Obey the instructions of the spiritual father seeing him as the representative of God.
25. Do all for the glory of God.
26. Have childlike love and trust towards Our Lady. The joy of religious life is in this mother. This mother gives us the gift of perseverance.
27. See God in all things, depend on him. Try always to do his holy will, and increase his glory. Our light, strength, peace and the coming heavenly life are contained in the two words – God Alone.

**Mental renunciation** is in the control of memory, intellect and mind and keeping them focused. Keep in mind always the sense of the presence of God.

### **How to practice it:**

1. Be like a pilgrim always. Think that Heaven is our abode and the world is a foreign land. Discard the

joys of the world and walk fast, desiring to reach heaven your home.

2. Be like the crucified. Run without embracing what is in the world and without enjoying its pleasures.
3. Be like a dead person; be like a person buried in the tomb, seeing and touching nothing in the world.
4. May you not desire for the concern of anyone. May you not be known, be remembered by anyone. May you not seek anyone's attention.
5. Be like one who is rejected in darkness. Do not even desire for spiritual joy.

## **Spiritual Perfection**

Being united with God is the heavenly bliss. To attain this, God gives each one the ordinary means so that he may attain grace. Two things to be noted.

1. Those regarding one's actions.
2. Those regarding the doer.

You have to do these in freedom, in the state of grace. Do this with Christ and for Christ, depending on him. Do it with supernatural intention. Do this basing on faith, trust and love. The purpose of your action is spiritual renewal. One's merit increases depending on the greatness of the act, the courage required, the suffering involved and the perfection of the act.

## **Bride of Christ<sup>18</sup>**

She is a victim of love and sacrifice and mother of souls – she is the bride of Christ. Her beloved is the one who offered himself as the victim of love, suffering and sacrifice. Thus, the inheritance of the bride is that of the bridegroom also. Her

inheritance is love, sacrifice and service. Love makes equality and she should do this to become like her beloved. Her life should be synonymous with the martyrdom of love. For this she should live the life of the crucified, a life of communion. She should also empty herself like her Lord. She should die and burn slowly, throughout her life.

- This must take place everywhere – in prayer hall, refectory, recreation hall, journeys, class rooms, hospitals etc.
- It must take place in all occasions spiritual, bodily and physical. E.g. when she does not get the necessary conveniences, or proper facilities for bathing, washing the clothes, work, when she lacks proper food, work and everyday amenities of life.

**Qualities to become a Religious sister:** 1. Have always a desire to go beyond the ordinary human nature. Always try to cultivate it. 2. External qualities: physical health, intellectual capacity, good conduct.

**Purpose to become a religious sister:** It is for the glory of God, for each one's perfection, and for the perfection of others and to do reparation of sins.

## **Meditation**<sup>19</sup>

The reason for human sin and lack of perfection is one's senselessness and lack of mental power. In order to attain holiness of life and spiritual perfection, one should attain knowledge of spiritual matters and get the mental power to work accordingly. Meditation gives you this.

1. By meditation, one gets a conviction regarding the eternal truths, mysteries of faith, the futility of the worldly realities.



2. Sainly images, good thoughts and holy desires are born in our heart and mind.
3. We get motivation to attain spiritual perfection by imitating our Lord and saints (St Ligouri)
4. It gives us spiritual zeal, taking away our spiritual lukewarmness (St Ligouri)
5. One gets occasion to understand one's mistakes and weaknesses (St Bernard)
6. One can find out the devilish tricks and temptations (St Catherine of Bologna)
7. It keeps the reading habit and attains virtues. Meditation is like a fountain in the midst of a garden which keeps its purity (St Chrysostom)
8. It gives occasion to attain the special graces of God. It was during meditation that saints got divine inspirations.
9. In any times of difficulties, one gets heavenly peace and bliss.
10. One can persevere in grace till the end
11. Meditation is the source of the spiritual life (St Augustine).

Fr John reflects on different stages of meditation and different methods:

**Monthly recollection:**<sup>20</sup> Like prophet Hosea says "the foreigners have taken away his strength; he does not know it", we also may not see the downfall in our daily lives. Thus, we fall into a tepid life. We find ourselves abandoned by God according to the Word of God which says "since you are neither

warm nor cold, I will vomit you from my mouth". St Augustine says: "always increase, always progress, do not stay in the middle of the road, do not look back, do not move to side ways; if you say 'this is enough', you are damned". Like a merchant who assesses his profit and loss by a monthly check of balances, we have to examine our spiritual life. The words of the *Imitation of the Christ* must be borne in mind that 'one should try to live now as he wants to be at the time of death'.

Fr John explains how one should prepare for the monthly retreat. Exam of conscience: he gives a detailed study as to how a sister should examine her conscience.<sup>21</sup>

**Holy Mother:**<sup>22</sup> God's mother, queen of the angels, our intercessor before God. She is ever ready to intercede for us. We do not pray to our mother, as sufficiently as we should. Besides, Jesus' mother is my own mother. Jesus is the head of the mystical body and we are members and mother is the throat. If Jesus is her son, we are all her children. Jesus is crucified and Mother, John, Mary Magdalene are standing below the cross. Jesus gives John as her son and his mother as the mother to John. The mother receives the whole humanity as her children. We shall also stand beneath the cross. Accepting the declaration of Jesus, we shall also live in her protection. What prayer shall not be met with, if we pray to her? I will show devotion and respect to my mother, enabling me to say justly that "God's mother is my own mother". O Lord, I thank you for having given me your mother as my mother.

## **Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Annual Retreat of 1955).**<sup>23</sup>

This devotion to Sacred Heart started when Jesus' heart was pierced. Jesus appeared to Margaret Mary Alacock in 1675

and asked her to reveal the devotion. Once St Gertrude asked John the evangelist why the devotion to Sacred Heart was not spread then. The response was that there was no need at the moment; while the end of the world would approach, and when the love and faith get colder in people's hearts, this would be spread. Yes, now the love and faith towards Jesus have become colder among people. Jesus asks me from the tabernacle: "son, daughter, give your heart to me; love me"; we shall give the response: "Lord, you see my heart; I give myself to you; receive the heart of this poor maid". I will do reparation for the humiliation suffered by Jesus' Sacred Heart.

**Month-long Meditation**<sup>24</sup> is divided into four parts. First week: purification- correcting oneself. Second week: Imitation of Christ – after cleansing, unite with Jesus' life; Third Week: confirmation – after imitating Christ's life, confirm it by reflection on Jesus' passion. Fourth week, transformation: change one's life by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Fr John gives models for one month's retreat as well as the meditation on the Passion of the Lord.<sup>25</sup> Noteworthy are the resolutions and practical thoughts here.

## **Way of the cross**<sup>26</sup>

'A religious sister does not become identified with Christ, if she lives without any problems, excels in virtue or if she has high position in the congregation, or has the company of saintly sisters. This identification takes place only in bearing cross with Christ. I should follow Christ, accepting the cross-bearing Christ. When we make the way of the cross, we follow him in spirit. After the reception of the Holy Communion, this is the best spiritual deed for the soul.'

**1<sup>st</sup> station:** Jesus stands before the court of Pilate as a criminal, humiliated and condemned and having none to plead

for him. The world condemned you when you entered the religious life and thought that you destroyed yourself, made yourself hidden and imprisoned; the world saw you as abnormal. You were not shaken as the world so dealt with you. What is your attitude when your fellow sisters blame and misunderstand you? You are fully convinced that you have not done any wrong that is alleged in you. But the entire situation is against you. You are judged as having done wrong, before others. What will you do when others look at you with scorn, losing respect they had towards you? You are pained more when you lose your good name.

Thank Jesus that you are conformed to him. See that Jesus stands before Pilate as a thief. You also suffer as he silently suffered, as he submitted himself to the will of God. Be silent in humility. Offer this as a reparation for your acts of accusing others or hearing others' mistakes. After three days, the Eternal Father glorified Jesus on earth, in heaven and in the underworld. God will not allow that your good name be tainted. When you suffer all these patiently, Jesus will raise you greatly. But if you yourself want to attain fame by your own mastery of words, it will be more dangerous.

**2nd station:** Jesus bears the cross and accepts it joyfully; once he accepted, he carried it till the end. Do likewise. You entered the religious house, accepting cross and leaving out the worldly pleasures. As you embrace it joyfully, carry it till the end. Jesus did not choose his own cross. He accepted what Father gave. He did not hate those who gave it. Whoever gives you cross, be glad that they are raising you to eternal glory. Think that they, even if they are sinners, are God's instruments to make you closer to him. A leech wants to suck blood but the patient gets well. God gives each one crosses that are suitable to him.

Once, a religious had a vision while he was meditating on the crosses given by God to men. Everyone complained to Jesus that their crosses were big. Jesus took all the crosses and put them in some place. He asked each one to take a cross as one pleases; they tried different crosses but each one felt that it was heavier than the one they had previously carried. Then, each one took the cross that really suited to each of them. Jesus did not complain about the thieves who were crucified together with him nor the place of crucifixion. Do also likewise. Accept without complaint the place and colleagues that you get, whatever type they be.

**3<sup>rd</sup>, 7, 9th stations:** Jesus fell frequently; he wants to teach us that there will be many falls in our spiritual lives. Just like he got up, we should rise from our failures with courage, without succumbing to despair. We should bear cross again like Jesus, who trusted in his Father and bore the cross again. Failures destroy our pride and self-reliant attitudes, making us humble and bringing us closer to God.

**4 station.** Jesus sees his mother. Both of them are not sorrowful that Jesus had to carry the cross. They do not complain. Both of them say “Father, not my will, but yours must be done”. Jesus teaches us how we should treat with our relatives. Religious life increases our love towards our friends and relatives. That love is sanctified by our love of God. We shall help them without a decrease in the love and fidelity to Jesus. This help is not to be physical but must be by prayer and good examples. You may see them (friends and relatives) and talk to them in accordance with the law of the congregation. But these times should be one of God’s blessings, showing forth divine happiness and joy in you as well as our earnestness in the divine service. Do not leave totally your friends nor love them too much. Loving too much does more harm than leaving

them completely. If a wife loves her relatives more than the husband, it brings quarrel among them. Likewise, Jesus does not like that a religious sister loves more her friends and relatives more than him, her bridegroom.

**5th station** One sees Jesus' humility here. He sought Simon's help in humility. Often pride discourages the religious sister to seek help and to receive help from others. She does the work all alone, without seeking the help of others, so that she will get the glory all to herself. Let her follow Jesus' example. Only if we are closer to cross can we understand its sweetness. Once Simon touched it, he was ready to bear it till the end. Likewise, only if we suffer the crosses with happiness, we will know its sweetness. The conduct of the sisters with charity, compassion, mercy and their heavenly joy attract many to God.

**6 and 8 stations:** Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. Many pious women comforted him. They are indeed fortunate, but we shall not be envious; we can also, like them, comfort Jesus; we are serving Jesus when we comfort the sick and serve the elderly and the destitute.

**10th station:** Jesus' clothes are taken away, especially the robe which his mother had woven in great love. Jesus knows that the same experience awaits those who follow him. He did not show any reluctance as the beloved robe was taken away from him. What is our attitude when we have to part with our dear places, objects and friends? Are we ready to leave all for the sake of Jesus?

**11th station.** Jesus is crucified on the cross in three nails and bound up with ropes. Our three vows signify the three nails of Jesus and our laws, the ropes; with these we are also bound with the cross of Jesus. As steadfast as we are in keeping these laws, our relationship with Jesus becomes stronger.

**12th station:** Jesus suffers humiliation on the cross. This pains him all the more at the time of death. The Jews shout that "if he is Christ, come down from the cross". Jesus could have surely come down from the cross. But he did not do that. Just like these enemies did to Jesus, the threefold enemies, - world, devil, body- will ask the sister to leave her vows and come back to the worldly life. A faithful sister runs away from these temptations and finds shelter in her bridegroom. It is said that St Peter was frightened of the religious persecution in Rome and was running away from Rome. Jesus was coming in the opposite direction with a bigger cross. Peter asked 'where do you go Lord?'; it is said that Jesus replied: "I am going to Rome to die once more instead of you". Likewise, when a sister abandons her crosses, Jesus carries it and asks her: "Beloved, where do you go". Jesus felt that even his own Father abandoned him. The sister also may feel that God had abandoned her. She should offer herself completely in God's hand without despair.

**13 station:** Jesus' body is laid on the lap of his mother. The holy mother received not the body of her living son but his wounded body. Jesus was ready to be in her mother's lap immediately after his birth and death. She is the heavenly mother of each sister; we should give mother's love to Jesus. She should love Jesus as if he is always close to her and prepare a heart, pleasing to his mother. Jesus, even if dead, lies there as glorified. When a sister dies, the world will think that there has been a loss. But her face will appear as if she earned a great victory. Her obituary does not appear in newspapers and journals, but it has been written down in the book of Eternity. At the time of his death, Alexander the great lamented that he could not conquer heavens, as he conquered the earth. The sister conquers what Alexander could not – the heaven. She could earn this, not by conquering the world but by abandoning it.

