

## CHAPTER – 2

### BRIEF HISTORY OF BLESSED MARIAM THRESIA

From childhood onwards Mariam Thresia's life was a spiritual journey towards high perfection. She gave the whole of herself to God and His people. In this chapter we aim at having a bird's eye view of her life's journey in three phases - spiritual awakening, spiritual flowering and spiritual fruition.

#### 1. Spiritual Awakening

This section discusses the spiritual sources which contributed to the awakening of child Thresia to initiate her spiritual journey. It also gives an idea of her heroic childhood experience, her family, education, sacramental life and of her spiritual practices which gave a strong footing for her life of perfection.

##### 1.1 Family

Thresia was born on 26 April, 1876, to devout parents, Thoma and Thanda, in the ancient Syrian Catholic Chiramel Mankidiyan family.<sup>1</sup> Thoma and Thanda had five children, two boys and three girls. Thresia was the third of them with one boy and girl elder to her and another boy and girl younger to her. As per the local custom, for Catholic Christian children, Thresia was baptised in Catholic Church on 3 May, 1876, in the parish Church of Puthenchira.<sup>2</sup> The name Thresia was given to her after the name of the great contemplative mystic, the foundress of the reformed Carmelite order for Women, St. Teresa of Avila.

As the Chiramel Mankidiyan family was a devout one, Thoma, Thresia's father, might have been a person of deep faith and fervent in religious matters. A witness of Thresia testifies that he was an outstanding personality in the locality and was a religious man.<sup>3</sup> Though he had the habit of consuming alcohol, he took care of his children. According to Thresia's autobiography, he had never been an obstacle or never raised any objection to the religious practices of his daughter. In fact he was a silent admirer of his daughter's spiritual endeavours.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C.O. Paulose, *Chiramel Kudumba Charithram*, (The History of the Chiramel Family), Thrissur: (1998), 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Certificates and Official Letters*, CHFA.O13.

<sup>3</sup> *Positio*, 'Summarium', 48.

<sup>4</sup> M. Thresia, 'Autobiography', 30.

Theresia's mother, Thanda was a God fearing woman and was widely known for her religiosity. Fr Joseph Vithayathil in his book, *Biography of Rev.Mother Mariam Theresia*, has explained in detail how Thanda imprinted in the child Theresia great devotion to the Holy Trinity, crucified Jesus and Mother Mary.<sup>5</sup> At the age of three and a half, when the Church bell rang for the *Angelus*, Thanda helped child Theresia to make the sign of the cross and recite the prayer.<sup>6</sup> Theresia herself expresses her opinion about her mother in the autobiography as a woman with a good nature and capable of explaining the meaning of daily prayers. She had great admiration of her mother's intuition to know the ways of God.<sup>7</sup> From the autobiography it is clear that her mother had great appreciation and understanding about her and she allowed her to continue with her spiritual practices and way of living. Once when her Mother noticed that the special food that she gave to improve Theresia's health was instead given away to the poor, she told Theresia angrily that she understood her ways and she would never again ask for such things.<sup>8</sup> At the age of twelve her beloved mother who played a great role in laying a strong foundation for her spiritual life passed away, leaving her in deep sorrow and in an insecure situation. On the same day she accepted Mother Mary as her own mother and dedicated her soul and body to the Blessed Mother.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Education

Theresia did not have a normal schooling as there wasn't any school nearby and because her family was poor. She could only learn to read and write from *Kalari*, under the tutelage of a village teacher named *Velukutty Asan*.<sup>10</sup> Theresia was initiated to the study of religion at the age five.<sup>11</sup> She was a very intelligent girl. She could learn and memorise prayers quickly. She has recorded in her autobiography: "when small children could not learn the prayers, my spiritual father (the parish priest) would ask me to teach them."<sup>12</sup> Certain expressions of child Theresia manifest her deep theological thinking. At the age of six Theresia realised that 'one does not have to reach a certain age to love God.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Vithayahtil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Theresia*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> K.C.Chacko, *Mother Mariam Theresia*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> M. Theresia, 'Autobiography', 33.

