CHAPTER V

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The origin, growth and development of the first five indigenous women religious congregations was discussed in the fourth chapter. The central purpose of the current chapter is to see how Mother Mariam Thresia can be placed in the historical context of Kerala as the foundress of the Congregation of Holy Family as well as to analyze her spiritual heritage, which culminated in the service to humanity, especially to the family, the basic unit of society and the world. The initiative and firmness of a humble village girl, Thresia, later known as Mother Mariam Thresia, rose to prominence, recognised over the whole world for hard work, dedication and resilience of spiritual depth through the revolutionary charism of Family Apostolate. The specific role played by this Servant of God, Mother Mariam Thresia is narrated in this section.

The founding of the Congregation of Holy Family in 1914 and the special charism of Mother Mariam Thresia – Family Apostolate – was a revolutionary break in the socio-cultural setup of Kerala of that time. Not only the public but also the church hierarchy looked at her with suspicion. The nuns of her age remained either within the four walls of the convent or those of the institutions of their apostolate. They never came down to the people around. But Mother Mariam Thresia was an exception. Mother Mariam Thresia and the Congregation of Holy Family sprouted in the
midst of the people around. The foundress threw herself right into the heart of the society, i.e., the families, where she sought the field for the new apostolate. In Mother Mariam Thresia, we see a beautiful blending of the love of God and love of the poor which has become the propelling force in her life to plunge herself in family apostolate. The secret of Mother Mariam Thresia's marvellous success lies in her wholehearted dedication to the cause of the poor and the neglected at the family level. It was a refreshingly original idea at the time when she tried to put it into practice a century before in the remote village of Puthenchira, where she was born. At present Thresia belongs not only to her village, but also to the whole world, to eternity. The world honours her as Blessed Mother Mariam Thresia.

Mother Mariam Thresia (1876–1926) founded the Congregation of Holy Family, the sixth indigenous Women Religious Order of the St. Thomas Christian community on 14 May 1914. We get information about Mother Mariam Thresia from various sources. First and foremost among them is the Autobiographical Notes – Letters and Prayers, Address prepared on special occasions and Exhortations – of Mother Mariam Thresia herself. Other writings about her include Mariam Thressiayude

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1 Mankydian Mariam Thresia, "Autobiography" – Section A, B, C, D. Handwritten Manuscript is kept in the Archives of the Congregation of Holy Family Generalate, Mannuthy, Trichur, Kerala. CHFA.01. This manuscript was printed and published by Superior General, Congregation of Holy Family, Mannuthy, Trichur. A. Mathias Mundadan et.al, ed. Mother Mariam Thressiayude Likhithangal (Malayalam), and Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia (English), Mannuthy, Trichur. Superior
Jeevacharitram written by Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, her Spiritual Father, \(^2\)

Official documents about Mother Mariam Thresia preserved and kept in CHF Archives etc. \(^3\)

Mother Mariam Thresia wrote her Autobiography under the insistence of her spiritual father, Rev: Fr. Joseph Vithayathil. \(^4\)

Accordingly she recorded how she struggled to respond to the divine call and overcame the crisis in her life. Since she received only elementary education, her scribbling required editorial help. Her Autobiography dealing with her experiences and events of life from 1876 to 1905 is an intimate reflection of the contemporary society too. Letters mainly addressed to her spiritual father discloses her spiritual experiences and

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\(^3\) Official Documents, CHFA /DC1, DC2, DC3, DC4, DC5, DC6, DC7, DC8, DC9, DC10. Official Documents include records related with beatification of Mother Mariam Thresia.

\(^4\) In the Diary of Rev. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil there is a note that every event of Thresia's life should be informed to Bishop John Menacherry. So Fr. Joseph Vithayathil wanted Mother Mariam Thresia to write daily events of her life and the events from the period over which her memory could go back. Realising her inefficiency to write a book, she has often raised excuses. Yet her Autobiography testifies her submission to the Spiritual father and to the higher ecclesiastical authorities. Joseph Vithayathil *Life...,Op.cit.*, pp. 39-40, 225, 357. Mundadan, *Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia...,Op.cit.,pp. 371-87.*
conflicts. There are fifty five of them from 1905 till the founding of the CHF in 1914. Prayers recited and used by Mother Mariam Thresia shows her deep personal relationship with God and her spirituality. Two of her Addresses in her own handwriting have come down to us. These documents constitute a formal expression of her love and gratitude to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil and Bishop John Manacherry, the Bishop of Trichur. Exhortations are the sum total of messages which Mother Mariam Thresia gave to her spiritual daughters.

Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, kept every detail of Mother Mariam Thresia’s life in the form of a Diary as instructed by the Bishop. It is this diary that later came to be known as Mariam Thresiayude

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5 Letters, CHFA..., Op.cit., 02. Out of Fifty five, fifty three were addressed to her Spiritual director, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, one of them to the sons of her maternal uncle Ousephachan, the other was a reply letter to Sr. Margaret. Out of these fifty three letters, fifty one were written while she was at home and two from the Carmelite convent, Ollur. These letters can be considered as a medium, to let her spiritual father know of her spiritual experiences, and an occasion to receive proper spiritual direction. Her humanness and womanliness is very clearly expressed in the letters. For example, she accepted her sufferings, she cried at the physical pain, felt like complaining to God, her concern for the health of the sister of spiritual father, her small gifts to her spiritual father on the occasions like his feast day. Mundadan, Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia..., Op.cit., pp. 389-444.