**14 station:** Jesus' holy body was buried without any pomp. Those who were with him were filled with a fire of love. Their sorrow was unselfish. Likewise, there would not be any pomp in the funerals of the religious sister. But those who follow her will be filled with unselfish love and gratitude. Jesus died at an important stage of his life. It appeared as a loss before the world. It may also happen in religious congregations. Some die young, and do not live long lives; but holy life is the purpose of the life of a religious. Those around the cross shouted: "we would believe if you descend from the cross". O Jesus, you need not descend from the cross. I believe you fully. You were crucified and died because of me. I love you and adore you. Be my father, saviour, friend, helper, bride and my all. Do not descend from the cross. Take me into the cross. May my soul which received your holy blood be satisfied. Bring in me hatred towards sins and the worldly joys. Bind me with your cross. May I love you. I will die for you. I will be yours alone in life and death.

### **Other Important sayings:<sup>27</sup>**

Your task is to love; let no one surpass you in love.<sup>28</sup>

- we should choose the creatures, as we choose medicine for our use
- The greatness consists, not in living in holy place but in living in holiness
- we shall not be taken away by other's praises nor be deceived by them; let us not accept those honours for which we are not worthy.
- the death of a religious sister is only the fall of the bride into the hands of her beloved.
- death is only a bridge that connects the life in this world to that in heaven.



- silence is the door that takes us to heaven.
- silence is not just stitching our lips but it is for rejoicing at the sweet voice of Jesus, sitting at his feet and for attaining perfection.
- silence is the father of prayer and soul of religious life.
- Jesus is the only obstacle for the comfortable life of a religious sister who is filled with worldly tendencies, having no heavenly desires.
- it is destructive to enjoy the worldly pleasures in such a way as to suffocate the soul.
- the cattle will be satisfied with grass. There is an element in the human person that cannot be satisfied with food but only with the Word of God.
- if you love, there will be joy and prosperity. Hence, love each other.
- just like the perfume poured on Aaron's head, that flew over his body and filled the fragrance over the whole of Mount Hebron, the fragrance that is the mutual love should spread among all the sisters.
- profound and intense internal life gets enriched in the external works and the virtue that is shallow and showy gets eclipsed in such works.
- we should practise in our lives, Jesus Christ's love of the enemies.
- just like the natural place of the fish is in water, so is the natural abode of the religious sister under the cross.
- the progress of the Congregation is the progress in virtue; it does not depend upon the measure of grain nor the amount of money.

- after the Bible, the most important book for the religious sister is the Rule Book; she should learn the rules by heart and meditate over them.
- the day of the profession is that day when one offers whatever one has prepared till this day as a burnt sacrifice.
- a religious sister who keeps a penny as her own is not worthy of a penny.
- when sorrow, tribulation and obstacle take place, go to Jesus, at least, in heart.
- even if you feel tepidity, hatred, idleness, do not leave away the usual prayers and devotions.
- only the Infinite God can give graces without limit.

These conferences show forth the spiritual depth of Fr John and the life that he wished for the sisters; indeed this is a part of his important legacy that he has given to all those who wanted to learn from the vision of his spirituality. We will further see in more detail the ideals of spirituality that he lived and bequeathed to us.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> Fr Paul Chazoor, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, p. 90.
- <sup>2</sup> Fr George Kochuparambil, in Sr. Grace (ed.), *Adaranjali* (Tribute), 1956-81, pp. 77-78.
- <sup>3</sup> *LMMR I*, 153, 1.12.1903
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR I*, 67, 2.7.1903
- <sup>5</sup> *LMMR I*, 108, 9.9.1903
- <sup>6</sup> *Resolutions II*, 33, 2-7.9.1924.

- 7 *Resolutions II*, 20, 3.11.1907
- 8 *Resolutions II*, 60, 19.12.1932.
- 9 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p.313
- 10 *Exhortations*, Sr. Alberta CSC, June 1951, f. 5, Kolazhy.
- 11 She was the first witness to be called in the tribunal of Servant of God Fr AJ Ukken in 2008.
- 12 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 323
- 13 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, p.16
- 14 *Ibid.* p.19.
- 15 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, 24.9.1951, f. 94, Kolazhy
- 16 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, 25.9.1951, f. 97, Kolazhy
- 17 *Ibid.* pp. 20-23.
- 18 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 26-29.
- 19 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 32-46. The date of this conference is given 22.2.1949.
- 20 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 46-47.
- 21 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 48-52.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- 23 *Ibid*, p. 53.
- 24 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 54-84.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 84-107.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 107-112.
- 27 *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, pp. 374-379
- 28 This is the motto, given by the servant of God as his legacy, to the sisters. Sr Berchumens CSS, *AJU Testimony II*, Kolazhy, p. 150. Further reflections on the motto are found in the *Conferences*. 'We can understand the greatness of the command "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" as it is ordered by our Lord. Three conditions are there in love. 1. Children of God 2. Deserved for heaven 3. Organs

of the mystical body of Christ. Hence, we should consider everyone as our brethren. An ever ready will to do anything and to suffer for others is called fraternal love'. Sr. Pauline, One Month Meditation, (Novitiate from 1 June, 1949), Maria Bhavan Generalate, Kolazhy, P. 86. 'Let us love, our heart is created for nothing but to love' Sr Serapheena 1.8.1947, Maria Bhavan Generalate, Kolazhy.

## Chapter 6

# THE SPIRITUAL VISION OF FR AUGUSTINE JOHN UKKEN

*By this exercise not everything is over, rather it is beginning; for we have got ready for war, we are not yet in war, all the resolutions are on paper, now practice them; They are to be reread often and not to be changed according to caprice. If labour frightens you, it invites to reward. LMMR I, 178-179, (trans.), 19.12.1903*

## Introduction

John tried to lead a life of recollection and kept spiritual solitude in which he let himself to be moulded into the image of Christ. It is said that early lessons of spirituality and devotion were given to him by Fr Joseph Kuttikatt, his former parish priest. John spent long hours before the Eucharist. He made the Holy Bible as the basic text of spiritual and religious life. He was convinced of the specific mission in his life. He realized that "I am come to the seminary to become a saint: All the rest should be postponed, neglected. Oh give me the grace to do what I so well understand, what is so obvious to me now"<sup>1</sup> He gave a diligent care to the resolutions he took during the retreat and to practice what he had written in his spiritual diary. The purpose of the retreat according to him were the following:

"1. *diformata reformare* [sic] 2. *reformata conformare* 3. *conformata confirmare* 4. *confirmata transformare* .. (1) *Ingredere totus* (2) *Mane solus* (3) *Egredere alius* : reform that is deformed; conform what is reformed; confirm what is conformed. Transform what is confirmed. ... enter totally [to retreat]; remain in solitude; come out as new"<sup>2</sup> As we already saw, John gave the fruit of his recollection and reflection to others in the form of personal diary: *Lights from Meditations, Monthly Recollections etc.* Vols. I and II, *Resolutions* Vols. I and II constitute the authentic words of Fr John. The first three are written before he became priest (1902-1907) and the last one (*Resolutions* Vol. II) are written during his priestly life. We can further see his vision on spiritual life in his *Conferences and Exhortations*, given to CSC sisters and taken down by them. We can see a close unity between his decisions and resolutions that he took in his seminary days and the spiritual life that he led in his priestly life, as evidenced from these *Conferences and Exhortations* and other documents.

“Prayer is a personal encounter with Jesus in a closed room. For that one needs to observe solitude, silence, control of intellect and sobriety”.<sup>3</sup> He asked the sisters to combine contemplative life with active apostolate; external works should be the result of the contemplative life. John pointed to the example of St Francis Xavier: “Whilst he attended to others, he neglected not his own soul; he found time to make prayers, retreats, at least after the toils of the day, at night”.<sup>4</sup> Perfection is to do ordinary duties in an extraordinary way, he told the sisters.<sup>5</sup>

By daily life and doing everyday duties well and through prayer, humility and obedience and above all by loving Jesus above everything, one grows in perfection. It is a life lived constantly in grace till death, before God and brethren. Perfection is achieved not in a day but daily; life is journey towards perfection.<sup>6</sup>

His fervent prayer was: “enter Jesus and for good, take possession of my Heart”.<sup>7</sup>

## **Presence of God.**

He made it a real habit to grow in the practice of constantly remembering the presence of God, telling himself “the end of my existence is to know and love God”.<sup>8</sup> He wanted to be always united with him and live in him. His endearing ejaculation was this: O God never let me part from you.

This practice of constantly recollecting the presence of God brought him to a deeper awareness of divine mercy. He prayed: “I will be a monument erected in honour of your infinite mercy”.<sup>9</sup> “Let me be here below and there above in the firmament, a monument of God’s mercy, a star giving light to glorify, proclaim His mercy”.<sup>10</sup> Similar ideas are expressed elsewhere: “I am simply an effect of divine mercy, I am saved

by an all powerful effort of divine mercy".<sup>11</sup> John thought that to be desperate is to do injury to God's heavenly heart. He lamented that people put limit to God's boundless mercy.<sup>12</sup> He wanted to live in close communion with Jesus, taking his heart from the worldly things and to live in prayerful spirit. He prayed: "Oh, sweet Spouse, in spite of my weakness, cowardice, I implore you by your holy mother, to give me a big share in the cross, let me be like unto you!".<sup>13</sup> I will act everywhere and always as Jesus, my leader and example.... After a retreat in 1903, he wrote in his diary: "How good it is to live always united with God, in the spirit of prayer, raising our heart from temporal things to spiritual".<sup>14</sup>

## Faith

John was a man of faith. In the ups and downs of his life, his life was anchored at faith and the success of his spiritual life can be truly attributed to his real living faith in God and in his designs for him.

John asked for the gift of faith (he calls this confidence) and for the daily grace to grow in this. "The ruler asks our Lord to come and cure his son! [Lk 7, 1-10] 1. He had confidence, therefore he sought Jesus. 2. When he apparently refused, he pressed still more earnestly. Have I confidence?".<sup>15</sup> Recollecting on the life of St Augustine, John quoted St Paul.

"Where sin hath abounded, there grace has much more abounded" (Rom. 6:1). "To despair is to rob God of His beloved attribute, which is the highest outrage and injustice that man can possibly commit against God. ... "I know whom I have believed (2 Tim 1:18). it is my Father, who has adopted me!".<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting on the faith of the leper, John stated: "In this prayer, *Si, vis Domine potes me curare, mundare*" we see his resignation to the good pleasure of Jesus. Do I acknowledge



my leprosy, my internal corruption and believe in the power of Jesus?" .<sup>17</sup>

John saw Mary as the model of his faith. We have many references in his diary presenting Mary as the example of Christian faith. "Her faith was far superior to that of the Patriarch Abraham, to believe that she could be mother of God and remain virgin. Then when I am asked to do apparently contradictory, or according to human way of thinking impossible, shall I not rather look at God's power to effect everything!"<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on the faith of Mary, John reflects: "Fiat mihi (She does not say faciam) i. e. I am not worthy or nor can I do anything to fit me to so exalted a rank: All I expect from that all powerful "fiat" which made heaven and earth. I too ask God to make me a saint, but I am able to effect nothing, let my sanctification be his work entirely."<sup>19</sup> A man of faith will not be desperate even if Jesus apparently refuses his petitions or delays to grant them.<sup>20</sup> John saw sanctification as entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. "Holy Spirit sanctifies and perfects us. Holy Spirit leads us in spiritual life through faith... Holy Spirit prompts us to act with love; helps us to be away from sins and occasions to sin".<sup>21</sup> The ability to know God and his mysteries depends on the depth of faith. Fr John used to give a one month retreat on Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

He later taught sisters: "We can practice faith by conforming our thoughts, words and deeds and also by observing and considering persons, objects and events in the light of faith".<sup>23</sup> According to him, the two enemies of faith are pride that comes from imperfect knowledge and impurity from lust.

John was a very staunch promoter of catechetical activities and faith education in the parishes he served (Mattam, Palayur, Chowannur, Parembadom etc.). Felicitation notes or

*Mangalapatrams* received from different places (Aloor, Palayur, Ponnore, Orumanayoor and Thiruvenkilom) show clearly how catechetics was a prime concern of his ministry.