<sup>8</sup> M. Theresia, 'Autobiography', 34.

<sup>9</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Mother Mariam Theresia*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Positio, Summarium*, 130.

<sup>11</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Mother Mariam Theresia*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> M. Theresia, 'Autobiography', 26.

<sup>13</sup> M. Theresia, 'Autobiography', 27.

At the age of eight when her mother noticed that Theresia was keeping awake for prayer and penance at night, she insisted on her sleeping by her side. Then Theresia replied: “You ask me to sleep; does our Lord ever sleep?... The age of lying by your side was over at the age of two and a half, so please don’t ask me to do that again.”<sup>14</sup> She preferred working and praying to play. About playing her observation was: “Wasting time would be painful to God.”<sup>15</sup> In her autobiography she explains how she utilised her free time: “My father and mother were very happy about the household work I did at home and the interest I took in teaching children, reading books, saying prayers and making my meditation without wasting my free time.”<sup>16</sup> The books she was reading were Lives of saints, Passion of our Lord, Imitation of Christ and Eternal Truths.<sup>17</sup> This was the remarkable difference noticed in the attitude of child Theresia compared to her companions and children of her age. She says in her autobiography that “in order to appear not too good before them, occasionally I did some harmless mischief and walked around telling jokes.”<sup>18</sup>

### 1.3 Sacramental Life

From the age of five onwards Theresia had expressed several times her great desire to attend the Holy Mass, to go to Confession and to receive Holy Communion. These sacraments are positive means for personal growth in holiness.<sup>19</sup> Before the age of six, Theresia was eager to make confession. At that young age she gave the proper reason for her request: “I knew what sin is and that is why I wanted to make my confession. At one point the priest asked me who taught me these things: ‘God Himself, I replied’”. The priest who understood her spiritual maturity, allowed her to make confession.<sup>20</sup> Similarly at the age of ten because of her repeated requests and convinced of her knowledge about sacraments and prayers, the priest allowed her to receive Holy Communion.<sup>21</sup> This also happened before she reached the customary age of receiving Holy Communion.

<sup>14</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 28, 29.

<sup>15</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 27.

<sup>16</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 34.

<sup>17</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 34.

<sup>18</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 212.

<sup>20</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 29, 30.

<sup>21</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 28. According to Canon Law the age for boys to receive first Communion is fourteen and that of girls twelve. Leonard Aloysius Mellano OCD, *Varapuzha Vikariathile Kalpanakalum Niyamangalum* (Statutes and Decrees of the Vicariate Apostolic of Varapuzha) Koonamavu: (Metropolitan press, 1879), 23.

At the age of six Thresia realised the greatness of the Holy Eucharist. Her companions were making fun of her calling her ‘granny’ for going for Holy Mass daily. She could withstand all the mockery for the love of God and attend Holy Mass daily. In her decisions she expressed great wisdom surpassing her age. She told her mother “One does not have to reach a certain age to love God.... am I not almost six years old? I don’t have the obstinacy natural to small children. On your way to the church, therefore, please come to the school (*Kalari*) and pick me up.”<sup>22</sup> She prayed to Blessed Mother Mary and got special grace to read and attend Holy Mass.<sup>23</sup>

#### **1.4 Prayer and Penance**

Thresia’s mother could succeed in imprinting in her young heart love for the crucified Lord. Thenceforth her only desire was to love Him, to identify herself with Him and to console Him in His pain. She begins her autobiography with the words: “I experienced an intense desire to love God from my early childhood.”<sup>24</sup> It continued with saying a list of prayers and doing penance in honour of Him and to grow in His love. Long hours of meditation on the crucified Lord enabled her to discover certain unusual penances to imitate Him, such as walking on four legs carrying a stone on the back, kneeling on the floor studded with gravel, using stone as a pillow, adding bitter things in the food to make it tasteless, stretching out hands while reciting a full rosary at midnight, disciplining herself with a whip, meditating on the passion of the Lord for long hours with out stretched hands, getting up several times at night to say prayers, fasting four days a week, and abstaining from meat.<sup>25</sup> These spiritual practices led her into a deeper realm of spirituality in her childhood itself.

