

CHAPTER IV

Formation of a religious community

The history of the formation of an indigenous religious order in India is inextricably bound up with the names of three holy priests of outstanding personal integrity, worth and organisational talents. Those priests were Fr. Thomas Palackal, Fr. Thomas Porookara, and Fr. Kuriackos Elias Chavara. They were each men cast in very austere traits with hearts of steel. They were capable of pushing on any desired objective even in the face of most discouraging experiences. They differed considerably in age. As mentioned earlier, the first of them was an ordained priest when the last was only a babe in arms. The middle one of the triad was ordained six years before the last. This is suggestive of the role which the three of them could claim in the achievement of the final objective of a body of religious priests in the Syrian hierarchy. The ascetic habits of Fr. Palackal developed in him a spirituality and a personality which inspired him to communicate a similar training to his disciples. He expected to form of them an indigenous institution, dedicated essentially to the service of God. Fr. Thomas Porookara, was also an exemplary priest who had remarkable success in parish work. He was a scholarly priest too, having mastered Latin and Portuguese in addition to Syriac. The influence which he exerted on his parishioners in general and the esteem in which he was held by all public men who came across him, won for him the attention of higher authorities. He was easily the choice to be the Secretary of the new Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. To be more correct, the first choice was Fr. Palackal. But he preferred to continue

with the work which was too dear to his heart, the forming of priests. So he recommended his esteemed colleague, Fr. Thomas Porookara. Thus were Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porookara brought together in positions of trust and influence beside the Vicar Apostolic. Both of them were men of God, bent on withdrawing from the world. Between them they discussed the objectives and the means. Considering the difference in age and position and responsibilities undertaken, it must have been Fr. Palackal who suggested to the junior priest, certain ideas of a life of renunciation or withdrawal from the world and that the latter approved it. It is equally likely that Father Porookara as secretary had come across the carmelite order and by his intimate association with them developed the idea of starting a religious order. However, jointly they placed the idea before the Vicar Apostolic. Impressed by the earnestness of the two priests, but reluctant to give up their service entirely, the pastor approved the idea partially and suggested to them the formation of a religious order in which other members may join and a strong body would ultimately result.

The youngest of the trio was Father Kuriackos about twenty years junior to Father Palackal and five years junior to Fr. Porookara. He was however the child of promise to Father Palackal. All along Fr. Palackal had been extending a protecting as well as fatherly attitude towards him. After his ordination and first mass, Father Kuriackos continued to stay in and about his own parish, zealously attending to parish work. He had been specially careful to preach at all Sunday masses. His exhortations and guidance were received very well by his parishioners. He worked up the erring, truant, lazy, indifferent members of his folk to ardent piety and thus reformed their ways. Numerous comments have been recorded of the penetrating power and lasting influence of his sermons. This was



especially remarkable at a time when such sermons were somewhat rare. Even while thus faithfully performing his mission or vocation as a labourer in the vineyard of Christ. Fr. Palackal had called him to the seminary at Pallipuram to pursue what he considered a much more effective service, namely preparing better labourers for the field. The veteran priest-maker, Fr. Palackal probably had a prophetic vision and he saw that Father Kuriackos was an exemplary force that would inspire, strengthen and rouse the priests from coldness and materialistic leanings. He might have mentioned to the young cleric or scholastic, his longings for creating an ascetic, unselfish, disciplined, poor, contemplative, priestly congregation that would ferment the leaven of the land. This desire was so pronounced, so commanding, so absorbing in the elderly Malpan, that it made a very deep impression on the mind of Fr. Kuriackos. Even during his ordination service, while co-operating with the ordaining bishop as co-celebrant of the mass, he had prayed specifically for the favour of the establishment and growth of a religious congregation of priests in this land. No wonder then that Fr. Kuriackos was called up from Parish work and commissioned to officiate in place of the scholarly Malpan himself whenever he was away. Thus did God bring together the famous trio of founders of the Carmelite order, around the seminary and see of Verapoly.

When Mgr. Maurilius had approved the idea of a retired life for the two senior priests, subject to the vital modification he himself proposed, of founding a convent for themselves and other probable recruits, the group started constructive action. First and foremost, funds had to be collected to establish a foundation. The existing records show that a substantial contribution was forthcoming from Kuttanad area. This must have been due in no small measure to the personal influence of

Father Kuriackos amidst his own people. Funds did not constitute everything for an organisation even though they were absolutely necessary and meant much. The success of the whole novel organisation was mainly in the calibre and discipline of the members who were to congregate and in the natural conveniences and attractions offered by the site. Living arrangements made by the founders were also of importance.

The problems connected with the search, the choice of site, the construction of quarters, the selection of novices, their training and initiative constitute material for a novel that would justify the saying "truth is stranger than fiction".