## Hope

John was a man of infinite hope. We can surely know this because even in the dire straits in which his life was rocked, he did not lose faith in God. John saw this life as a pilgrimage to Him. He earned the wealth for this journey through the sufferings: “mortifications, humiliations accumulate wealth for my eternal life, nothing however small will lose its merit and reward”.<sup>24</sup> “Narrow path is only for you and for your beasts of burden i. e. passions and luggage, i. e. your riches, honours, there is no room. God and you! They are few, very few in this path. Struggle to be one in that few! For here struggle is necessary, ... struggle my soul to be one of those blessed number”.<sup>25</sup> His great moving force in this life was heaven and the joys of heaven. And because of the same zeal, John thought that it was his duty to pray for the souls in purgatory.<sup>26</sup>

With true hope, throughout his life, John tried to grow in the love of God. In the retreat of 1913, Fr. John resolved that he would not seek any human love and that he will be fully committed to the love of God. The human weaknesses would dampen our spirit to love God and fellow men and women. John was aware of this and constantly meditated over the fall and rise of St Peter.<sup>27</sup> One should not lose hope or be led into despair even in his fall. The love of God and the zeal for the souls were constant motivations in his apostolate. That is why, despite heavy odds, he wanted to start a union of priests who would be apostles of the love of Sacred Heart of Jesus. While reflecting on the agony of Jesus in the garden, John said: “I thought that if I were there that I would run up to Jesus and

embrace him".<sup>28</sup> Of course, one may experience falls like St Peter but Jesus constantly beckons us to a life of true faithfulness. In the Jubilee year of priesthood (1932), again Fr John reflected over the fall of Peter but seeing that Jesus redeemed the Head of the Apostles, he prayed to the Lord 'to do with him also similarly'.<sup>29</sup> When financial burdens were seen to overwhelm him, he would totally trust in God and said 'God will look after'. The sisters remembered: "Even when food was scarce, we were taught to give it to the needy. 'What you need will be given by God' he used to say. He was never desperate of the problems or lack of things – this is the greatest example of trust in God".<sup>30</sup>

## Charity

John grew in the virtue of charity. According to him love is the chain that binds man with God. "Oh infinite goodness of our Father, do bind us together by so sacred bond as charity".<sup>31</sup> He exhorts that our love is not just to win friends but to love all, especially the marginalized of the society. "Love your neighbour like yourself! I do not wish any evil to me! Prosperity is always welcome! Oh how many saints loved their neighbours more than themselves! Give me my good God true charity for my brothers!".<sup>32</sup> Rom, 13: 8-10, states that one should not have any obligation except to love. This was accepted by John as his guiding principle.

Jesus and Mary are again the prime examples in doing good to others. "Our dear Jesus and His most holy mother during all their life were merciful. It is written of Jesus that He went about doing good: curing the sick; casting out devils, resuscitating the dead!.... I am ashamed and sorry that I neglected so long the works of mercy!".<sup>33</sup> Meditating on the miracle at Cana, he asked for 'the wine of charity'.<sup>34</sup> He said: "Charity of Mary is prompt and ready; it disregards all

difficulties, and troubles it forgets. ... I must see in my brothers the person of Jesus, then it would be easy, to perform acts of charity, for who would be so foolish to refuse an office, a service when Jesus himself asks it"?<sup>35</sup> Reflecting on the example of St Raphael who showed great charity; he wrote: 'How is it I am so indifferent to acts of charity and so full of self'.<sup>36</sup>

John also saw the virtue of charity as an inseparable quality of priesthood. He regards himself as the innkeeper, with a great openness and acceptance towards the poor.

I was robbed of my baptismal robe and wounded, then our Lord cures me and gives me over to the seminary. What goodness of Thy Heart! How willingly you poured your wine of blood upon me! So let me also have compassion for the weak and do similarly to ameliorate their condition, specially when I will be the innkeeper as a priest. Oh, make my heart like unto Thine!<sup>37</sup>

This is the grateful outpouring of a 23 year old seminarian. Later, Fr John exhorted his children to be compassionate towards all, without any consideration of caste and creed. Thus, the legacy of Fr John Ukken is compassionate charity to all, both in word and deed. John thoughtfully noted that salt is to season and render food palatable and to preserve things from corruption. "I am by my word and example to reconcile sinners and keep away corruption".<sup>38</sup>

Fr John practiced charity in his life as and when occasions came. We saw how Fr. Paul Chittilappilly was helped by him in the charitable work for lepers.

## **Compassion**

Jesus showed great compassion to the poor, the sick and to the sinners. These three groups of people were always close

to Jesus' mercy and love. John believed that the same must be experiential for the people through his disciples. Fr John wanted to imitate this compassion – the root meaning of which *is to suffer with* – by participating in the struggles and tensions of the people.

“In so many places of the holy writ it is said that our dear Lord wept! In the manger, Lazar’s tomb, etc. But I do not weep! ... Dear Jesus give me the triple tears of contrition, of compassion and devotion..”. John noted that according to St. Basil it was never said in the Gospel that Jesus ever laughed. However, risibility is a perfection of man, which Jesus would have enjoyed too.<sup>39</sup> The real sorrow consists in “shunning extravagant and foolish mirth [*sic*] and in ... bewailing one’s misdeeds and those of others towards so good a father, and in bewailing one’s condition here so far from the fatherland and Father’s embrace and caresses” ...<sup>40</sup>

John always trusted in the compassionate intercession of Blessed Virgin. “Mary seeing her children in this valley of tears was exposed to so many dangers, surrounded by so many enemies, was moved to pity and devised a means against all the dangers of soul and body by giving us her livery, by clothing us in the maternal habit of protection and tender solicitude and took upon herself so many obligations on our regard”.<sup>41</sup> Holy mother “was melting away like a candle out of compassion for Jesus, sinners and for me ....”.<sup>42</sup>

John has also reflected how the compassionate love transformed saints like St Francis Assisi and Mary Margaret. St Francis Assisi loved God above all things; he proclaimed “my God and my all” and he loved Jesus’ passion and meditated on it. According to John, St. Francis was merited to bear on his own person, the sacred stigmata.<sup>43</sup> As a seminarian, he told to

himself that to become a priest, love of Jesus is essentially required.<sup>44</sup> John writes from time to time his own state of being an orphan and trusts fully in the divine providence: “When in tender years my parents dying I was stranded on the wide world, Pater et mater dereliquerunt me tu autem suscepit [*suscepisti-sic*] me [father and mother abandoned me, but you however protected me - *sic*], my education, entry into seminary and pleasant life there, priesthood and so many countable posts in the diocese, even held in honour now, Jubilee celebrations... Quid retribuam Benedic anima mea Dominum” .<sup>45</sup>

John practiced what he preached. He used to help the poor from his pocket. The sisters remember his great example of compassionate love towards the poor. “One day we had nothing to eat. A beggar came there and asked for food. Though we were hungry, father gave what he had in his pocket. Definitely he was a model of charitable works for us. Poor people had an important place in his heart and life always”.<sup>46</sup> Fr John started the *Chitty* business,<sup>47</sup> to save the poor people, especially farmers, who were aided with financial help. He could help many others to find livelihood with the money from the *Chitty*. The Sisters of Charity were asked by him to learn nursing and first aid. He visited the families of the poor and sick. He would later ask the sisters to get there with sufficient food and medicaments.<sup>48</sup> He helped the fellow priests with support and company. As we saw, when Fr Kakku Panakkal from Orthodox church wanted to join reunion movement and become Catholic, it was Fr John Ukken who supported him with great concern, as naturally the former would have faced stiff opposition from the predominantly Orthodox Kunnankulam area.<sup>49</sup> We saw in 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, when certain Fr Andrews had fallen to some illegal relationship with a woman, it was Fr John who counseled him, brought him to better sense and eventually converted him from his wayward dispositions.<sup>50</sup>

He also helped the sisters to found their convents and establish themselves. As we saw elsewhere, he personally supervised the construction of the large part of the Sacred Heart convent at Trichur, and the convents at Chiralayam (CMC) and Mattom (FCC). Fr John blessed the first house of the Holy Family Congregation. He sent two sisters to assist at the formation of the Congregation of St Martha, which was established in 1948 by his close friend Fr John Kizhakooden.

## **Evangelical Counsels**

Although Fr John himself was not a vowed religious, he practiced the three evangelical counsels with utmost fidelity. What he had learned from his seminary days and later from his priestly life, he imparted to sisters: “Obedience is the connecting link between the members of the community, poverty is the richness of the congregation, chastity is their splendor, and mutual love is their fortune”.<sup>51</sup>

## **Obedience**

Obedience means complying with the voice of God in conscience and to submit oneself to the authorities whom one sees as God’s representatives. The greatest model of obedience is Christ and his mother. Jesus’ obedience is to be understood in the light of his commitment towards the service of the people. ‘Here is your servant and let your will be done in me’ was the response of Mary. Likewise, Fr. John looked up to the example of Jesus and Mary to grow in this virtue. They obeyed the edict of Emperor Augustus Caesar without questioning. He declares that ‘without obedience there are no saints’! He recalls the words of St. Francis of Assisi who said that if God were to give for his superior one of those dogs that led the blind men, he would obey it!!<sup>52</sup>

When Augustus ordered an enrollment, Mary did not examine his motive, whether actuated by the glory of God etc. nor his qualifications: She did not even think of the inconvenience to herself: She did not seek a pretext to dispense herself. I admire your obedience and I congratulate yourself and I implore you, what facilitated your perfect obedience! Mary saw in the Emperor, God: Now who is so foolish as to resist the will of God if He personally asked us to do something? So my mother, give me that faith to see God in my superiors, whoever they may be!.<sup>53</sup>

John comments that the obedience of Mary and Joseph was blind, prompt and generous.<sup>54</sup>

John gives a profound meditation on obedience when he reflects over the model of Jesus. He remembered how Jesus obeyed from his childhood till his passion. He says that Jesus as a tender child allowed himself to be carried wheresoever His Parents wished. Jesus in the B. Sacrament acts in the same way. He obeys wicked priests too! ... *Et erat subditus illis.*<sup>55</sup> Jesus was subservient to men, to creatures, to servants and God, and Creator and Lord was the subject. Jesus obeyed for long 30 years for Jesus knows to our nature how difficult it is to submit and on the other hand, as St. Ignatius says, 'Obedience is the mother of all other virtues. ... *Factus est obediens usque ad mortem.*' John meditates that the obedience of Jesus shined more splendidly in His passion. This act of obedience cost Jesus so many sufferings, scourging, crowning with thorns etc. till death on the cross! John ends this reflection on obedience by this prayer: 'let me be obedient in everything, let the excellence and nobility of obedience be known to me!'.<sup>56</sup>

15 years after ordination, he wrote while he was at St Thomas College: "I find [it] difficult to spare my views with those of my superior. I should at any cost try to tally them. Superior holds God's place. He is alone responsible to God



regarding the things ... He is guided by the Holy Ghost."<sup>57</sup> He was ever obedient to his superiors seeing in their decisions God's loving design for him.

As he lived a life of obedience, even his fellow priests were ready to obey his voice. It happened that once a prominent priest in the diocese of Trichur, who had held important positions in the diocese, declined to go to a parish, as per the priests' transfer. Fr John prevailed upon the priest to accept the post, as this would, he told him, give an example of obedience. The priest obliged and took up the post.<sup>58</sup> Fr John told the sisters that obedience made the convent heavenly.<sup>59</sup> The sisters were to "lead a virtuous life obeying the words of the superiors without delay and doing good deeds in silence".<sup>60</sup>

According to him, one could summarize obedience, as the total submission to superiors, whether they are with less knowledge or younger. By imitating St. Joseph we should be obedient to our superiors since they are the ambassadors of God. If a religious is totally obedient, he/she is a saint, since for this no other act is necessary.<sup>61</sup>

## Poverty

His own personal experience of poverty and orphanhood, which we have seen in the first chapter, helped him to imitate the poverty of Jesus. He resolved that he would learn simplicity and moderation on the use of material objects. One should love the poor with the compassionate heart of Jesus. He submitted himself to the divine providence without succumbing to the worldly cares and anxieties.

John writes:

Poverty is subject of the first beatitude! a) Poverty at heart i. e. although rich, to live disengaged as to quit them at any moment

for the love of God, if it is required. b) Really to abandon all for the love of Jesus:...Jesus knowing very well our weakness, cupidity, set a life-long example of poverty! He chose a poor mother, poor foster-father, poor stable, poor Nazareth, poor profession, poor apostles, lived poor without a home wherein to rest his head in his public life, was stripped of even the last shred of linen before his death!<sup>62</sup>

John looked around and saw the real saintly souls who practiced poverty: they are “able to give all attention to things eternal and some way buy heaven for themselves even in this world by the foretaste they get! Meanwhile they are not wanting in anything: For their Father has care of them, who said: First seek the Kingdom of Heaven etc”.<sup>63</sup> With an expression of deep trust he said that ‘as an orphan he has a special right to call God, Father’.<sup>64</sup>

Jesus’ own example of poverty gives us ample thought: “Foxes have holes, I have not where to lay my head. How often I serve you Lord, for things unworthy of you! ... Jesus shows the necessity of poverty to serve God and sets such an example! I, the creator of foxes, have provided them with holes, I have nothing!”.<sup>65</sup> John who lived the ideal of poverty could very well say to his sisters, later: “the religious sister who keeps a coin as her own is worthless for a coin”. He warned that “those who keep wealth and give away things to others without permission does not comply with religious life”.<sup>66</sup> John had a frugal diet and his dress was not of the best class but was always tidy.<sup>67</sup> He exhorted the sisters on the evangelical virtue. “A religious gives up the world by the vow of poverty. Keep away from the creatures... Religious people should be completely unattached”.<sup>68</sup> As the records of the Chowannur parish and the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity show, he used a good part of his own resources and money to meet the daily expenses of the parish; the rest he gave to the sisters.