## **2 Spiritual Flowering**

A plant blooms when it becomes mature. As Thresia entered into the adolescent period her intense desire to be united with the Lord also bloomed and its fragrance was diffused. This was visible in her choices, decisions, practices of virtues etc. Hence this section deals with her choice of vocation, heroic practice of virtues, and choice of the spiritual director who played a significant role in all her discernments and about her extraordinary experiences.

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<sup>22</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 27.

<sup>23</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 27.

<sup>24</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 25.

<sup>25</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 25-28.

## 2.1 Desire for the Divine

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God for the living God” (Ps.42:1,2). When Theresia reached the age of fifteen, her desire to love God also grew deeper. In contrast to the normal desires of the teenagers she loved solitude and a simple life. The noisy family environment was not conducive for silence and prayer. She wished even to go to a forest like the Indian ‘*Sanyasis*’ do. In the autobiography she mentions about the attempts she made to go to the forest. When she discerned that it was not the will of God, she dropped the idea. Theresia then had the desire to join a convent. Owing to the poor economic condition of the family she could not get an admission there. Her desire to live as a maid in the convent too was not acceptable considering her high class family origin. For the love of the Lord she was even ready to go for begging to collect money for the patrimony. Fr. Thomas Paulose, the parish priest of Puthenchira parish church, whom Theresia considered as her spiritual father at that time, objected to her idea of begging and asked her to remain at home. Thus, the search for a ‘way to love God peacefully’ was shattered and she remained at home according to the directions of the spiritual father. She says in her autobiography:

I continued to stay at home peacefully, spending the time in prayer and doing everything according to the personal guidance of my spiritual father. I used to go to church every day, and I made my confession and received Holy Communion twice a month. At that time I was fifteen years old.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 Heroic Practice of Virtues

Virtues contribute to Christian perfection and holiness in a variety of ways. Through the practice of virtues the individual is configured to Christ and thus gives glory to God.<sup>27</sup> Hours of meditation and prayer, acts of penance, disciplined life and charitable works favoured Theresia’s growth on the path of virtues. There are numerous instances from her childhood onwards that manifest her heroic way of practising virtues. In her letters<sup>28</sup> to the spiritual father there are expressions like ‘If God is God’(L.43), ‘Isn’t God God’ (L.11), ‘God knows’ (L.3), ‘God willed so’ (L.13),

<sup>26</sup> M. Theresia, ‘Autobiography’, 31, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> The following quotations from the Letters are taken from the book, *The Writings of Mother Mariam Theresia*, A.M. Mundaden (ed.), Mannuthy: (Holy Family Generalate, 1994).

‘God himself will get things done’(L.23), ‘Let Thy will be done’(L.37) etc. which explicitly speak of her deep faith and hope in God. She believed that God sees everything, knows everything and that everything will turn to be good in the end, in contrast with appearances (L.3, 23, 39). Hope is to have faith in the promises of God. There are repeated mentions of the reward God has prepared for all those who care for the destitute and convert the sinners and bring them to the right path (L.4, 5, 26) etc.

In letter 34 Thresia suggests to her spiritual father that he keep trust and hope in God. She wrote, “I trust that God is God. If for any reason, you Father, if you feel worried or afraid, please get rid of it immediately in the name of God. Our God is our hope.” In a severe tribulation she expresses her deep trust and hope. “I have to overcome this trial with God’s grace...Even now I am very much vexed. I have never been in such a poignant tribulation. I trust in your word. I don’t know what it means. God alone knows! It is really an ocean” (L.43).