8 Exhortations are oral instructions given by Mother Mariam Thresia to her sisters during the period 1914-1926. Being the foundress of the Congregation she has given some of the fundamental guide lines, commands and principles of life style which are conducive in laying a firm foundation for the Congregation and also messages for its spiritual growth. There are thirty two such exhortations. The Novices and Junior Sisters who were trained by Mother Mariam Thresia during the period 1914-26 wrote down these exhortations. Exhortations, Hand written manuscript copy, CHFA..., Op cit., 05. Mundadan, Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia..., Op.cit., pp. 455-84.
Fr. Joseph Vithayathil acted as an intermediary between Bishop John Menacheny and Mother Mariam Thresia. This Diary gives an insight into the holiness of Mother Mariam Thresia, her mystical experiences, the actualisation of her ardent desire to identify with Jesus and the suffering people, her participation in the passion of Jesus, and her apostolic activities.

This Diary deals with three stages of Mother Mariam Thresia's life. The first part describes her intense desire to love Jesus and Jesus only and to be loved by Him, her detachment from worldly pleasures and pomp, her consecration of life-long virginity, the role of her virtuous mother, in helping her daughter to tread the path of sanctity. The second part mirrors her sufferings and temptations, her search for the divine plan of God about her, the tortures and diabolic attacks, visions and ecstasies, the long process of receiving the five holy wounds of Jesus (stigmata) in her body, the flowering of her charism of compassionate love and family apostolate. The third part deals with the fulfilment of her long cherished desire to have a separate house for prayer and contemplation – Ekantabhavan – the providential founding of the CHF, its branching out, the incoming vocations and her last days.

Birth and Childhood

Thresia, later known as ‘Mariam Thresia’\(^{10}\) was born in an ancient Syrian catholic family of Chiranal Mankidiyan in a remote village of erstwhile Tiru-Kochi region called Puthenchira (now in Trichur district) on 26 April 1876. Thresia’s father was Thoma Mankidiyan\(^{11}\) a twice-married man. His first marriage was with Mariamkutty of Menacherry family of Njarakal. She died after giving birth to a daughter – Anna. After the death of his first wife, he married Thanda, who belonged to Mangali Catholic family at Thuravur in the Ernakulam district. Thresia was the third child of Thoma and Thanda.\(^{12}\) Their other children were Francis (Porinju), Joseph (Ouseph), Mariam and Ittianam. Thresia was baptised on Wednesday 3 May 1876 by Rev.Fr. Poullose Maliekal Koonan in the parish church of Puthenchira.\(^{13}\) Thresia was sent to the village Kalari / Ezhuthupalliikkoodam where she was taught the 3 R’s. She never studied beyond Kalari, for there was no school in that village and girl children were not sent to schools far away from their houses. She attended parish religious instruction classes. She was smart in her lessons and could memorise the prayers quickly. Her enthusiasm is expressed in her words:


\(^{11}\) C.O. Poulouse, Chiramel Kudum'a Charithram (Mal), (The History of Chiramel Family), Trichur, 1988, pp.81ff.

"When the small children could not learn the prayers, my spiritual father (parish priest) would ask me to teach them. Many used to find fault with him, and ridiculed me for this." 4 Disregarding criticism, Thresia obeyed the order of parish priest. Thus Thresia was groomed to be bold, obedient and courageous enough to face criticism.

Thresia’s mother Thanda was very particular in bringing up the children deep rooted in faith. Thanda used to help her children to make the sign of the cross and recite other prayers even in their early childhood.15 Thresia could recall in her autobiography that her mother was deeply spiritual and good-natured and was capable enough to explain the meaning of her routine prayer.16 Thanda being a devoted lady used to attend Holy Mass daily in her parish church. Thresia requested her mother to take her to the church daily. To quote her:

"I asked her: ‘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 and pick me up’. She would take me to the church daily knowing it was due to my desire to love God that I was asking for this favour.” 17

This incident shows how Thresia in her childhood itself tried her best to practise her religion in an ardent manner. She was aware of her

13 Certificates and official Letters, CHFA..., Op.cit., 013,  
special call by God. Thresia’s friends used to laugh at her for her daily attendance of Holy Mass. Thresia continues:

“My companions used to laugh at me calling granny (In olden days only elderly people used to attend Holy Mass daily. So Thresia’s friends mockingly called her ‘granny’) While going to Mass every day. As my mother came to know of it she told me ‘Don’t you hear what they are saying?’ Therefore she objected to my going to church daily. I requested not to tell so, because one does not have to reach a certain age to love God.” 18

From very young age she practised acts of penance and mortification. Her Autobiographical notes reveal the intensity of her love for the suffering Jesus.