## Celibacy

Celibacy on account of total dedication to the kingdom of God is a great gift from Him. John believed that it gives us an inner freedom so that one serves God and fellow men and women with great commitment. Those who receive this gift may totally trust in God and exercise self control - especially control of senses and desires. Fr John made a total dedication to God by a vow of celibacy and pleaded the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be faithful in his celibacy. According to John: "Keep better modesty of eyes and restrain the imagination, above all guard your affections; do not be too tender, do not seek affections: Remember Jesus and Mamma love you so much! "sicut dilexit me pater, ita delexi vos".<sup>69</sup> He resolved already before his Ordination: "Jesus, if I love anybody out of you, mihi anathema sit. I must be entirely pure to be like unto Mamma. She so pure, I so impure! Also to keep my vow made to God before the whole church on my Ordination".<sup>70</sup> Later in 1925, he resolved to avoid every willful sin against chastity.<sup>71</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1932, in his Jubilee year, he wrote: "All my sin life long from sensuality. Hence watch on that and take proper precautions and pray; occasionally res(ort) [*sic*] to corporal penance".<sup>72</sup>

Celibacy helped John to love without discrimination and distinctions. He was aware both in his personal life and in the lives of his fellow brothers and sisters, the tough challenges the call of celibacy elicited. His resolutions during seminary life are worth mentioning.<sup>73</sup> He underlined the need of penance and austerity to be successful in keeping this virtue. "The control of the bodily desires is necessary in order to keep the virtue of chastity....; (these desires are) inborn in very human being". John rightly pointed out that the carnal desires are in a way or

other found in all human beings. "Nobody is forced to make this dedication; but once this dedication is made, one may not commit sacrilege". According to John, the motivating factor of celibacy is the fact that God and man esteem this virtue; further it removes many obstacles and brings us great reward. Important principles to be kept in this regard are: "I am a weak human being; everything is possible for me due to God's mercy; however, an unreasonable fear is unnecessary". The women may even be saintly and blood-related.... but one must keep away from them. "There could be a fire even from a blessed candle!"<sup>74</sup>

In his personal life, Fr John consciously avoided relationships and occasions that could compromise the pledge of celibacy: "I see familiarity with ...is an occasion of sin.. I must by the grace of the S.Heart avoid.." One of his resolutions in 1924 is "to check inordination in particular love specially with E.S".<sup>75</sup> He resorted to cuts of discipline and wore chain on Fridays and Saturdays. He exhorted the sisters to do the same. "When there are temptations against chastity, meditate on the flagellation at the pillar. That would help to overcome the temptation".<sup>76</sup>

## Humility

In Fr Johns' instructions, humility was a constant theme. When we read his diary, we would be struck to see the number of times John speaks humbly of his origin, acknowledges his sinfulness and unworthiness and presents himself as a humble child before the Merciful God.

He meditated on Jesus' emptying of himself, hiding his wisdom; the Lord was not ashamed of his poor parents, stable etc.<sup>77</sup> While meditating on Magnificat, John says: "What

goodness in God to have regarded Mary and what humility in Mary! I thank God and admire and praise Mary, I humble myself for being so lofty! I see true greatness is in being humble: For that is the necessary disposition to be regarded and filled by God! *humilia respicit* [ Ps 113:6, 'he looks down on the lowly'] He continues:

*"Magna fecit ... In this verse she teaches us simplicity by simply and candidly owning those great things: humility by referring all to God; gratitude for benefits received"..... In these verses we see clearly the low and needy are happy, since God himself takes care of them to raise the one and fill the other at his own table. I glory then in my infirmities. My sufficiency is from my God'.<sup>78</sup> "Let me be humble as the sand that is tread upon by all feet".<sup>79</sup>*

John recalls that Mary called herself "ancilla" (servant) and became the Mother of God. "Oh mother, I implore you make me thoroughly humble. For Jesus says: If anyone among you wish[es] to be first let him become the last. Learn of me ...wash one another's feet as I have done.."<sup>80</sup>

"The higher the house, the deeper should we sink its foundation. Now the edifice of priesthood is the sublimest, so the corresponding humility.... The higher the tree the deeper does it strike its root..... One who is lying on the ground has no fear of falling, so a humble (man) does not fall into sins; all his virtues are under the cover of humility and are not dispersed by the wind of pride"<sup>81</sup> According to John, humble men always are beloved to God and blessed by him. Abraham called himself dust and ashes and became the Father of the elect! John also gives the example of Peter who acknowledged that he was a sinful man and the centurion who belittled himself before the Lord.<sup>82</sup> He constantly prayed that he did not fall into the trap of complacency and egoism. "Devil cannot bear humility. So

there is no better way of overcoming temptations and defeating Satan than humility".<sup>83</sup> He acknowledged before the Lord: "I was born in the state of sin, an enemy of yours" and asked for God's abundant mercy.<sup>84</sup> Reflecting before the Christmas Crib, he would, in utter humility, even rate his heart as 'filthier than the manger'.<sup>85</sup> A number of times John calls himself as a wretched sinner.<sup>86</sup> "I am ashamed and sink into my own nothingness".<sup>87</sup> "I must persuade myself that I am the least and I deserve the least and last".<sup>88</sup> He humbly made the examination of conscience: "Can I now say that I have the Lord only for portion? Alas, I was then a worlding, now a votary of the world".<sup>89</sup>

Humility's great example is seen in the self kenosis of the Blessed sacrament. "...look at well the glory of Jesus in heaven: How angels not being able to bear the glare hide their faces with their wings! Then consider Jesus in the tabernacle, a little piece of Bread... And institute the comparison between him the King of glory and you, dirty worm, dust and ashes! ...".<sup>90</sup> John always asked Mary to teach him the virtue of humility. "When Mary was told of her Divine Motherhood, she could not understand its meaning: For she had such a low opinion of herself. What am I to court praises, to be jealous of other's success, to be sad when depreciated? My God, I was nothing before you created me and if you wish you can blot me out from existence, I was born in the state of sin..".<sup>91</sup>

John further comments on St Augustine's sermon on humility. The Bishop of Hippo says that there are many biblical proofs for the same: a) those that promises us great things; 'learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls'. (b) that threaten us: God resists the proud and gives graces to the humble.

John's prayer is that

I who am dust and ashes, who am *tam que nihilum ante te*, have neglected your promises and despised your threatenings, God, my Father make me humble".... Proud men practising virtues are like those who carry dust before wind; with shame I confess, I am such, thinking myself to be a saint, without foundation".<sup>92</sup>

He further reflected on the example of Bishop of Hippo who was consulted by popes and revered as saint. He wrote *Confessions* stating all his iniquities, impurity, theft etc. He would not consent to become priest and only with reluctance he accepted Bishopric. He refused Episcopal vestments because of his poor parentage. Augustine would call himself, 'tantilius puer et tantus peccator' (a little child but a great sinner).<sup>93</sup> John sorrowfully looked at himself and wrote that he had not followed the example of his heavenly patron in the virtue of humility.

Another example John presents in his diary is that of St Francis Borgia. Borgia once carried a pig and to those who mocked at him, he said. 'No wonder a pig carries another pig'. Five times he refused the Cardinal's hat and when he was chosen as the General, he wept.<sup>94</sup> St. Stanislas was ready to live like a servant, sweeping his brother's room, serving in the kitchen, at table, in the boarding house etc.<sup>95</sup>

John learned to be humble from the example of Jesus and his mother, receptive to all types of people and mingling with all classes in the society. Therefore, he took a firm resolution: "do not be stunned by praise, neither be deceived by it; do not accept the undue adulation".<sup>96</sup> "Let me not turn dizzy by the praises and honours I may get because of position".<sup>97</sup> If he wishes a fourth vow for his sisters, it would be living with humility in all the circumstances.<sup>98</sup>

John tried to live fully the virtue of humility. Meditating on the sermon on themount "blessed are the meek" he says:

Affability in words and manners, repression of anger, suffering injuries in silence constitute the virtue of meekness. .... I made no attempt to practise it... Jesus proposes His meek Heart to our imitation; He would not break a bruised reed nor extinguish a smoking linen! Oh so many saints, as St. Francis Sales, Vincent have imitated Thy meekness, give me too, the grace and to all those who work for souls. Oh immaculate mother, you loved this virtue in your Son and copied it in you!.<sup>99</sup>

John used to recite often: "O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart conform to your Sacred heart". John showed indignation at many oppressive structures and people but he was always aware that he had to learn humility by imitating the saints and even making humility his second nature. John reflects on the results of humility: "By their sweet and winning manners they would attract all men to them, would be displeasing to none, avoid all friction ...by possessing the whole earth!"<sup>100</sup> Even after holding important positions in the diocese, he could say in 1925 with true humility that 'in the priesthood, I am a stain both socially and morally, I am a greater wretch than Judas'.<sup>101</sup> John exhorted the sisters that 'humility is the mother of all virtues'.<sup>102</sup> 'One who is humble will have faith, hope and charity'.<sup>103</sup>

## **The Sense of Sacrifice and Penance**

Fr. John regarded sufferings as his inheritance from Jesus. Jesus' sufferings were the source of strength for John. By his suffering, Jesus teaches us the ideal of detachment.<sup>104</sup> Jesus reached the depth of suffering. "Jesus, the Son of God felt that dereliction so much that he thought even God had abandoned him. He did not complain". This was to give us a lesson. He gave this lesson by suffering himself. "Jesus did not seek consolation, even from God. How I seek it from God, from creatures!"<sup>105</sup>



John saw that many around him lived very worldly lives. To them he warned: "Broad way leads to perdition and many tread it. There is no law, no restriction, like the beasts of the field they wander whithersoever they will! Oh my sin this is enough for me, now retrace your steps to narrow path". John acknowledges that there are very few treading in this path. ... "Struggle to be one in that few! For here struggle is necessary, in the other you are naturally, struggle my soul to be one of those blessed number' ".<sup>106</sup> His wise counsel for us in temptations is: "Never argue with the devil, he is [father] of liar; therefore as soon you recognize his voice close the door and windows".<sup>107</sup>

If the souls are called to a higher degree of perfection, then the struggle would be so much the more violent; "and then the difficulty of always carrying the cross, of perpetual and life long abnegation are magnified".<sup>108</sup> John looks at the sufferings positively: in our suffering we have to pray repeatedly and pray for liberation, for God is our Father and does everything for our good.<sup>109</sup>

'One who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.'; Commenting on this John writes: "Jesus says: suam, i. e. not any cross; only that one which is his'. ... You have only to follow him, who carries his own cross before you and dies on it!".<sup>110</sup> John strongly believed in the excellence of the cross. "The Son of God bore it on His shoulders, soaked it in His blood and used it as His death-bed! I adore you, o cross!... Its utility, is it not the instrument of our salvation. Did it not serve as a key. It is our armour. *In hoc signo vinces*.<sup>111</sup> It is our hope: *haec est scala peccatoris*. I thank you and when I am sad, let my courage rise by you, cross".<sup>112</sup>

To grow in this spirit of sacrifice, John wore thorny chain, 'as punishment for his sins, for the sins of others and conversion

of sinners; to become more similar to Jesus' suffering'.<sup>113</sup> "Let me be born to a life of mortification .. and prayer".<sup>114</sup> He did penance in order to gain indulgence for the souls in purgatory. He would always tell: "The unhappy things that occurred to you could be accepted with the motive of penance for your and other's sins".