Thresia lived the virtue of charity in a most heroic way. She had unlimited love for God and people. Brushing aside all oppositions and the prevailing customs and conventions she went visiting the poor and needy in their houses. This was quite unusual for women in that period. With three of her friends: Karimallikkal Mariam, Maliekal Mariam, Maliekal Thanda,<sup>29</sup> she was engaged in the parish works like cleaning the church, arranging flowers and decorating the altar etc. They were going out to visit the sick and suffering people, praying for them and converting sinners to the right path.<sup>30</sup> In the letter 16 she dared to ask the parish priest to exhort the people through a sermon about the sinful ways of people in the parish. Her sole desire was to save the souls for the Lord and she spent herself for this cause.

### **2.3 The Spiritual Guide - a Providential Gift**

St. Peter says: “Your enemy the devil is prowling about, roaring like a lion and looking for someone to devour” (1Pt. 5:8). As Thresia grew deeper in the practice of virtues, she had to undergo severe diabolic assaults. She felt the need of an able spiritual director who can understand and guide her. It was the providence of God that sent Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, a highly spiritual and reliable person as her parish priest. She chose

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<sup>29</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Mother Mariam Thresia*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> *Positio*, ‘Summarium’, 38.

him as her spiritual director. He played a unique and decisive role in the life of Thresia as the spiritual guide from 1902 onwards till her death on 8 June 1926. He was a scholarly priest, a person of firm determination and prayer, and above all genuinely spiritual in outlook.<sup>31</sup> Thresia very faithfully and openly shared everything with her spiritual father. In all her endeavours and extraordinary experiences he was a witness and prudent intermediary between her and the Bishop John Menachery. Bishop ordered him to report to him all matters of significance concerning Thresia.<sup>32</sup> He obeyed and kept a diary in which he recorded regularly and faithfully what was conveyed to him by Thresia and what he had witnessed in her. The loving bond which existed between Thresia and her spiritual father seems to have been ratified by God by calling him to heaven on 8 June 1964, after forty eight years of Thresia's death on 8 June 1926.

#### **2.4 Extraordinary Experiences**

From the day Thresia chose Fr. Joseph Vithayathil as her spiritual father, he journeyed with her in great faithfulness till the last moment of her life. From 1902 till the foundation of the Congregation of the Holy Family in 1914, Thresia had a crucial period with strange experiences. Her extraordinary experiences can be divided into two main categories. One was the fierce battles that she had to fight with the devils and the second, the special graces given to her to experience the sufferings of the crucified Jesus. In the most helpless moments of both cases she was getting heavenly consolations too. In her autobiography section D she has recorded in brief her visions, locutions, ecstasies, miraculous healings, temptations, diabolic assaults, consolations etc.<sup>33</sup>

Like Job in the Old Testament (Jb.1:6-12), Thresia had to undergo very severe trials, torments and temptations from the devils. Letter 7 is an example which expresses her deep pain: "I feel that I am in great trouble. I am even afraid whether God has forsaken me... I feel like being thrown into a deep abyss". God allowed Thresia to be tested by evil spirits for three years from 23 January 1902 to 8 December 1904.<sup>34</sup> Thresia had to suffer the torments not only in mind but in body as well. Its severity is very well expressed in her letters and in her autobiography. But she never yielded to any of their temptations. As a reward Mother Mary added her own name to Thresia.<sup>35</sup> Henceforth she addressed herself as Mariam Thresia.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lucy Arikatt & Franco ed., *Karmayogi*, Mannuthy: (Holy Family Publications, 2004), 24-29.

<sup>32</sup> *Certificates and Official Letters*, CHFA.O13,1

<sup>33</sup> M. Thresia, 'Autobiography', 35-38.