“I used to abstain from meat, and eat curries adding bitter stuff to it ... I used to recite a full rosary at midnight, meditate on the sorrows of Blessed Mother, discipline myself with whip, meditate on the passion of our lord for an hour with arms outstretched and woke up many times during the night to say the prayers.” 19

It is clear that Thresia was deep rooted in her faith and that she led ascetical life with an understanding quite different from earlier practices. Thresia felt that Jesus was calling her to suffer with Him, to keep awake and pray with Him. Her childhood was an enactment of the passion of Jesus. These acts were so deliberately chosen that in later life, she could in obedience to her spiritual father, recall and record in minute details all

19 Ibid, p. 374
Thresia longed to make her first confession in order to receive Holy Communion. She expressed her desire to her mother several times. Always her reply was to wait till the age of First Communion, "seven or eight years." Unhappy over this, Thresia approached some priests and asked them to hear her confession. In her own words: "Then they tested my knowledge of the sacrament and finally permitted me to receive the sacrament of penance, before I reached the customary age." But Thresia was not satisfied. At the age of nine, she told her confessor of her yearning for Holy Communion. But he objected and sent her back asking her to wait for some more time. Subsequently, Thresia went to a nearby monastery of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate at Ambazhakkad and made her confession. Realising the purity of her heart and intensity of her yearning, he allowed her to receive first Communion, though she was only ten. Thereafter, she received Holy Communion once a week and later twice a week. About this time she also chose Jesus Christ as her

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22 According to Canon Law, the age fixed for confession of children was seven or eight. Leonard Aloysius Mellano, *Varapuzha Vikariyathile Kalpanakalom Niyamangalum* (Mal), *Statutes and Decrees of the Vicariate Apostolic of Varapuzha*, Koonammavu, Metropolitan Press, 1879, pp. 46-47.
bridegroom and promised perpetual chastity and invoked the help of Jesus to be faithful in her promise to Him.

Thresia was ready to suffer because her deep and intense love for Jesus was so real to her. Her *fasting and penance* were not rituals but real acts of life. Regarding her *fast and abstinence* she notes: “During the season of Lent (Lent is the 50 days just before the Easter) I fasted four days a week, observed abstinence on other days and meditated on the suffering of our Lord, kneeling on the floor studded with gravel ... from the age of five, I used to abstain from meat and eat curries adding bitter stuff to it.”

Due to continuous penance and *fasts*, Thresia's body was weakened and prone to physical illness. So her mother tried to persuade her to abstain from such practices. But Thresia stood firm in her decision. This shows that she was very strong in her mind and decisions. She even instructed her mother to put her trust in God: “Hasn't God given me good health? Is it not because you opposed His will, that I am sick again? Therefore let us place our trust in God.”

Thresia had a personal devotion to Eucharist and Holy Mass. It was her mother who instilled this devotion in her tender heart. Though

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26 This CMI monastery was founded by Blessed Chavara on 20 Oct.1868 and the novitiate of the Order was started on 1889. Trichur Diocese Jubilee Souvenir, 75 Years (1887-1962), 1962, p. 64.
she did not understand the meanings of the prayers of the celebration (for at that time it was entirely in the East Syriac Language) she used to accompany her mother every day to attend the ‘Qurbana’ (It is a celebration headed by the priest, Holy Mass). Thresia’s method of attending ‘Qurbana’ is documented in four pages.

“As I walk from home to church I meditate, all the way that I am going to participate in the same divine sacrifice offered on the Cross in Calvary. When I enter the church ... I say ejaculatory prayer that the passion of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross be imprinted in my heart ... recall with sorrow the betrayal of Judas by kissing our Saviour, the arresting, scourging and kicking of Jesus by wicked people ...

At the time of offertory when the priest shows the bread and wine to the people I pray for the living and the dead, for all sinners and for all the intentions of the church ... At the ringing of the bell, I would recall to mind the sound of hammering the nail on the hands and the feet of Jesus Christ and imagine how painful it would be if it were my hand and feet. I meditate and pray for forgiveness of my sins and repentance over them ... I prostrate with my forehead touching the floor and pray; ‘Oh my Redeemer, suspended on the cross on my behalf I prostrate and adore your sacred body; forgive me my sins; Save me.”

Finally after saying the ‘Our Father’ together with the priest, ...Then I remember the intention already made at the offertory or the Mass and pray for the Souls in purgatory and for the holy church.

Then the priest recites the prayers, ‘Hail Mary’ three times and ‘Hail Holy Queen’, I pray that all men, women, children, all other Christians and non-Christians may know the true religion and be saved. I also pray for the Holy Church and for the intentions of Holy Father. Let the will of God be done!”

Thresia attended the Qurbana with great concentration and devotion. When we analyse the text, we can understand that, for her, the Holy Mass was no mere sacred ritual, but her daily tryst with her Beloved. During the Holy sacrifice, Thresia experienced the whole life of Jesus, her redeemer. In her ‘world view’ she included ‘All’- the living and the dead, the sinners, men, women, children, Christians, non-Christians etc. Thresia made a new knowledge system, where she included the whole universe. This consciousness urged her to work for all especially the down trodden in the society. Her deep awareness of the mystical body of Christ becomes very clear.

Thresia cultivated special love and devotion towards Blessed Virgin Mary. In her autobiography and throughout her life we can see this filial love towards her Heavenly Mother. With full confidence she sought Bl. Mary’s motherly protection all through her life. Thresia internalised the virtues of Bl. Mary and suffered all her trials and temptations in a mood of resignation to the ‘will of God’.