In his daily life, John expressed his willingness to take up more suffering. "Persecution can be against body and soul, fortune or fame, from devil and his satellites, wicked men. Pain endured as penalty of sin committed is not persecution... Jesus in His life patiently suffered persecution that no one ever suffered! ..So give me much and for long to suffer for the love of you and your most holy mother".<sup>115</sup> "I shall feel happy when I have to serve and if I am left in the background then shall know that I am becoming similar to my master. I shall not back when I have to suffer in any way, how much it costs me or how miserable I am. ...".<sup>116</sup>

In his priestly life John never slackened in his zeal to do penance. He wrote in 1922 that Jesus invited him to do penance like Mary Magdalene: "Let me co-operate at least with this second effort of God to sanctify me. Leave all if necessary to gain God and His love and grace".<sup>117</sup> He resolved to make the station of the cross daily as well as frequent visits to the BL. Sacrament and to do regular meditations on the passion of the Lord and "practise some penance and true mortification".<sup>118</sup> Growing in the ascetic spirit, he told himself: "Close your senses to the world".<sup>119</sup> He later told the sisters that the religious should bear the cross of Christ in order to undertake reparation for their own sins and those of the world. The natural place of fish is in water. Likewise, the natural abode of the religious is underneath the cross.<sup>120</sup> God sends the sufferings so that with a little caning the people can be stopped being led astray. Every

Christian, like Christ, is to be a holocaust. John lived this principle and asked the sisters to be holocausts in realms such as spiritual, physical and worldly spheres.<sup>121</sup>

The numerous crosses and trials that we encounter in our daily lives shall not deter us from our Christian path; it should lead us to think of Heaven. John enjoyed here on earth the foretaste of the joys of Heaven. "Ask to know the joys of heaven and excite your heart after them. In heaven we have perfect happiness, everything calculated to fill us: Our senses perfectly satisfied, our intellect and will rest in the absolute true and good. God, I thank you for having made us capable of such happiness; we are made for you"!<sup>122</sup>.

## **Cardinal Virtues**

He also grew in the cardinal virtues such as prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude. He exhorted the sisters "not to act on impulse but to act prudently after thinking. It is a gift of Holy Spirit. Prudence is the core of all virtues".<sup>123</sup> Fr John dealt prudently with the parishners, Rev. Sisters and people of other denominations and faiths. Indeed, his prudence and tact would have made him agreeable to all sections of the community so that he was appointed as the Panchayath President unanimously. We already saw how Fr John helped to solve the Arnattaukara cemetery issue.<sup>124</sup> We may also recollect that he was instrumental in bringing about a peaceful settlement to the Kavady issue.<sup>125</sup>

Fr John also grew in the virtue of justice. He loved God and did all the duties to him faithfully. Throughout his personal diary, we see his total commitment to God and to his calling. To his fellow men and women, he did the duties that were expected of him. He pleaded the cause of the poor and often helped them

by arranging loans, even at the risk of great financial burden to him. We saw elsewhere how his life's dream was to work for the cause of the Pulayas of Malabar. He was obedient to the superiors and showed them allegiance and respect. On several occasions, when he could have raised reasonable questions, he obeyed with total submission and never spoke a word against his superior. As we saw, in his time at St Thomas College as Manager, he had difficult times but one does not find in his diary a hint as to who caused him those difficulties.<sup>126</sup> He says that he does not keep any revenge to those who freely hurt him.<sup>127</sup>

He was a man of temperance too. His food was moderate and clothing was ordinary - however he insisted on clean and tidy dress. Already in 1922, we see that with regard to his visits, food, drink etc. Fr John resolves to restrain himself.<sup>128</sup> Even in the Jubilee year in 1932, when all praised him and appreciated him, he is still humble enough to think of his childhood, beset with poverty and the pains of the early death of his parents. As a Jubilee resolution, he is very clear that he is to grow in self control. We have already seen these words:

Terrible temptations are in store for me, people will praise me in addresses etc. Then I think of that I am something where as I am nothing. Then you will resist me! Food else will be in keeping with festivity.... Dissipation may set in...pray much, be recollected, and walk before God and humble....<sup>129</sup>

Fr John also showed the virtue of fortitude in his life. He exhorted the sisters: "Fortitude is to take up all difficulties and crosses and illnesses which will help to grow in perfection. To face any distress and desperate situation, one has to try to go forward without leaving out everything".<sup>130</sup> We have described how he showed courage to continue with the celebration of Mass at Eyyal, when some forces tried to block the Catholics from

exercising their right to worship. On many occasions in his parish ministry, he squarely faced opposition, but without losing his calm and composure.

## **Growth in Holiness**

John truly aspired to live a saintly life. In his seminary life, he prayed “to perfect the work begun by Jesus, namely to make a saint”.<sup>131</sup> In the silver Jubilee year also his prayer is similar: “Be earnest to pray to become a saint according to the loving heart of Master”.<sup>132</sup> Incessantly he prayed: “Jesus save me, save me abundantly to become a saint”. “My God, you have called me an unworthy wretched sinner to so high a calling as priesthood and daily give me so many graces and solicit me, push me, may order me to become a saint. I shall not, slight Thy grace any longer, I shall try to become a saint and it is clear”.<sup>133</sup> He sincerely believed that there is nothing that brings more glory to God than sanctity.<sup>134</sup>

John was also very sensitive to the sinful situations in the world. While he grew in age, he also progressed in holiness. For this progress, he repented over all the sins and shortcomings that occurred in his personal life. He very well noted that ‘sanctity consists in doing “common things uncommonly.”’<sup>135</sup>

John wanted to grow into the holiness of God the Father and frequently compared himself to Jesus and his mother. She praised Mary that she did not share the mind of Adam. He implored the help to teach him the great danger of sin. He implored to Mary: “Oh Saint-maker, make me a saint”.<sup>136</sup>

Since he knew his own weaknesses, he said: ‘I should do all that I can for becoming a saint and rely for the rest in Jesus’.<sup>137</sup> Jesus asked the Samaritan woman simple water to give her in exchange of living waters. Recollecting this, John exclaims: “how little Jesus asks to give much. He asks my good will to make

me a saint. May I well understand this, O sweet Jesus". He often writes in his diary: "Quid isti et istae, cur non ergo" – If this [holiness] is possible for him and her, why not for me".<sup>138</sup> He asked the favour from St Augustine that he might imitate him, his heavenly patron, as a saint.<sup>139</sup> With this strong conviction, John kept nobility in his speech and behaviour. He wrote in his diary the motto of St Stanislaus: "Ad majorem natus sum, non ad caduca" (I am born for greater things, not for the worldly things).<sup>140</sup> This was practiced in his life. He sincerely believed that he would be able to join the company of saints and bless his children from heaven.

The pleasures of this world, positions of honour and influence, and other temptations were in store for John, as he advanced in his spiritual life. One should detach from these and attach himself to the Lord, he told himself. "Shall I not ask him to attach me to Him".<sup>141</sup> "Lord, possess me, I am by a thousand titles yours. I am entirely yours by Mary".<sup>142</sup> Meditating on the resuscitation of Lazarus, John prayed to loose him "from all inveterate habits, all attachments" and loose his hands to do good works.<sup>143</sup> He prayed fervently to Mary: "Mother, still how miserable do I cling to the world! Mother, separate me, tear me off the world, wean my heart".<sup>144</sup> He told himself that he should not run 'after the apparent goods of this world'.<sup>145</sup> According to John, those who were saturated with the things from below will lose all flavour for the things celestial.<sup>146</sup>

For this he submitted himself in all things to God's will. "As body lives by food, so soul lives by doing the will of our Father".<sup>147</sup> Many sentences from his spiritual diary attest to the submissiveness of John to God's will. Recollecting on the young man who wanted to bury his father (MT 8: 21-22) he says: "It is a good action! Yet for this moment the call of God to

be obeyed, because everything is good in as much as it is the will of God".<sup>148</sup> He knew that God the Father has a clear plan for him. He totally believed it, entrusting himself to his providence: "today, I have abandoned myself into the hands of my Heavenly Father".<sup>149</sup> And yet he did his duties with utmost fidelity. He told himself: "My soul, ordinary actions make one a saint".<sup>150</sup>

Recollecting on the miracle of Cana, John observed that the family there had to do what it could, before the miracle took place. "So I should do all that I can for becoming a saint and rely for the rest in Jesus".<sup>151</sup> "I am a grain of dust, I am a small atom in this world, like a drop in the vast ocean; with me non existing, nothing was lacking in the world, with me existing the world does not rejoice, when I depart, the world will not weep! I am nothing. Evenso my God thought of me from eternity and loved me from eternity" – John was sure that after his creation and redemption by Jesus, he is now called to be holy.<sup>152</sup>

An important characteristic of holiness is total dependence on divine Mercy. Jesus is the unfathomable depth of mercy. John realized this truth and always made it a constant theme in his preaching. He speaks about the Father who accepts the prodigal son,<sup>153</sup> saying not a word of rebuke to the returning son and embracing him with great warmth. Likewise, John also saw his own unworthiness to become God's anointed one. Recalling the Pauline confession of the sinfulness of man – 'how wretched I am' (Rom. 7: 24), he proclaimed that he was a great sinner like Augustine who committed sin against God's mercy and love. He proclaimed: "Neither the quality of my sins nor their number terrifies me, when the death of my Saviour comes into my mind". John was hopeful that "He has a sanctuary for me in his

wounded side: He embraces the whole world by his outstretched arms: He kisses me by his inclined head” .<sup>154</sup>

John also grew in the virtue of loving those who caused him many obstacles and those who offended him by their words and deeds. He would later tell the sisters that they should emulate Jesus’ love towards those who opposed him.<sup>155</sup> Jesus forgave those who criticized him and those who found fault with his words and deeds. This was also the model of John that he wanted to bequeath to the posterior generations. Remembering the example of Jesus, John prayed in each Mass for all those who detracted him.

## **Zeal for Souls**

John was always moved by the spirit of the Mission for the Lord. Following the traditional understanding of the mission, he always gave importance to the winning of the souls: “we know soul is noble by nature as it is the image of God, nobler by graces as it is redeemed by [a] God, noblest by beatitude to attain which it is made. So attend to your own salvation and neglect not others” .<sup>156</sup> Like Jesus, John too searched human beings who were in despair, in want and in desolation and worked for their uplift. He resolved to use all means for the conversion of souls. Mary prayed for the conversion of sinners and propagation of faith.<sup>157</sup>

Already in his seminary days, John prayed for the conversion of souls. When he became a priest, his heart was filled with zeal for the souls:

My God and my Father asked the sacrifice and I cheerfully made it as long as it is His good pleasure and together with it I gave over my whole being through the most sweet Heart of Jesus and my most sweet Mother, as a holocaust to be burned down and



consumed at any moment for His greater glory and for the souls.<sup>158</sup>

A priest's chief responsibility is to work for the salvation of souls. For this he has to undertake great sacrifices. Towards the end of his spiritual diary, one sees profound reflections of John on mission and salvations of souls.<sup>159</sup> John even wanted a missionary union of priests as he thought that a group work would benefit the missionary cause.<sup>160</sup> *Deus vult omnes homines salvos fieri.....* God wishes all to be saved – and with this vision, he pledged to work for the salvation of all.<sup>161</sup>

This was his legacy to his children as he asked them to pray: “Do Lord send many zealous apostles”.<sup>162</sup>

## **John, a Model of Hard work**

John was faithful to the daily duties that he had to do as a seminarian. He prayed that the Lord grant him and all priests “a little of thy charity, zeal”. John lamented that comparatively, few priests labour and are zealous since many sought rest and their own convenience.<sup>163</sup> Following Jesus, John wanted to become a model for the faithful and the sisters in manual labour. He asked that all the works in the convent should be done by the sisters themselves and that they be done with pure intention.<sup>164</sup> “Choosing best and most convenient things for myself ... I must, by the grace of God, in imitation of Jesus, who spent Himself for souls, try to overcome myself in this respect”. John humbly prayed that he be freed from his own selfishness. He recollects: “In Nazareth how many years Mary spent! Yet all those years are not recorded! ... My soul, ordinary actions make one a saint”. These ordinary actions in the seminary formed the priest in John. Thus in his priestly ministry, he could become father to all, especially to the destitute and poor. This was a faithful accomplishment of the spirit of Jesus’

inauguration of the public ministry, proclaiming liberation to the poor (Lk. 4; 18).

## Conclusion

The reflection on the spiritual vision of Fr John Ukken testifies to the relevance of Fr Ukken's legacy today. He was a priest and pastor who grew in faith, hope and charity, amidst the trials and challenges of his parish ministry and especially with the difficulties in the early days of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity. He showed great commitment to God and devotion to all that is God's. His concern for his brethren was not any less; he showed real interest in the uplift of the poor and marginalized. The destitute, the landless, the widow, the orphan, the fallen, the tepid - all could come to him and experience the flame of divine love and mercy shown in him.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> *LMMR II*, 95-96, 9-17.12.1904.
- <sup>2</sup> *Resolutions II*, 2, December, 1904.
- <sup>3</sup> *Exhortations*, Sr. Alberta CSC, June 1951, f. 8, Kolazhy.
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR I*, 151, 24.11.1903.
- <sup>5</sup> *Exhortations*, Sr. Alberta CSC, 1 June 1951, f. 8, Kolazhy
- <sup>6</sup> *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, June 1951, f. 26, Kolazhy
- <sup>7</sup> *LMMR I*, 38, 25.8. 1904.
- <sup>8</sup> *LMMR I*, 63, 20.6.1903
- <sup>9</sup> *LMMR I*, 13, 1903.
- <sup>10</sup> *LMMR II*, 14, 28.7. 1904
- <sup>11</sup> *LMMR I*, 153, Dec. 1903
- <sup>12</sup> *LMMR II*, 96, Dec. 9-17, 1904.