<sup>34</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 42

<sup>35</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 42

In the letter 11 she has written: “At the time of my meditation what all visions I see, what all thoughts come to my mind! It is impossible for me to explain to you how they are like.”<sup>37</sup> Her spiritual father has recorded in detail her special graces like vision of heaven, vision of the Holy Family, vision of hell, exchange of hearts, consolations given by Jesus, Mother Mary, St. Joseph and St. Teresa of Avila, angels giving Holy Communion in her room, receiving the stigmata to identify her with Jesus etc. Though stigmata are a special grace, it is a sharing of the pain of Jesus on the cross. In the Lent season Thresia was seen in the crucified form on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for long hours crowned with thorns.<sup>38</sup> Her spiritual father has reported in the diary that ‘on Wednesday 27 January 1909 at the time of meditation after midnight Jesus gave her His five wounds in a visible way.’<sup>39</sup> Mgr Thomas Moothedan has made a similar mention in his writings:

Thresia had in her hands and feet the impression of the wounds of our Lord about the size of the old copper coin. On the head there were also thorn marks as those made on our Lord’s head by the crown of thorns. Some have seen the blood stain of the wound on her side. The passion scene on Fridays is attested by over fifteen Sisters, two or three Priests and several laymen.<sup>40</sup>

Another phenomenon she experienced in her prayer was the appearance of the souls in the Purgatory. Several souls appeared to her and told her that they were sentenced to spend a certain period in the Purgatory.<sup>41</sup> Her spiritual father explains in his *Diary* how Thresia started her devotion to souls in the Purgatory. One day after receiving the Holy Communion Thresia fell into an ecstasy. Then Mother Mary took her to *Sheol*. She felt the burning heat and she saw many souls rolling in the pit of fire. Holy Mother said to her: “Compared with the agony of these souls your sufferings are negligible. Shouldn’t you help them?”<sup>42</sup> Thresia prayed, did penance, offered Holy Masses and performed charitable acts for the purification of souls in the Purgatory. In the autobiography she mentions that she had seen some of the souls going up to heaven on first Saturdays.<sup>43</sup> Examples of this kind are numerous in the life of Thresia.

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<sup>36</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 64, 75, 78, 95.

<sup>37</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 174.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Moothedan, *A Short Life of Sr. Mariam Thresia*, Kodakara: (St Xaviour’s Orphanage, Press, 1977), 96.

<sup>41</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 48-56.

<sup>42</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 37.

### **3 Spiritual Fruition**

All living things are created in such a way that they can reproduce and thus continue their existence in the world. As trees and plants get matured, they bloom and produce fruits and seeds. The spiritual fruits are the goodness of a spiritual person that others enjoy. All those who live in the spirit of God spend a great part of their lives in humanitarian activities. As God's giving is total, a person of God also shares selflessly for the growth and salvation of the other. Thus a person of God cooperates in the redemptive work of God. Thresia's intense love for God led her to take risks and challenges as she dedicated herself to the service of the poor. She was courageous to be 'different'. Her life of prayer and contemplation paved the way for launching a new mission - family apostolate in order to win souls for Christ, to build up families and thus to build up the nation too.

#### **3.1 Family Apostolate - A New Mission**

In the first half of the twentieth century when women were confined to their own homes, Thresia with her friends moved from house to house, nursing the sick, caring for the lonely and orphans, converting sinners to right path and educating children. It was by heavenly inspiration that Thresia initiated this unique mission, a mission which no one had envisaged before.<sup>44</sup> As Thresia got more united to the Lord through prayer and penance, He expressed His desire to her. One day the Lord appeared to her, wounded and bearing the cross and asked her to share in his suffering for the sins of the people and to work for the salvation of souls.<sup>45</sup> It was an invitation for an active apostolate to which she responded wholeheartedly. Her creative imagination could find new ways of working for the salvation of the souls. Criticisms, objections, customs and conventions could not prevent her from doing the will of her Beloved. To reduce the pain of the Lord on the cross, she was ready to accept any amount of humiliations, physical sufferings, ridicules, mockery, etc.

There were many instances of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and guardian angel, sending Thresia to the sick and dying patients to pray for their peaceful death and thus to save their souls before they perished in sin.<sup>46</sup> She was even

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<sup>44</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 26-32.