Thresia’s mother Thanda was interested not only in the spiritual but also in the temporal affairs of her children. She wanted her daughter to wear gold ornaments according to the custom of Thomas Christians. So Thanda pierced Thresia’s ears to wear the gold earrings, which was considered in those days as a sign of nobility. But Thresia had made up

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her mind to dedicate herself as a virgin. Hence she tore off her earlobes twice so as to foil her mother’s efforts to make her wear earrings. Her mother finally gave up her plan. Thresia’s dress was always simple and neat. She did not want to conform to traditional and conventional customs and manners. Thresia consciously behaved as an ordinary girl for she did not want to be noticed by anybody. At home, she was a responsible child and her parents were very happy about her. She writes candidly how she devised a plan to avoid being regarded too holy:

“My father and mother were very happy about the house hold work I did at home and for the interest I took to teach little children to read books, recite prayers and make my meditation without wasting my time. But in order to appear not too good before them, occasionally I did some harmless mischief and walked around telling jokes.”

When her mother gave her better food she could accept it readily, but gave it to someone else, without anybody noticing it. Love and concern for others was her over riding passion. “Some times she would ask me to eat well at least for few days. Quite willingly I used to accept the things she gave me, but would give it away to some one else without any one noticing it.”

In her childhood itself, Thresia developed and internalised a belief system quite different from the dominant. This she acquired

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through prayer, *fasting* and ‘imitation’ of Christ. She tried to identify herself with the value system of Jesus, i.e., ‘forgiveness’ and ‘do the will of God’. This is one aspect of her spirituality. To cite few:

During her childhood she had a boil and swelling on her arm. While her brother and three others were playing, a stone fell on her arm and due to severe pain she fainted. As she regained her consciousness, her father was ready to punish them. But she told him: “I won’t be relieved of my pain even if you punish them”. She requested him to forgive them. He did not beat them up; instead asked me, from where I got so much patience and what kinds of thoughts were inspiring me. On another occasion while Thresia and her brother were playing, he ran and hit her on her back with his hand, because he did not like something that she said. The blow was so severe that she could not get up and walk around for a few days. When her mother and others compelled her, she revealed it. But she forgave him: “Even though I felt much pain on account of the blow, taking it as the will of God, I forgave him.”

When Thresia was twelve, her mother began to show signs of ill health. Her father Thoma Mankidiyan became bankrupt as a result of the marriage of his seven sisters and two of his own daughters. Thoma sold most of his family property. Because of financial strain he felt humiliated in society and at home. To escape from the problems crowding into his

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mind he took to drinking. Family quarrels broke out after the marriage of his eldest son Porinchu and daughter Mariamkutty. Thanda, with all her strength of character and firm faith in God, felt the stress and could not hold out against the storm and became sick. Thresia attended her sick mother day and night. With great resignation, the dying mother entrusted her children in the hands of God and died on 2 March, 1888. 39 Thresia with tears knelt before the picture of the Bl: Virgin Mary and entrusted her family into the care of Blessed Mother. 40 She prayed: “Holy Mother, be thou a mother to me; I will live as becomes thy daughter”. 41 She always addressed Bl: Virgin Mary as “Mother”. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, her spiritual father unveils her relationship with Bl. Virgin Mary: “Then the girl (Thresia) who had been leading a life of self-effacement and sacrifice submitted her soul and body to Bl. Mary’s hands ... She felt very much distressed because of the lack of peace among the other members of the family, and the disturbances caused by her brother who came home drunk. Yet she thought of ways by which they could be made to live peacefully.” 42 For a girl of her early teens like Thresia, 43 it was not easy to hold together a family in peace and harmony. She was called to

42 Ivantia, Biography of Mother Mariam Thresia..., Op.cit., p. 35.
43 Joseph Vithayathil, The History of Mariam Thresia, Unpublished handwritten manuscript in Malayalam, p.42. CHFA 08. Thresia was only 12 when her mother Thanda died in 1888.
grow up in the midst of trials and pains. But her wakeful heart always found relief in prayer and solitude. She yearned to bring down the Trinitarian unity into her own family and the families around. Having drunk the bitter chalice of suffering in her family, she was later inspired to go to the help of other such families.

**Vocation: Desire for solitude**

The death of Thresia’s mother was a shock to her. But this shock, instead of disappointing her, drew her closer to her Divine Spouse. Her earnest efforts to love God since early childhood now found expression in her dream of the solitude of the wood hills. There, she thought, she would pursue virtue and lead a life of *tapas* (austerity or penance). The ideals of *tapas* and renunciation, integral elements of Indian spirituality, swayed her and finally she decided to leave home. Like the *sannyasin* of the Indian ascetical tradition, she wanted to live in some mountain recess. “At the age of fifteen a thought of going to the forest haunted my mind. Thinking that it would be difficult to practise virtue at home, I decided to go to the woods for leading an austere life.” 44 But her plan was obstructed by the intervention of her sister-in-law. 45 Given the mores of the people of Kerala, it was unthinkable for a girl of her age to go to the mountains and live there in solitude. Though Thresia had to give up her idea under pressure from the family, the thought of loving God in silence

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45 After the death of mother, sister-in-law had taken the place of her mother.
and prayer continued to haunt her day and night. Thresia next sought solitude in the shade of a convent. She recalls:

I went to a convent and enquired about my staying there as a maid doing some work. After enquiring about my family name and relations, they sent me away saying that I could not be accepted as a maidservant there. After I left, they consulted the Bishop about it, and came to the conclusion that they would admit me to the convent provided I could pay Rs.150 (as patrimony). I was informed of it.46

But her father Thoma Mankidiyan could not afford to pay Rs.150 for the dowry required by the convent. So she went to Thuravoor to ask her uncle, who was a very rich man. But he did not relish her idea of joining the convent and so refused to give her any money. He told her that he would arrange a place for her in Thuravoor and see to her needs.