- 13 *LMMR I*, 117, 23.9.1903.
- 14 *Resolutions I*, 8, Dec. 11-20, 1903.
- 15 *LMMR I*, 133, 18.10.1903
- 16 *LMMR I*, 95, 19.8.1903.
- 17 *LMMR I*, 132, 20.10.1903.
- 18 II Vatican Council, LG 60-64
- 19 *LMMR II*, 66, Nov. 4-5, 1904. Fiat mihi (Let it be done to me); faciam (I shall do)
- 20 *LMMR I*, 77, 23.7.1903.
- 21 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, June 1951, f. 57, Kolazhy
- 22 *Exhortations*, Sr. Alberta CSC, 1951, f. 21-28, Kolazhy
- 23 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninmu*, 9.
- 24 *LMMR I*, 4-5, April 1902
- 25 *LMMR I*, 117, 22.9.1903.
- 26 *LMMR I*, 7, 1902
- 27 *Resolutions II*, 35, 1925.
- 28 *Resolutions II*, 39, Retreat 1926.
- 29 *Resolutions II*, 46, 1932. Cf. Editorial, *Karunardram*, Showers of Mercy, 2/2 (2010) p. 5.
- 30 *AJUT*, Sr Seraphina, Testimony, Mariabhavan Generalate, Kolazhy
- 31 *LMMR II*, 18, 1.8.1904.
- 32 *LMMR I*, 108, 9.9.1903.
- 33 *LMMR II*, 9, 23.7.1904
- 34 *LMMR I*, 77, 23.7.1903; *LMMR I*, 119, 26.9.1903.
- 35 *LMMR I* 67, 2.7.1903.
- 36 *LMMR I*, 137, 24.10.1903.
- 37 *LMMR I*, 85, 7.8.1903.

- 38 *LMMR II*, 13, 27.7.1904.
- 39 *LMMR II*, 6, 20.7.1904
- 40 *Ibid*, 20.7.1904.
- 41 *LMMR II*, 1, 16.7.1904.
- 42 *LMMR I*, 25, 1903
- 43 *LMMR I*, 127, 5.10. 1903
- 44 *LMMR I*, 5, 1902
- 45 *Resolutions II*, 61, 19.12.32.
- 46 Sr. Libertha CSC, Written Testimony, f.23, Kolazhy.
- 47 *cf supra* p. 41
- 48 Sr Bridget CSC states thus: Fr John wanted the sisters to have a dispensary, attached to each convent. He trained his daughters to see Jesus in the sick and the marginalized. He is known as 'the Father of the Poor' in Kunnankulam.... When Kunnankulam area was ravaged by plague, he was the Chiralayam parish priest. Together with Fr Anthappan Valiaveetil, he used to visit each plague-struck family... While visiting the poor families, he would help them financially. He would add: "It is blessed to give than to receive". (Maria Bhavan Generalate, AJU Testimony, pp. 105-106).
- 49 *cf supra* p. 64
- 50 *cf supra* p. 67
- 51 *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, p. 26.
- 52 *LMMR II*, 91-92, Dec. 9-17, 1904.
- 53 *LMMR I*, 74-75, 17.7.1903
- 54 *LMMR I*, 17, 1903.
- 55 "He was subject to them".
- 56 *LMMR I*, 54, 20.7.1903.
- 57 *Resolutions II*, 26, 4.9.1922.

- 58 Narrated by Bp. James Pazhayattil. Cf. Bishop B. Puthur, *Karunardram*, Showers of Mercy, 2/1 (2010) pp. 10-11.
- 59 *Exhortations*, Sr. Seraphina CSC, f. 196, Kolazhy
- 60 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, f. 25, Kolazhy
- 61 *Exhortations*, Sr. Seraphina CSC, ff.14-15, Kolazhy
- 62 *LMMR I*, 3, 17.7.1904.
- 63 *LMMR I*, 4, 18.7.1904.
- 64 *LMMR II*, 15, 30.7.1904.
- 65 *LMMR I*, 109, 10.9.1903.
- 66 Conferences 1946, cf. Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 111.
- 67 cf. Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 111.
- 68 *Exhortations*, Sr. Rosily CSC, , f. 90, Kolazhy
- 69 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you"
- 70 *Resolutions II*, 12, 15.12.1906.
- 71 *Resolutions II*, 36, 1925.
- 72 *Resolutions II*, 63, 1932
- 73 *LMMR I*, 162, 12.12.1903.
- 74 *Ibid.* He thought that in order to keep chastity one should not be lazy and should be away from intoxicating material and women.
- 75 *Resolutions II*, 26, 1922; *Resolutions II*, 34, 2-7.9.1924.
- 76 *Exhortations*, Sr. Alberta CSC, June 1951, f. 19, Kolazhy
- 77 *LMMR I*, 10, 1903.
- 78 *LMMR II*, 57, October 1904.
- 79 *LMMR I*, 41, 2.5.1903,
- 80 *LMMR I*, 131, 13.10.1903
- 81 *LMMR I*, 131, 12.10.1903
- 82 *Ibid.*

- 83 *LMMR I*, 132, 12.10.1903.
- 84 *LMMR I*, 148, 14.11.1903.
- 85 *LMMR I*, 186, 25.12.1903.
- 86 *Resolutions I*, 4, 28.12.1903.
- 87 *LMMR II*, 57, Oct. 1904.
- 88 *Resolutions II*, 6, 1906.
- 89 *LMMR I*, 149, 18.11.1903.
- 90 *LMMR I*, 135, 22.10. 1903
- 91 *LMMR I*, 148, 14.11.1903.
- 92 *LMMR I*, 100, 26.8.1903.
- 93 *LMMR II*, 38, 26.8.1904.
- 94 *LMMR I*, 130, 10.10.1903.
- 95 *LMMR I*, 147, 12.11.1903.
- 96 Conferences 1946. Cf. *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, pp. 76-77.
- 97 *LMMR II*, 14, 28.7.1904.
- 98 Sr. Lawrence, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, 120.
- 99 *LMMR II*, 5, 19.7.1904.
- 100 *Ibid.*
- 101 *Resolutions II*, 35, 21.8.1925.
- 102 *Exhortations*, Sr. Rosily CSC, June 1949, f. 94, Kolazhy.
- 103 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, June 1951, f. 167, Kolazhy.
- 104 *LMMR I*, 64, 23-24.6.1903.
- 105 *LMMR I*, 139, 27.10.1903.
- 106 *LMMR I*, 117, 22-23.9.1903.
- 107 *LMMR I* 169, (tran.), 16.12.1903.
- 108 *LMMR I*, 110-11, 12.9.1903.
- 109 *LMMR I*, 174, 18.12.1903.

- 110 *LMMR I*, 117, 22-23.9.1903.
- 111 'You will win in this sign'.
- 112 *LMMR I*, 113, 14.9.1903. "This is the ladder of the sinner".
- 113 *Resolutions I*, 9, Dec. 11-20, 1903.
- 114 *LMMR I*, 106, 5.9.1903.
- 115 *LMMR II*, 12, 26.7. 1904.
- 116 *LMMR II*, 51, 27.9.1904.
- 117 *Resolutions II*, 31, 4.9.1922.
- 118 *Ibid.*
- 119 *LMMR I*, 38, 1902.
- 120 Conferences 1946. *Pithrevaniklude Manicheppilninnu*, p. 86.
- 121 Sr. Sheena CSC, "'Be Thou A Holocaust', SD.A.J. Ukken's Vision of Christian Existence", in *Karunardram*, Showers of Mercy, 2/1 (2010) pp. 24-27.
- 122 *LMMR I*, 141, 1.11.1903.
- 123 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, June 1951, f. 172, Kolazhy
- 124 cf. *supra* p. 45.
- 125 cf. *supra* p. 69.
- 126 *Resolutions II*, 27, 1922.
- 127 *Resolutions II*, 34, 2-7.9.1924
- 128 *Resolutions II*, 28, 1922
- 129 *Resolutions II*, 65, 20.12.1932
- 130 *Exhortations*, Sr. Corthuna CSC, June 1951, f. 47, Kolazhy
- 131 *LMMR I*, 31, 1903.
- 132 *Resolutions II*, 66, 20.12.1932.
- 133 *Resolutions I 2*,, 28.12. 1903.
- 134 *LMMR II*, 19, 2.8.1904.

- 135 *LMMR I*, 169, (tran.) 16.12.1903.
- 136 *LMMR I*, 142, 1.11.1903.
- 137 *LMMR I*, 78, 24.7.1903.
- 138 *LMMR I*, 79, 30.7.1903; the same is repeated on *LMMR I*, 103, 28.8.1903;  
*LMMR I*, 110, 12.9.1903.
- 139 *LMMR II*, 41, 28.8.1904.
- 140 *LMMR I*, 146, 11.11.1903.
- 141 *LMMR I*, 5, 1903.
- 142 *LMMR I*, 94, 18.8.1903.
- 143 *LMMR I*, 119, 26.9.1903.
- 144 *LMMR I*, 43, 5.5.1903; *LMMR I*, 88, 12.8.1903.
- 145 *LMMR I*, 78, 26.7.1903.
- 146 *LMMR II*, 8, 22.7.1904.
- 147 *LMMR I*, 79, 28.7.1903.
- 148 *LMMR I*, 109, 10.9.1903
- 149 *Resolutions II*, 20, 3.11.1907
- 150 *LMMR I*, 48, 17.5.1903.
- 151 *LMMR I*, 78, 24.7.1903
- 152 *Resolutions I*, 12, (tran.) 11-20, Dec.1903.
- 153 *LMMR I*, 134, 19.10.1903.
- 154 *LMMR I*, 95, 19.8.1903.
- 155 *Conferences 1946*, *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, p. 143.
- 156 *LMMR I*, 154, 3.12.1903.
- 157 *LMMR I*, 54, 31.5.1903.
- 158 *Resolutions I*, 18, 7.8.1904.
- 159 *Resolutions II*, 67-71, 1932.
- 160 *Resolutions II*, 34, 2-7.9.1924.



<sup>161</sup> *LMMR I*, 159, 12.12.1903.

<sup>162</sup> *LMMR II*, 32, 17.8.1904.

<sup>163</sup> *LMMR II*, 31, 17.8.1904

<sup>164</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, 150.



Chapter 7

**COMPLETING THE GOOD RACE  
AND ACHIEVING  
THE ETERNAL LAURELS**

*Crucifix is a golden book but unfortunately closed to so many! (Resolutions I, 14, 19.12.1903)*

Fr John retired from the parish ministry in 1954 at the 74<sup>th</sup> year of his life. Now he would concentrate on the well-being of the religious congregation he founded. Since CSC was experiencing all the difficulties of the early infancy, he was to offer his full potential to develop it as a vibrant organization, fulfilling its objectives. He was their novice master, spiritual father, one who gave them Constitution and was the administrator of the temporal goods. Now he wanted to slowly transfer these jobs to the members of the Congregation itself and enable them to stand on their own shoes. With this in mind, he intimated to Bishop Alappat his intention to hand over the reins of the Congregation to the sisters. But the response from the bishop was that 'everything should go smoothly as of now and that all the sisters were content with the state of things'. John obeyed the words of his superior.

Even if some of the sisters were backward in the formal education, Fr John insisted that his children should be in the forefront of loving God and doing service to his people. He gave the necessary instructions in this regard. He was often pained to see that some of his children did not rise up to his expectations. He would give them Bible classes and instructions on moral theology. One sees in his bookshelf theological books, many of them from the 1930s and 1940, which he kept in order to give the sisters updated theological and spiritual instruction. He would correct them relentlessly but kindly; to the uncharitable and unscrupulous, he would spare no mercy. To the offended and misunderstood, he would come with soothing words. Fr John was insistent that everything must be done in order, with cleanliness and decorum.

Fr John was sincere in his dealings, although at times his judgements went wrong. And because of this, some had to face misunderstandings. However, when Fr John realised that

he was wrong, he would ask pardon and clear away the misgivings.

So far, Fr John appointed superiors from among the sisters to the different houses of CSC for a term of 3 years. On May 30<sup>th</sup> 1955, a new chapter began in the history of CSC. 20 sisters representing the existing 6 convents came together as per the instruction of the diocesan bishop Mar George Alappat at St Augustine's convent in Kokkalai, Trichur. The Bishop himself presided over the meeting which elected superiors for the 6 convents and a novice mistress. The sisters who had the charge of superiorship sought the counsel of Fr John always and they together led the Congregation, amidst great poverty and economic hardships, which were acutely felt in the aftermath of the Second World War. Fr John would give classes to the sisters and novices in those times also.