<sup>45</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 180.

ready to stay up overnight when she felt that her prayers were needed for the salvation of the dying patients. In 1909 the country came under the grip of small pox, a dangerous epidemic. Many people fell prey to the epidemic. Thresia, with great courage, went around caring for these patients and helping them to have a peaceful death. She expressed to the Lord her readiness to do any penance in order to save people from the disaster. As a result she was given severe body pain for nineteen days and thereafter no one died of the epidemic.<sup>47</sup> There were many occasions on which such vicarious sufferings were taken up by Thresia for the healing of the suffering people and for the salvation of souls in the Purgatory.<sup>48</sup> Though there was not enough money for her own personal needs she would not ignore any orphan child or any person in need of help. At the time of her death, there were ten orphan children under her care.<sup>49</sup>

### **3.2 Ekanthabhavan - A New House**

At home Thresia did not have an atmosphere of silence and prayer and to practise penance as she desired. She had expressed to her spiritual father and Bishop John Menachery her desire to live in a small house to pray and to continue her charitable works. After observing and studying the case of Thresia, in response to her request the Bishop decided to send Thresia to the Carmelite Convent at Ollur. Accordingly, on 26 November 1912 she began to stay there. The Carmelite Sisters were very happy to admit her in the convent even without any payment. However, Thresia felt that she was not called to be a Carmelite nun. When she expressed her mind to the Bishop, he told her: “God’s will is not that you stay in the convent. So I permit you to return to your home. Your spiritual father will construct a place for you”. As per the Bishop’s order, Thresia left for Puthenchira after two months of her life in the Carmelite Convent, on 27 January 1913.<sup>50</sup>

Fr. Vithayathil with the help of the parishioners and many other generous people constructed a small two storied house for her within just nine months. On 7 October 1913, Thresia moved to the new house of solitude and prayer and began to

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<sup>47</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 31, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 89.

reside there permanently.<sup>51</sup> Thus the long cherished dream of Thresia to be alone with 'the Alone' came to fruition. In the new house she strictly followed a rule of life sanctioned by her spiritual father. Fixed timings were given for prayer, meditation and charitable works. She slept only for two hours from 10 to 12 midnight. From 12 to 5 am she would meditate on the Passion of the Lord and do acts of penance as permitted by her spiritual father. There were set times during the day for attending to the sick or dying patients. If she was sick, she was not obliged to keep this schedule.<sup>52</sup> Attracted to her way of life, three of her old companions who were helping her visit families and do other charitable works started staying with her from January 1914.<sup>53</sup> Thus the small house became a house of prayer, atonement and a centre of apostolic activities.

### **3.3 C.H.F. - A New Congregation**

Thresia and her three friends in her house, now called *Ekanthabhavan*, had a well disciplined life according to the rules sanctioned by her spiritual father, Fr. Vithayathil. Bishop Menachery who was initially sceptical of Thresia's visions and other extraordinary experiences, was impressed by their way of life. He became convinced of the genuineness of Thresia's virtuous life. After consultations with Fr. Vithayathil, on 14 May 1914 Bishop Menachary erected this four member community to the status of a religious congregation having a definite canonical form. The Bishop gave the name Holy Family for the new congregation. The Holy Family kept visiting her very often giving consolations and directions and was praying with the group gathered in her room on Fridays while they were reciting the rosary.<sup>54</sup> Thresia was given the name Mariam Thresia, the name which Mother Mary had given her in 1904. She was given the religious habit and made the first and final commitment on the same day 14 May 1914. Her three friends were admitted as postulants and were given the veil on the day. Mariam Thresia was made the Superior of the community. Thus through Thresia Congregation of Holy Family was founded and she became its Foundress. The Eighth General Renewal Synaxis of the Holy Family Congregation declared Fr. Joseph Vithayathil as the co-founder of the Congregation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *CHF Charithrathilude*, 21, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 191-194.

<sup>53</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 186.

<sup>54</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> *CHF History*, 178.