To quote her words:

So I went to my mother’s house and told them about it very sorrowfully. They refused my request saying many excuses... I told them that I wanted this not to enjoy life and that I came all the way undergoing the troubles in order to find a way to love God peacefully. So I returned home.47

Thresia was once again allured by the thought of asceticism. But force of circumstances compelled her to give up the idea and she returned to the former idea of convent life and decided to beg for patrimony. She

46 The referred convent near her house might be the Carmelite convent, Ambazhakkad. It is a norm in the Carmelite convent that, to join there the candidate should pay ‘patrimony’. Mundadan, *Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia...*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 377.
consulted this matter with her parish priest.\textsuperscript{48} He objected and told that she should stay at home and help her family members and the parish doing loving service to her neighbours. Thresia with her companions used to clean the church and decorate the altar with flowers.\textsuperscript{49} Thresia did not stop such church services. She offered her life for the public, visiting the neighbouring houses, attending and nursing the sick, looking after the dying and praying for the conversion of sinners on their sick bed.\textsuperscript{50} She engaged herself fully in this ministry of redeeming the wanton and the profligate by exhortation, inducement and above all by prayers, penance and sacrifice. The conspicuous aspect of Thresia’s life of public service was its unusual novelty. What she chose to do was something that was not expected from a youthful unmarried girl in the social set up of that time. Through this revolutionary intervention, she broke away from the conventional attitude of the society. The whole society including the clergy and the ecclesiastical authorities watched the activities of Thresia with a critical mind.

Due to the life of penance, fasting, prayers and public service, Thresia was affected by illness. She had also some extraordinary spiritual experiences as ecstasies and diabolical temptations, tortures and attacks.

\textsuperscript{48} At that time Rev. Fr. Thomas Poulase was the Vicar of St. Mary’s Church, Puthenchira. (189). For details see, Puthenchira Priests Committee, \textit{Smaranika-Puthenchira Charithratihiloote}, Puthenchira, Trichur, Puthenchira Priests Association, 1975, pp. 41-46.
She was puzzled and confused about such phenomena. It became a subject of talk and mockery in her own home, neighbouring houses and even in nearby villages. Her brothers and sisters showed their dislike and disapproved of her manner of living. Because of these adverse circumstances, she turned to God and prayed to get a spiritual director to guide her. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil as her spiritual guide played a unique and decisive role in the life of Mother Mariam Thresia. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil represented to her the Church and its authority, and she was ever submissive and obedient to them.

Fr. Joseph was born on 23 July 1865 as the son of Joseph and Anna Vithayathil, a prominent family in the parish of Puthenpally. After his studies, on 11 March 1894 he received the priestly ordination in the parish church at Ollur. He was then appointed as parish priest in various places. On 30 April 1902 he was appointed as parish priest of Puthenchira, where he did pastoral work until 15 January 1922. Mother Mariam Thresia took Fr. Joseph Vithayathil as her Spiritual Director in 1902. Until her death it was Fr. Joseph Vithayathil who guided her in her spiritual journey.\(^{51}\) Father Joseph Vithayathil (1865 – 1964) gives an account of his first encounter in the confessional with Thresia.


\(^{51}\) For details see, Charithra Committee, Oru Nootandu kanda Karmayogi, (Mal), Mannuthy, Trichur, Superior General, Holy Family Generalate, 1997.
In 1902 I was the parish priest of the church at Mala and was invited to hear confession during the annual retreat conducted in the church of Puthenchira. While I was hearing the confession of women, one among them named Thresia asked me to be her spiritual father. After the retreat I returned to my parish. Before the end of the year 1902 in the month of April I was transferred to the parish of Puthenchira as Vicar (Parish Priest). The above-mentioned Thresia again asked me to be her spiritual father. From that day onwards (from 1902 to 1926) it was I who gave her spiritual guidance.52

Fr. Joseph Vithayathil had entered in his Diary all the major developments in the life of Thresia and her spiritual conditions punctually, from 1902 till her death in 1926. His Diary describes the day-to-day attacks of the devil, the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary and sometimes the Holy Family altogether. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil gave an account of the trials, temptations and other extra ordinary experiences of Thresia to Rt. Rev. Dr. John Menacherry and for the rest of it he observed the strictest secrecy till his death.53 As directed by Dr. John Menacherry, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil asked Thresia to write her life story, *Autobiographical Notes*, from early childhood up to 1902.54 Thresia’s life was interwoven with mystical experiences. Evil spirits tormented her over a long period of time. She had the experience of heavenly visions, locutions, stigmata and the like which were given to her as gratuitous