Fr. Palackal, the senior most member of the group, realised the magnitude of the responsibility that was vested in him with the receipt of contribution from many parishes. He led the search for an ideal place suitable for a life of quiet retirement in contemplation of God. Good and healthy surroundings, easy accessibility, plentiful supply of drinking water, topography convenient for constructing buildings, all these were relevant factors affecting the choice. It was practically difficult to find a place suitable from all angles. Fr. Porookara also took turns in this arduous quest. The two of them explored a number of possible sites in north Travancore region, but the searches were not successful. Father Kuriackos officiated for the Malpan at Pallipuram while he was on this search. However, there were occasions when he also joined the squad or made enquiries by himself. Parishes which had contributed in money or kind for the foundation, offered probable sites all of which had to be considered.

The failure to come across any site even remotely suitable weighed heavily on the minds of the pioneering priests. However, before long the pioneers hit upon a spot

The next in order of chronology is the foundation at Elthuruth. Surrounded by wet lands, it often appears like an island. Possibly that is how it is called 'El-thuruth', island of God. Thus even the name of the place is significant. This was started first at Aranattukara on the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady in 1858. The foundation stone was laid by Father Kuriackos himself. Very soon with the help of the northern parishes mainly, the monastery and chapel at Elthuruthu were built and completed in 1866. The Prior General himself visited the monastery and blessed the new church and said first mass there.

Like Mannanam in the south, Elthurth in the North has been a stronghold of the faith during these years. Those who look for a quiet secluded place for retreat, or contemplation can still well look for it there, in spite of the noisy appendages to it in the form of a high school and a printing Press. Both have been of great and immeasurable service to the cause of the faith during the ninety years of its existence. It is perhaps the first religious house in the land which attempted to run an industrial school.

One of the unsuccessful foundations which were short-lived, was located at Plasanal. This was not founded by Father Kuriackos. On the contrary, it was established by one of those priests who had left the order from Mannanam. After the death of this founder, the institution was entrusted to the Carmelites. They found the place ill suited. One of the monks died of malaria in the house. Gradually, the foundation was disestablished and the church and rectory were handed back to the nearest local parish.

The monastery at Vazhakulam is perhaps the one which has the longest history behind its inception. It was conceived as early as 1837, but was in fruition only as late as 1859. A seminary was opened in this monastery in 1866. A high school also was started in 1891.



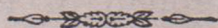
The Ampazhakad foundation was raised in view of the scope for missionary work in the area, judging from the missionary labour of St. Francis Xavier and the Jesuit fathers. It is today one of the well-established houses. Day after day, the poor of the place get a noon meal at the portals of this house of God. Ever since the novitiate at Coonammavu was lost to the Syrians in 1889, Ampazhakad was the novitiate for the congregation.

The last of the foundations which Father Kuriackos saw was the one nearest to his home. In 1861, some monks preached a mission in Pulincunnu. At the close of it, the parishioners requested the bishop to establish a monastery there and offered full co-operation. Work on the house was completed by 1866. A seminary was established here six years later. However, this was raised to the privileges and full stature of a religious foundation only in 1885. A high school forms an attractive complement to this monastery in the home of the holy founder himself.

The people of Mutholy, near Palai had requested of the bishop, the privilege of a monastic foundation as early as 1867. This prayer was granted in 1870 and the foundation was laid. But it took about fifteen years before a formal monastery was established there.

Founders of various religious orders and other holy or pious institutions had often to meet with very many trials and difficulties and failures and disappointments. They were often subject to severe and serious misunderstandings. But the case of Father Kuriackos seems quite different. The outstanding personal qualities of head and heart of this Servant of God won for him a respectability and appreciation which stood him in good stead in organising these foundations. The amount of personal effort by way of inspection, discussion, rapprochement, conciliation, organisation and

financial arrangements, which Fr. Kuriackos put in is immeasurable. An idea, however, can be formed only by the magnitude of the achievements in the various fields. Primarily he worked towards the establishment of a religious community of priests. But his was not a purely other-worldly life. He knew realistically enough, that, while the Kingdom of God was not of earth, the earth and its resources and its people were all to be oriented towards Him. He knew that, while he and his colleagues, the monks, could sanctify their lives by exclusive cloistered contemplation, they had an opportunity and an obligation to bring up their fellowmen also with them. This led him to take up the cause of social service measures like education, and publicity, in both of which he achieved enviable success. He tried to make every foundation for prayer and contemplation a social service centre also. His dreams are being fulfilled by his children to a great extent. The schools, the colleges, the printing presses, the daily newspapers, the monthlies, the dispensaries, the pilgrimage shrines, the catechism centres, the poor feeding centres and other humanitarian and religious activities undertaken by his spiritual children are all contributions in this line.





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