As the community had no assets, the Superior, Mother Mariam Thresia, had to find ways and means of maintaining the Sisters. She begged and collected alms and did various odd kinds of works. She also continued the dedicated service to the people in a more zealous way. She was regarded as a person specially favoured by God and powerful in her prayer. So she used to be called to the bedside of the sick. Many were cured through her prayers and penance.<sup>56</sup> Many young girls from Puthenchira and from the neighbouring parishes were attracted to the sanctity of the foundress and the new way of life. A retired High court Judge, Mr. Joseph Vithayathil testifies that a good number of girls from respected families were attracted by the example of Mother Mariam Thresia and joined the Congregation.<sup>57</sup> She had to struggle hard to provide the least minimum living conveniences for the new members.

### **3.4 School - A New Venture**

While visiting the families and handling their problems Mother Mariam Thresia felt the lack of education among children. At that time there wasn't a proper school in Puthenchira or in the neighbourhood. Children especially girls were not going to schools. Feeling the need, Mother Mariam Thresia said to her spiritual father that she wanted to start a school to give the knowledge of God to children.<sup>58</sup> Without any financial security or trained personnel she ventured to start a school. Just after a year of starting the Congregation, in 1915 the first and second classes of the Holy Family School, Puthenchira were inaugurated in the convent building.<sup>59</sup> Though she did not have the opportunity to get trained in a school, God gave her the wisdom to foresee that it is through education that good citizens and good families are formed and that the society can be transformed. Her sole capital was her complete trust in the providence of God for both finance and personnel. The people of the locality extended full cooperation and made generous donations by offering their land for the school and helping in the construction of the school building. Her spiritual father was her strong support and strength. In a short span of twelve years period, she succeeded in starting two schools, two boarding houses, one study house, and one orphanage along with three convents.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 26-32.

<sup>57</sup> *Positio*, 'Summarium', 105.

<sup>58</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 188.

<sup>59</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 92, 93, 96.

### 3.5 New Convents

The house of solitude which was built for Thresia became insufficient for accommodating the fast growing number of Sisters. Hence it was enlarged and small buildings were attached to it in order to provide rooms for the newcomers. The spiritual father and many other generous people came forward to help her. To ensure the bright future of the Congregation, a boarding house was started in a rented house at Thrissur in 1918. Four Sisters and twenty girls were sent there for higher studies.<sup>61</sup>

Growth in the number of Sisters necessitated the starting new of convents. The Mother did not have enough land or funds to construct new convents. They were in great need and prayed day and night for the cause. In answer to her prayers, Fr. John Ambookan, a priest from Puthenchira donated an uncultivated land of seven acres and financial help for the construction of the building.<sup>62</sup> The Maharaja of Kochi, as an expression of his appreciation of the holy life and charitable works of Mother Mariam Thresia, donated timber for the construction of the convent.<sup>63</sup> With the contributions from various people, a convent was built at Kuzhikkattussery and in 1922 Sisters shifted their residence from Puthenchira to the new convent.<sup>64</sup> Requests from various parishes around to start new convents were coming in. People were ready to donate land for the purpose. A piece of land required for a chapel and convent was donated at Thumbur and there a new convent was built and blessed on 10 May 1926.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.6 Final Days

The spiritual journey of Mariam Thresia reached the final destination. The Congregation of Holy Family which was founded on the sufferings, sacrifices, hard works and humiliations of its Foundress grew fast. Her spiritual father Fr. Vithayathil has pointed out in his *Diary* that there wasn't even a minute without suffering in the life of Mariam Thresia.<sup>66</sup> The new way of apostolic activities undertaken by the Holy Family Sisters by visiting the families caused negative critical remarks even from zealous priests. However, these criticisms and humiliations never hindered the growth of the Congregation.

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<sup>61</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 92.

<sup>62</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 189, 190.

<sup>63</sup> *Positio*, 'Summarium', 510.

<sup>64</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 92, 93.

<sup>65</sup> *CHF Charithrathilude*, 86, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Vithayathil, *Diary*, 188.