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gifts by God.\textsuperscript{55} Such incomprehensive events are not rare in the lives of many saints, as mentioned in St. Thresia of Avila, Margaret Mary Alecoque, St. Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio and so on. In the life of Thresia we come to know of a series of mystical events such as visit of the Holy Family,\textsuperscript{56} vision of hell and purgatory, change of name,\textsuperscript{57} piercing of heart with lance and stigmata.\textsuperscript{58} Thresia had to endure severe temptations against Faith, Hope and Charity. She resisted, survived and finally triumphed over them by resorting to long hours of prayer and augmented exercises of atonement and reparation. Not all the people of her parish and neighbourhood were convinced of her sanctity. Many doubted and criticised her behaviour. The life of Thresia is replete with what appears to be diabolic assaults, trials and temptations. As they occurred so frequently and repeatedly she found it very difficult to stay in her house. So, Thresia longed for a separate prayer house. She informed this to her spiritual father in 1903. Fr. Vithayathil in turn sought the permission of the Bishop to arrange a separate house for accommodating Thresia who had such mystical experiences and even physical trances. But Bishop said bluntly “I don’t believe any of these, if these are from God, there must be much bigger signs than this.”\textsuperscript{59} Bishop later sent a

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\textsuperscript{57} I bid. p. 152.
\textsuperscript{58} I bid. p. 513.
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letter to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil regarding this: 60

Trichur
6 July 1903

My dear Father,

This comes from God. Instruct her in ‘our’ name to suffer everything resigning herself to the will of God, not to deviate from it, to entrust her completely to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph and always to seek their protection. I shall issue special orders separately after consulting the sisters at Ollur.

Sd/- Vicar Apostolic.

Fr. Joseph Vithayathil informed the Bishop all the trials and torments of Thresia. Bishop was sometimes under the impression that whatever happened in the life of Thresia was the work of the devils. So Bishop issued the order for ‘exorcism’ and instructed Fr. Joseph Vithayathil to recite the prayer of exorcism over her.61 So, whenever Thresia showed signs of diabolic possession, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil recited the prayer of exorcism repeatedly. In 1905 Bishop John Menacherry wrote a writ of exorcism and sent it to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil and ordered him to stick it on the wall of her room. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil brought the writ and read it out to her. She received the writ, kissed it with great joy and said, “This is a blessed gift for me.” 62

61 Positio Super Virtutibus, Congregation for the Cause of Saints, (P.N.1242), Mariam Thresia Chiramel Mankidiyan, Positio Super Virtutibus, Rome, 1996, pp.35–36. The Positio Super Virtutibus is the key documentation on the life and virtues of the Servant of God. It is usually designated simply as Positio.
from her hand and stuck it on the wall of her room. People who read it mocked and insulted her. After one year, insects had eaten the writing on the wall. She heard that the Bishop was coming to Ambazhakkad convent. She went there and requested him to issue another one. But Bishop said there was no need of it.

Whenever Thresia was sick, and could not take the ordinary food, she used to have special diet. Somebody informed the Bishop that Thresia was taking special food, milk, bread and coffee. Believing it to be true, the Bishop ordered that she should take only the food available at the house. This was on 24 October 1905.\(^{63}\) The spiritual father informed Thresia of the ban and forbade her from taking any food except the ordinary food in her house. She accepted the directive and submitted to the law cheerfully. But it impaired her health. Even when the Bishop was informed of this, he did not react. However, in 1906 bishop wrote a letter to her, in which he told her that she should follow the prescription of the Physician, and that the ban on her food was removed, and he instructed her to pursue the ordinary way of life.\(^{64}\) Bishop wrote: "Thresia, I have read your letter. I don’t fully understand you. You may consult physicians for your sickness and take whatever food or medicines they prescribe. The restrictions on this are withdrawn. I am of the view that the devil is trying you, disguised as the angel of light. I think that it is good for you to


\(^{64}\) *positio*..., *Op.cit.*, p. 61
be humble and to live and act the ordinary way."  

In connection with the prohibition, the Bishop forbade Thresia from receiving daily communion, and restricted it to once a week. She submitted herself to the order with complete obedience, and cheerfully accepted it. This lasted for a year. After one year she was allowed to resume daily communion.  

Thresia was her baptismal name. From her birth in 1876 till 1904, her parents, relatives and friends called her by this name. Thresia affirms that in 1904, Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to her in a vision and told her that she should thence be called ‘Mariam Thresia’. It is recorded in the biography of Mother Mariam Thresia written by Fr. Joseph Vithayathil that from 8 December 1904 onwards, she will be called ‘Mariam Thresia’. So, after 8 December 1904, she was called by the name Mariam Thresia by her spiritual father. Later when she was staying in the convent at Ollur, Bishop John Menacherry also called her ‘Mariam Thresia’. Thresia remained in her house leading a celibate life. She expressed her desire to join the Carmelite Third Order, which was meant for the laity. Her spiritual father wrote a letter to Bishop on 1 March 1905 requesting to grant permission to admit Thresia in the

Carmelite Third Order and use the veil. Bishop gave permission:

“As desired, you are permitted to give the veil on Friday. Along with that, you may bless and give the large scapular sent from the convent and admit her to the Carmelite Third Order”. 70

Bishop’s House, Trichur,
1.3.1905
John Menacherry, Bishop.