Fr John realized that his end was near. In the months of August and September 1956, he systematically organized all the title deeds of the lands of the convents and the documents of hypothecation that belonged to them. He appointed Fr George Chiramel as the executor of his will. In the month of September, he told the sisters: "O little flock, do not be afraid. I will help you from heaven more than today". "My duty after death is to pray for you". He hinted to the sisters a number of times of his impending death, although the sisters did not realize the gravity of the situation.

John had deeply reflected on the meaning of death during his life. Already as a young seminarian, he wrote in his diary.

When I consider on the state of my dear body in the grave after 5 days, is it worth the while that I bestow upon it such cares even at the detriment of my soul? Oh St. Francis Borgia, may I not be willing to serve such an idol! See worms coming out,

going in, a mass of rottenness; to what state *sin* has reduced our poor nature! All, even holy persons think their final separation farther than it is and they are frightened to see themselves already dying!!!!".<sup>1</sup>

He longed to live like Mary, emulate her blissful life; 'he wished to live in order to end happily'. With hope, he looked to death: "When shall His sweet voice sound in my ears: 'your pilgrimage here below is ended, rise and come home'<sup>2</sup>". He exhorted the sisters:<sup>3</sup> "Pray for a blissful death. Death is definite; but the time is not. Death is the end of our life. If our life is nice, death will be comfortable; if that is comfortable eternity also will be so."

On October 4<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St Francis Assisi, Fr John said the Mass and preached on the poverty and the love of God of this great saint. When he reached his room after breakfast, he felt very weak. He had intermittent fever. His personal doctor Dr Krishna Ayer came and checked. John was bedridden but did not wear forlorn looks. He cracked jokes and brought laughter to those who surrounded him. He was sorry to miss taking the classes for the novices. On 10<sup>th</sup> of October, he received the Holy Communion. He called the novice mistress and instructed that he would not anymore be able to give classes and that a substitution must be sought. On Oct.11, he had started severe cough and was diagnosed as having double pneumonia. In the evening of Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>, at 4.30 pm bishop Alappat came to visit Fr John. The latter told the bishop: "I am preparing to go; I cannot do anything more. I entrust everything to you". The bishop comforted him and the bystanders noted that even at this moment Fr John could share some jokes.

On Oct 13, 1956 was a Saturday, the feast of our Lady of Fatima. Fr John asked his children: "bring my best cassock, shoes, spectacles. I have to receive the Holy Communion in real

splendour". He was, as in his life, also in his death insistent of inner and exterior purity. He told the sisters that they were 'decorating him as one would do with the bride, ready to receive her bridegroom'. Fr Ittoop Valiyaveettil, the parish priest of Chowannur came and gave him Holy Communion. After an hour, the cough became all the more unbearable. Fr Marianus CMI who used to give classes to the novices, and who was the chaplain of the nearby Fatima convent, came to visit Fr John at this time. John was perspiring and showed clear signs of the agony of death. To the sisters who surrounded him, he gave blessings thrice. Towards 11.00am the situation became worse. Fr Ittoop and Fr Marianus decided to give Last Sacraments to Fr John who willingly accepted it and responded *amen* to the prayers of the Sacrament.

Those whom Fr John had help to grow up were near his death bed. Of these, Pathrose, Jacob, Devassy who were called Fr John's foster children were all in tears. He breathed his last around 4.30pm. He trusted in the help of Mary and would have prayed as he had done earlier: "At the moment of death, when the whole hell is let loose on us, when despair, remorse, regret possess our heart, when our intelligence has become so dull, our will so powerless, half dead, she is our consolation, our joy".<sup>4</sup> Holy mother came to his dear child and took him to heaven on one of her feast days.

People flocked together hearing the news of the sudden death of Fr John, their *Achan Thampuram*. Among them were people of different castes and creeds. People were crying aloud and calling out that their father was gone. Bishop Alappat came immediately and said the Office of the dead. He saw to that the practical arrangements of the burial were done.

After some discussions, it was decided that Fr John Ukken's body would be buried inside the parish church. On the evening of October 14<sup>th</sup>, the burial ceremonies began with the solemn requiem Mass. Msgr. Sebastian Chearayath, the Chancellor of the diocese, made the funeral oration. The coffin was taken to a decorated lorry. It was a rainy day but when the funeral procession started there was a clear sky. The procession took them to the nearby Kunnamkulam town. Many Jacobite Christians and Hindus participated in the procession together with hundreds of priests, sisters and laity. The whole ceremony was over only by 7.00 pm.

## **Different Facets of His Sanctity**

Already in his life, many recognized Fr John's holiness. John himself wanted to live a holy life and led a life of sacrifices and renunciation. His jottings on the all saints day, a prayer to Mary, on Nov. 1, 1903 are as follows: "how many were trained and raised to high sanctity, Oh Saint-maker, make me a saint. I am your loyal subject henceforth, make me a saint, you can make me one at no cost! Oh do!"<sup>5</sup>

His spiritual diary shows forth the inner saintliness of the person. His founding of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity was a bold attempt to perpetuate the ideals of charity through a visible institution. His work among the poor, especially in the last phase of his life at Chowannur, basing himself on the message of the Gospel is yet another dimension of his holiness.

Fr John aspired to be a saint and his journey to spiritual perfection is marked with struggles to win over the inclinations of his body and the passions of the world. He readily admitted the inner tensions of his soul and acknowledged the inclinations



of his character to sin.<sup>6</sup> His sense of sin and the humility of confessing his own sinfulness itself became paths to holiness, by which he overcame these temptations. He applied himself to rigorous fasting and an austere way of life. John tried to acquire moral perfection by earnestly practising justice, and acting according to his well-formed conscience.<sup>7</sup> He respected the elders and obeyed the superiors. His firm faith in God's providence, thirst for reconciliation with God and with others and the readiness to propagate faith are all well testified from his spiritual diary and are the hallmarks of his inner holiness.<sup>8</sup>

Fr John lived a personal life of prayer and penance. Long hours he spent before the Eucharist were moments of his own personal sanctification and those of the community he served. For him, the Holy Mass was the chief event of the day. He saw the Mass as a great banquet and received the Eucharist with great joy. He saw Eucharist as the source of spiritual power against the temptations.<sup>9</sup> He also asked the sisters to offer night vigil as reparation for the sins of humanity.<sup>10</sup> He often meditated on the sufferings of the Lord and got identified with Him and the Divine Mother. And saw, he exhorts us to take the narrow path.<sup>11</sup> Fr John routinely practised penance and mortification.<sup>12</sup> He was a model to his parishioners and especially to the sisters in the virtue of heroic suffering by which he experienced the closeness with the crucified Lord. Fr John himself was a good preacher and has preached retreats for priests a number of times. He was also filled with missionary spirit, which is evident from the fact that he sent many sisters to remote areas of Kerala and India.

Now, half a century after his death, the fragrance of his holiness continues to spread. Fr Augustine John Ukken is held in high veneration among many people in the archdiocese of Trichur, especially in and around Chowannur. The Sisters of

Charity, the Congregation he founded, and the faithful of the Archdiocese of Trichur regard him as a true saint, loving priest and a Christian model of loving service. Many people have experienced the intercessory power of Fr Augustine John Ukken and several miraculous healings are reported.

Because of these reasons, the archdiocese of Trichur, decided to examine the heroic virtues in the life of this great and noble soul. The CSC, the initiator of the Cause, was allowed by Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath to take up the Cause of their founder on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2007. Fr Paul Pulikkan took oath as Postulator on 21<sup>st</sup> Dec. 2007. The *Libellus* of the Postulator – the request to open the enquiry into the virtues of Fr Augustine John Ukken – was accepted by Mar Thazhath on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008. From this day onwards, Fr John was known as the Servant of God. On August 31<sup>st</sup> 2008, a Board of Enquiry was instituted to study the Virtues of the Servant of God. This was done in a solemn ceremony held at St Thomas Church at Chowannur. The exhumation, identification and transfer of the mortal remains of the Servant of God was done on 24 March 2010. The mortal remains of the Servant of God was canonically identified and transferred to the newly built St. Thomas church at Chowannur on this day.

The observations of the contemporaries, those who knew him, and of the colleagues were presented to the judgments of the Church. 44 witnesses were examined by the Board of Enquiry. Further, 3 members of the Historical Commission also gave their depositions. This Enquiry is being closed on 23 May 2012.

As a further step in the process of Beatification, Fr Paul Pulikkan, the Postulator, submitted a petition before Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath on 7th Feb. 2011, for the instruction of

an Enquiry on an alleged miracle, taken place through the intercession of the Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken. The request was to investigate the alleged miracle of healing from renal failure and neurological illness, experienced by Mrs. Leetha Joseph of Edathiruthy parish in the Eparchy of Irinjalakuda.

## **The Miraculous Healing of Leetha Joseph Panikulam through the Intercession of the Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken.**

Mrs Leetha is the wife of Joseph Panikulam, hailing from Edathiruthy parish, Eparchy of Irinjalakuda, Thrissur District, Kerala. She is a house wife and Joseph is a pharmacist by profession. They have one child, named Vincent. They had severe economic hardships as the medical shop Joseph had owned did not yield him sufficient income to make both ends meet. In the 9th month of Leetha's second pregnancy, on 1st august 2002, she felt severe pain in the abdomen. She was admitted to the local Lal Memorial Hospital at Mapranam at 7.30 pm. As she was in a serious condition, she was moved to the Elite Hospital Thrissur. The doctors found that she had massive retroplacental clot, that her placenta was ruptured and intrauterine foetal demise had occurred. She underwent an urgent caesarean surgery, was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), put on ventilator and blood transfusions were given. On the following days, she developed renal failure and was referred to the Jubilee Mission Hospital (JMH), also in Thrissur for haemodialysis. By this time, she had developed jaundice also. She had haemodialysis on 7-9<sup>th</sup> August, after which she had seizures. In neurological examination, it was diagnosed that she suffered a brain stem haemorrhage with left sided hemiplegia (paralysis).

Leetha was given medical supportive and symptomatic treatment in ICU. She was in a very serious condition. The doctors told the relatives that the situation was deteriorating and they had to be prepared for her death. Relatives and friends came from far off places to say farewell to their dear one who was struggling between life and death. She was given the Sacrament of the Anointing of Sick.

Earlier, Joseph Panikulam had met Mr. Pauly Puthur of Pudukad at the Elite Hospital, where Pauly's son had been admitted after a jeep accident. Hearing of the pathetic condition of Leetha as he was sitting outside the ICU, Pauly offered to pray for her and promised to request prayers from others. Throughout the two weeks when Leetha was in the JM Hospital, Pauly used to come and console Joseph and his relatives. By now Leetha had lost her eyesight partially and was often in tantrums and when she drank water, she used to have fits. In this seemingly hopeless condition, on Aug. 25<sup>th</sup> 2002 Pauly requested the prayer of Sr Mary Gai CSC, an ardent devotee of Fr Augustine John Ukken.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August Sr. Mary Gai reached the JMH at 6.30 pm. She talked to the relatives and asked them to pray for the intercession of Fr Augustine John Ukken for Leetha. Around 8.00 pm, Sr. Mary Gai came to the dialysis room where Leetha lay unconscious in a waterbed because of the bedsores on the body and the head. Dialysis was not effective. She had tubes in the mouth, nose and neck, and intravenous line on the hand. Dr. John A.G., (nephrologist) and Dr. P.C. Gilvaz (neurologist), who were the main physicians treating Leetha In JMH, could not offer any re-assurance of her recovery.

Standing near her bedside, Sr. Mary Gai began to pray for the intercession of Fr Augustine John Ukken. After some

time, Leetha's eyelids opened. She was asked to identify the picture of Jesus on the wall. After a short while, she could identify the picture. Sister Mary Gai gave 15ml of water and helped her to sip it. The Sister continued to give water at regular intervals and pray for the intercession of Fr Ukken. She helped Leetha to move her hands and legs. At midnight Leetha could sit up straight on her bed. Joseph, Leetha's husband, was called in. He also began to pray for her. Leetha could recognize her husband and join in their prayer 'Hail Mary'. Leetha could now move her hands and legs. Sister Mary Gai helped her to stand on her feet. Reciting the intercessory prayers, the Sister and Mini, Leetha's younger sister, helped her toddle slowly. Leetha walked around the bed once. She sipped some more water and took rest.