On the occasion of the blessing of the third convent and chapel at Thumbur, a portion of the railing of the sanctuary collapsed and fell on Mother Mariam Thresia's leg. As she was diabetic, her wound got festered and grew into an ulcer in a few days time. Though she was taken to the hospital and was treated very carefully, her condition deteriorated and was declared fatal. She was given the anointing of the sick on 7 June 1926 by Fr. Vithayathil.<sup>67</sup> In the exhortation of Mother Mariam Thresia copied down by Sr. Rose Mariam, her final advice was given. She knew that her death was fast approaching. She called her sisters to her side and said:

My children, why should you let your hearts be troubled like people of little faith? You know that I will not be relieved of this illness. If it be the will of the heavenly groom that I leave you so soon in order to accept His invitation, let it be fulfilled! Our congregation is still an infant. You should not forget that it is your duty as members of this congregation to protect it and help it grow up. Respond to your Superiors sincerely and lovingly. Love one another. Help one another.<sup>68</sup>

Then the Mother entrusted all her daughters and the whole responsibilities of the Congregation to Fr. Vithayathil's care. By 10 pm on 8 June 1926, repeating the words 'Jesus Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart', she left this world. The next day, 9 June 1926, amidst great mourning and weeping of the Sisters and a large gathering of people, the funeral was conducted in a simple manner in the Holy Family convent chapel at Kuzhikkattussey.<sup>69</sup> Her spiritual father wrote the following about her death: 'That bright lamp died out immersing all in an ocean of sadness.'<sup>70</sup>

### **3.7 Living Forever**

The fame of the sanctity of Mother Mariam Thresia had spread in her native place Puthenchira and in the neighbouring villages even before her death. After her death her fame gradually spread far and wide. At Kuzhikkattusery where she was buried, people started coming in pilgrimage. Thousands of favours received by them were reported. Among the pilgrims who visited the tomb for favours include people of all caste and religions. Mr. Joseph Vithayathil, a retired high court judge reported: "I

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<sup>67</sup> George Nedungatt, *Crucified with Christ for All*, Mannuthy: (Holy Family Publications, 2002), 121.

<sup>68</sup> M. Thresia, 'Exhortatons', 138.

<sup>69</sup> *CHF Charithrathilude*, 91-94.

<sup>70</sup> Vithayathil, *Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia*, 96.

used to visit the tomb occasionally to request the prayers of the Servant of God. I know the tomb was frequented by many people of all categories including intellectuals. Soon after the death of the Servant of God, people began to visit the tomb. I have observed that the number is always on the increase.”<sup>71</sup>

There are many miraculous healings that took place through the intercession of Mother Mariam Thresia. On certain occasions Mother herself appeared, touched the patients and healed them. Mr. P. D. Mathew’s healing is an example for it. Mathew was born with club feet. While he was fifteen years old, he was instantly cured of his club feet, the right foot in 1970 and the left foot in 1971, each time after a long period of prayer and penance offered by his entire family. In the first healing in a dream, or in a vision, Mathew saw Mother Mariam Thresia come near him and rub his right foot. When he woke up he saw his right foot was straightened and cured. In the second case, during the second round of prayer, his mother had a vision or a dream of Mother Mariam Thresia and she saw that Mathew’s left foot also was healed.<sup>72</sup> As years passed by the number of the pilgrims to her birth place Puthenchira and to her tomb at Kuzhikkattussery were on the increase. Every year on 26 April her birth anniversary is celebrated in the presence of thousands of people at Puthenchira. The ecclesiastical authorities accepted her cause for beatification. After many years of discussions and studies, on 9 April 2000 she was raised to the position of ‘Blessed’. Thus Thresia, at present is known to the world as Blessed Mariam Thresia. On 8 June her feast is celebrated at Kuzhikkattussery in a very solemn way.

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<sup>71</sup> G.Nedungatt, *Crucified with Christ for All*, 137.

<sup>72</sup> *Positio Super Miraculo*, 1999; G. Nedungatt, *Crucified with Christ for All*, 240-243.