The Second Phase of Thresia’s Vocation

While Bishop Menacherry visited the Carmelite convent at Ambazhakkad in 1909 Mariam Thresia went to see him. She informed her spiritual condition and desire to be alone with Jesus. Hearing her earnest desire to live a life of solitude and prayer, the Bishop advised her to kneel before the Blessed Sacrament and pray to God in order to discern whether it was God’s will that she should join the convent of St. Clare which was under construction at that time. 71 As instructed by the Bishop she went to the church and prayed to reveal the plan of God for her life. When the Bishop came to the chapel, she informed that she did not feel that she had a vocation to join the Clarist Convent. 72 After hearing this, he gave her some advice and sent her home. She showed the courage to express her opinion to Church authorities especially to the Bishop. Here we can see that Mariam Thresia is very strong in her conviction and discernment.

This is a break from the traditional pattern of behaviour.

In her house she could not spend a day in peace, silence and solitude. People who came to hear of the extra-ordinary happenings in Mariam Thresia, started crowding at her house, just to see her. Apart from the problem of the visitors, she had other difficulties in continuing to stay at home. The drunkenness of her father and brother all the more worried her. They too felt Mariam Thresia was a problem – an unmarried daughter or sister of thirty-seven staying at home. The situation was aggravated when even the Bishop showed signs of suspicion over her behaviour.

Meanwhile, in connection with the annual retreat Bishop visited Puthenchira parish. He ordered that Mariam Thresia should be dedicated to Blessed Virgin Mary. He also entrusted to her spiritual father an amount of money to be used for her cloths. Mariam Thresia spent few more days in her house with much difficulty. She heard that the Bishop was visiting the Carmelite convent at Ambazhakkad again in 1912. So she went to see him, together with one of her friends. She told him of her experiences, difficulties and desires. The Bishop suggested a temporary solution. He directed her to go and stay at the Carmelite convent, Ollur and advised, “Try to understand more clearly what God’s will with regard

to you is. Pray much."74 Chev. K.C. Chacko comments:

“Possibly he (the bishop) expected that the Carmelite sisters would be able to watch her more closely and intimately and eventually be in a reasonably better position to furnish him with reliable evidence on the purported supernatural, physical and spiritual manifestations in Thresia”.75

Accordingly, on 26 November 1912, Mariam Thresia went to Ollur convent. The sisters welcomed her gladly. In consultation with her, the sisters suggested some changes in her dress while living there. The physical, mental and spiritual trials and disturbances continued to afflict even during her stay at the convent. Mariam Thresia was under the care and special protection of Sr. Euphrasia CMC. Sr. Euphrasia loved and respected Mariam Thresia.

While Mariam Thresia was at Ollur, she wrote two letters to her spiritual father, which express clearly what she felt about her stay at Ollur convent.76 She wrote: “Did I tell you father that I was going to join this convent? No. I submit to all your orders fully ... As I expressed my sorrow in coming away, you sent me away saying not to be sad, to be obedient to the order of superiors.” 77 The sisters at Ollur were happy to accept her in their convent. They openly expressed their wish that she

74 This was the second Carmelite Convent in the Trichur Diocese. It was started on 24 May 1900. The first is Ambazhakkad convent. Joseph Vithayathil, Life..., Op.cit., pp. 532 -33.
75 K.C. Chacko, Mother Mariam Thresia..., Op.cit., p. 79
would stay there. They stated that her spirit of obedience, humility, service and asceticism was exemplary. They felt that her supernatural experiences would be a valuable asset to their order. They informed the bishop of their readiness to accept her into their congregation. They also said that they were ready to forgo the customary patrimony and other incidental expenses in her case.\footnote{The Bishop told them to wait a little before taking a decision about her, till he consulted with her spiritual father about it. Thresia wrote letters to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil while at the convent in Ollur: “Most Rev. Father, the Bishop used the same name that you called me.”\footnote{He ordered me to put sandals on and to wear the rosary around the waist and many other things ... The desire of all the Rev. Mothers is that I must join their convent soon. Bishop also agrees with it.} He had ordered the sisters to teach me two prayers - Breviary and the Psalm starting with, “Out of the depths.” I submitted myself to the order silently.\footnote{Meanwhile the people of Puthenchira sent request after request to the bishop to get back Mariam Thresia from Ollur. While Thresia was here, she used to visit the houses – nursing the sick, attending on the 

dying, helping the poor and giving good counsel to the wrong doers. So the people of Puthenchira missed her very much.

Bishop Menacheny discussed the matter of Thresia’s return to Puthenchira with Fr. Joseph Vithayathil. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil went to meet Mariam Thresia in Ollur convent. When he asked her whether she was willing to join the Carmelite convent and live there, her reply was that she had no such desire. This he communicated to the Bishop. So the Bishop came to Ollur convent and informed Mariam Thresia, “It is not the will of God that you stay in this convent. So you may return to your own place. Your spiritual father will build a house for you there”.  

Actually Thresia revealed herself to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil that, it was not her vocation to join the Carmelite convent, Ollur. By this time the Bishop had overcome his apprehension about the genuineness of Thresia’s vocation for religious life. Bishop Menacherry tested the authenticity of Mariam Thresia’s vocation for religious life for a period of ten years i.e., from 1903 – 1913. The Bishop asked her to find out whether she had vocation to the Franciscan Clarist Congregation. Thresia was fully convinced that she was not called to this Order either. Finally, he decided that she should return and stay at Puthenchira. He agreed to send her back to Puthenchira after putting up a separate house to accommodate her there.