The condition of a patient in the next bed had become serious, and the nephrologist Dr John A.G. came in at 4.00 am. He was surprised at the changes Leetha had undergone during the night. According to his direction, more water was given to her, which she drank without any difficulty. After Sr. Mary Gai went back to the Convent on the morning of 26<sup>th</sup> August, Leetha was moved out of the ICU at 10.30 am and all the tubes she had for one month were removed as it was very clear that she had made a rapid recovery in the previous hours. It is reported that the Superintendent of the JMH cried out that 'there was a miraculous healing in the hospital' and asked people to visit Leetha. After spending 7 more days in the hospital, on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2002 Leetha was discharged from the Hospital. She stayed at her brother's house for three months for convalescence. After full recovery she went to her own house. Since her cure, she was not given any serious medication or therapy. She could see clearly and take food.

For the last 10 years, Leetha has been leading a happy life with her husband and son. They are grateful to the merciful God and for the intercession of the Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken. They firmly believe that her recovery is a miracle, obtained through the intercession of the Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken.

According to the written testimony of Leetha, during the night of 25<sup>th</sup> she had a vision of three sisters who told about a saintly priest. They said that 'this was to serve the cause of a saint'. She did not grasp the meaning. She thought that these words were about her. She was bewildered and pleaded that she did not want to become a saint. Their response, according to Leetha, was "do not be afraid, God will look after everything". She did not understand the meaning of this vision.

In August 2010, Leetha was seeing the telefilm "Achan Thamburan", a documentary in Shalom TV on Fr Augustine John Ukken. There is a dialogue in the film where Fr Augustine John says, "Do not be afraid, the Lord will look after everything". She recollected that these words were the same as she heard in her dream in the early morning of 26<sup>th</sup> August. She believed firmly that it was through the intercession of the Servant of God Fr. Augustine John Ukken that she got the miraculous healing. She also believes that with this healing, she has a call to pray for her brothers, providentially named Augustine and John. She says that together with her healing, she also got the gift of tongues.

To conclude: On the August 25<sup>th</sup> night, there was a sudden or rapid recovery for Leetha, not explained by the medical science. This was an instantaneous cure as the healing took place in the span of a few hours during the night so that she could be moved to an ordinary ward in the next morning. After this rapid recovery, there was the gradual recuperation. The doctors have

certified that for all practical purposes, Leetha's cure has been complete and permanent; there has been no relapse for the last 10 years. Her present condition is normal and stable, and she does not use any medicine.

The medical experts regard the cure as something beyond their medical experience and practice. They recognize that the rapid recovery could be owing to 'prayer' and 'an unseen hand, beyond reason'.

The report of the alleged miraculous healing was submitted to Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath by the Postulator on 7<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011. His Grace established a Board of Diocesan Inquiry on 12 the July 2011. The Board of Inquiry examined twenty one witnesses including medical experts and verified all the pertinent documents. This Enquiry would be concluded on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

## **Fr Augustine John Ukken on the path to Sainthood**

Besides the spiritual diary, a number of biographies and articles that have been written on Fr Ukken give us ample sources for a further profound study on this great son of the Church. The Congregation of Charity would like that their founder reach the honours of the altar. In the last 56 years after his death, they believe, they have experienced the protective hand of their founder.

In saints, the church is taught "to know a most safe path by which, despite the vicissitudes of the world, and in keeping with the state of life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, holiness" (LG 50, II Vat. Council). The Beatification of Fr Augustine John Ukken would present the Syro Malabar church and the Universal church a great model of Christian life where prayer

and work are intertwined in an exemplary way. He will be a model for the diocesan priests, and also for the religious, combining the social apostolate and a deep prayerful life. Fr Ukken's total submission to the authorities and readiness to be sent anywhere will clearly act as an example of priestly obedience. Fr Ukken can act as a role model for interreligious dialogue and ecumenism, the need of which is all the more self evident in these times. Finally, the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity would be happy indeed to present their founder Fr Augustine John Ukken as a model for all their members, especially when he is raised to the veneration of the altar.

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> *LMMR I*, 14, 1903.
- <sup>2</sup> Respectively *LMMR I*, 141, 1903. *LMMR I*, 107, 7.9.1903.
- <sup>3</sup> *Exhortations*: Sr Rosily, 1949, 4<sup>th</sup> day meditation, Maria Bhavan Generalate, Kolazhy
- <sup>4</sup> *LMMR I*, 15-16, 1903
- <sup>5</sup> *LMMR I*, 143, 1903
- <sup>6</sup> V. Ukken, *The Moral Vision of Rev. Fr. Augustine John Ukken*, Charity Publications, Maria Bhavan Generalate, Kolazhy, 2006, 10-20, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 10-20
- <sup>9</sup> *LMMR I*, 70-71, 8 and 10. 7.1903
- <sup>10</sup> *Kalatheethanaya Karmayogi*, pp. 38-41.
- <sup>11</sup> *LMMR I*, 117, 22.9.1903.
- <sup>12</sup> *Resolutions II*, 31, Retreat 1922.



# CHRONOLOGY OF FR. AUGUSTINE JOHN UKKEN

Birth at Thoyakkavu - 19.12.1880.

Baptism at Enammavu - 26.12.1880.

Mother's death - 1883.

Father's death - 1886

Childhood and primary education at Parappur - 1880—  
1892.c

Completing School studies at Trichur - 1895—1898

Decision to become Priest - 1898

Seminary studies at Kandy, Sri Lanka - 1898—1907

Ordination at Kandy - 21.12.1907

Assistant Manager of the St Thomas College, Trichur -  
1908—1909

Parish priest, Kandassankadavu – 1909-Sept-Dec.

Rector Minor Seminary, Trichur - 1910—1917

Secretary to Mar John Menachery - 1913—1917

Parish priest of Lourdes Cathedral, Trichur - 1917—1918

Parish priest of Kottapady - 1918-1921.

Manager of the St Thomas College, Trichur - 1921- 1925

Parish priest Mattom - 1925-1928.

Parish priest Chowannur - 1928-1939, 1941-53

Parish priest (also) Chiralayam - 1933-1939

Parish priest of Palayur - 1939-1941

Parish priest in charge - Arthat, Anjoor, Cheror, Eyyal, Orumanayoor, Guruvayoor, Parempadam, Vadanappilly, Vellarakad parishes.

Foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity – 21.11.1944.

Panchayath President (head of local civic administration) and local court judge of Chowannur (period, not known).

Chaplain of the CSC Convent in Chowannur 1954-56

Death at Chowannur the 13.10. 1956.

Start of the Canonization Process 30.11.2007

Servant of God 24.8.2008

Erection of the Archdiocesan Tribunal 31.8.2008

Exhumation, Identification and Transfer of the Remains of the Servant of God 24.3.2010

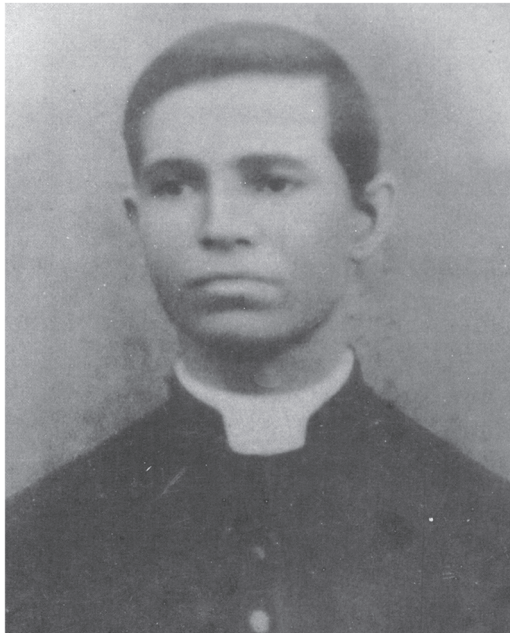
Conclusion of the Archdiocesan Tribunal 23.5.2012

Erection of the Miracle Tribunal 12.7.2011

Conclusion of the Miracle Tribunal 28.6.2012



**Young Fr John**





**Rector of the Minor Seminary**



**Fr John's Personal belongings**







**St Thomas Church, Chowannur**



**Journey for Eternal Reward**



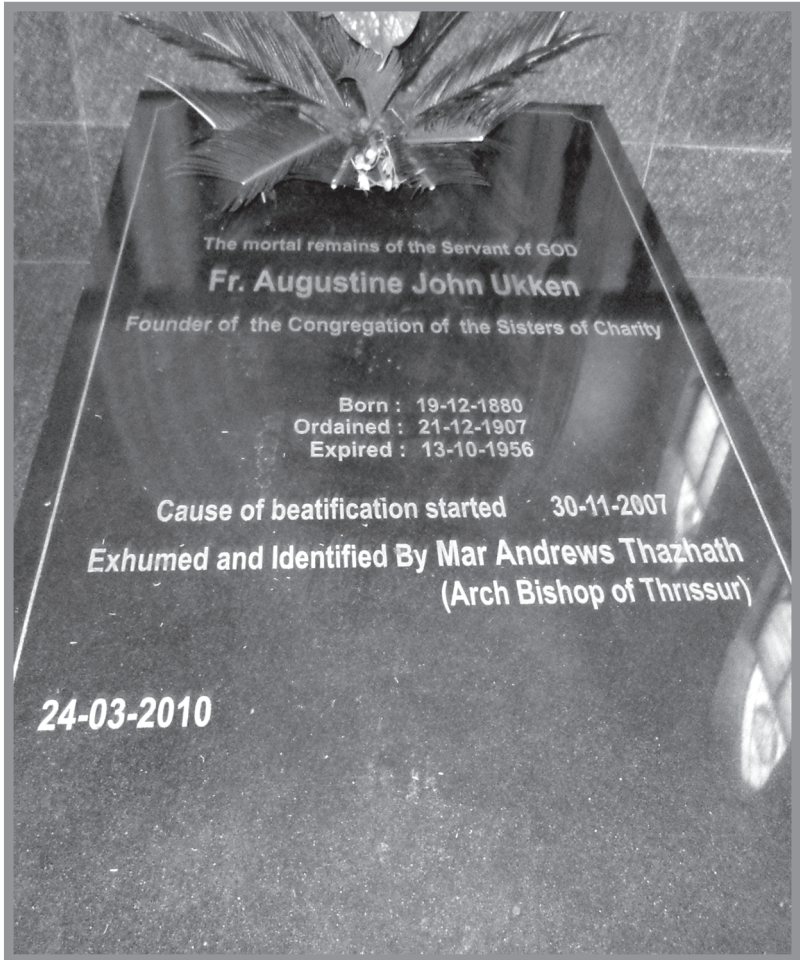
## **Exhumation, identification and transfer of the mortal remains of the Servant of God, 24-3-2010**

Tribunal Members: 1. Rev. Dr. Thomas Srampickal, Episcopal Delegate 2. Rev. Dr. Francis Alloor, Promotor of Justice 3. Rev. Fr. Raphael Akkamattathil, Notary 4. Dr. Tony Joseph, Medical Doctor 5. Dr. Nelson Chandy, Medical Doctor 6. Rev. Sr. Grace, CSC, Witness 7. Mrs. Rosy Chazhoor, Witness 8. Mr. Thomas M.R, Helper 9. Mr. Wilson T.O, Helper 10. Mr. Venu A.A, Helper 11. Mr. Baby Varghese, Photographer



**Conclusion of the Miracle Tribunal, 28-6-2012**





**The Tomb of the Servant of God**



## **The Tribunal for the enquiry on the life and virtues of the Servant of God**

Tribunal Members:- 1. Rev. Dr. Thomas Srampickal, Episcopal Delegate 2. Mar Paul Alappatt, Promoter of Justice 3. Rev. Fr. Raju Kokkan, Notary 4. Mrs. Annakutty Jose Thanchan, Vice Notary 5. Mrs. Leena Kurian Kodiath, Vice Notary 6. Rev. Sr. Canisia CSC, Copyist 7. Rev. Sr. Jerry CSC, Copyist 8. Rev. Sr. Alisha CSC, Copyist. Postulator Fr Paul Pulikkan, Vice Postulator, Sr Janet CSC



## **The Tribunal for the enquiry on the Miracle attributed to the Servant of God**

Tribunal members:- 1. Msgr. George Manadan, Episcopal Delegate 2. Fr. Mathew Kuttikottayil, Promoter of Justice 3. Fr. Frango Puthiri, Notary  
4. Sr. Sheena CSC, Vice Notary 5. Sr. Pauline CSC, Copyist 6. Sr. Felicitia CMC, Translator 7. Dr. Babu D. Parakkal, Medical Expert.

# PRAYER FOR CANONIZATION

God our Father, glorify Servant of God Fr Augustine John Ukken, who following your Holy Son, toiled to bring the poor and destitute to You by his loving service. If it is for Your greater glory and the salvation of souls, we beseech You to raise to sainthood Your humble servant.

God our Father, as a sign of the eternal bliss that Your beloved Servant enjoys now, give us this special grace.... through his intercession. Amen.

*3 Glory be to the Father*

*Imprimatur:*

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NB: Reports of favours received through his intercession may be kindly addressed to.