83 positio..., Op.cit., p. 64.
By this time, Mariam Thresia was already reputed as a saintly person. The sisters at Ollur were very much grieved over her departure. The news that Thresia was leaving Ollur convent was a shock to the sisters and the chaplain of Ollur. At Ollur, some priests and the famous physician Chiramel Antony Tarakan of Aranattukara visited her to dissuade her from leaving Ollur. In accordance with the Bishop’s order, she left the convent and returned to Puthenchira on 27 January 1913. Thus, her long cherished desire to have a ‘separate house of prayer’ was sanctioned by the Bishop.

The Carmelite sisters closely watched and looked after and eventually gave a good report to the Bishop. The sisters openly admitted the good character and behaviour of Thresia combined with the qualities of humility, obedience, service and asceticism. Sr. Ignatia and Sr. Mary Louisa of the Carmelite convent were convinced of her virtues and hence testified the sanctity of Mariam Thresia. Sr. Bonaventure of the Carmelite convent also gave evidence that she saw Thresia’s stigmatic experience while she was a novice.

A House of Solitude

Bishop John Menachery, after ten years (1903 – 1913) of close observation and various tests of the vocation of Thresia, authorised the

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86 Ibid., p.537.
construction of *Ekantabhavan* for Mariam Thresia. He was convinced of the genuineness of her vocation. Thresia’s enduring patience, humility and obedience finally banished all his doubts and hesitations. Thresia’s life style won over the people of Puthenchira. When they repeatedly requested the Bishop to send her back from Ollur, he knew that the goodwill of the people was on her side, and he readily granted permission to build a *house of solitude* for Thresia, which was her heart’s desire ever since 1903.

The news that a house was going to be built for Thresia was known in the parish and the near by places of Puthenchira. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil took the initiative and the people of the locality came forward to extend their helping hands. Maliekal Koonan Kunjuvareeth Ittoop, Puthenchira donated the site (land) for putting up a house for Thresia. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil started the construction of a house with his own personal resources. Due to scarcity of fund, he found it very difficult to continue the construction. When Mariam Thresia came to know about the financial difficulties, she asked his permission to collect fund. Thus, within a short time, the *house of solitude* was completed, a small, robust two storied building of four rooms, built of granite stones and teakwood with simple white washed walls.

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89 *Ibid.* p.119
Before occupying the new house, Fr. Joseph Vithayathil sent Mariam Thresia with a letter to the Bishop asking to get permission to bless the house. The Bishop did not agree to it and even scolded her and sent her back. She came back fully resigned to God's will. She said, "Lord, what ever you desire, only that I want. Let your will be done." She reported the matter to her spiritual father. But, before long, the Bishop not only permitted the blessing and occupation of the house, but also deputed his own secretary to bless the house. On 23 September 1913, Rev. Fr. John Ukken blessed the house of solitude / Ekantabhavan in the presence of Fr. Joseph Vithayathil and many other priests and parishioners of Puthenchira. On 7 October 1913 Mariam Thresia shifted her residence to Ekantabhavan. Her friends - Mariam Karumalikkal, Mariam Maliekkal Koonan and Thandamma Maliekkal Koonan - also stayed with her during daytime. At night, they took turns and one of the three stayed with Thresia to keep her company. As in the past, Thresia was engaged in visiting houses, nursing the sick, consoling the distressed and helping the dying to have a peaceful death. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil prepared a programme in the form of rule of life and timetable for the

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Ekantabhavan. They are:

1. She should not go to houses or other places without permission. In the absence of the parish priest, she is permitted to go and help the sick in their houses, if it is necessary.

2. No gift should be received or given away without permission.

3. She must visit the sick in the parish.

4. Special permission must be taken if she has to stay in the residence of sick people.

5. She must take at least one of her companions when going to houses of the sick. If none of the friends is available then she must take another lady whom she trusts. She may go alone to places quite near.

6. She should not send letters to anybody or open and read the letters addressed to her without permission.

7. Except to the people of the parish, she should not talk to strangers without permission. She may however talk to her relatives.

8. No body should be allowed admission inside the house without permission.

\[97 \text{CHF Charithrathiloode, Vol I, pp. 22-23, Appendix-1.}\]
**Time Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>06.00 - 08.15 A.M</td>
<td>Going to church, Holy Mass, communion, thanksgiving etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.30 - 10.00 A.M</td>
<td>Social work-Charities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00 - 10.30 A.M</td>
<td>Spiritual reading: Passion of the Lord; Lives of saints.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.30 - 11.15 A.M</td>
<td>Mediation on the passion</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.15 - 11.30 A.M</td>
<td>Spiritual relaxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.30 - 12.00 A.M</td>
<td>Rosary: Examination of conscience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00 - 01.00 P.M</td>
<td>Food and relaxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01.00 - 02.30 P.M</td>
<td>Acts of charity- observing silence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>02.30 - 03.00 P.M</td>
<td>Writing - reflecting on spiritual matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03.00 - 03.30 P.M</td>
<td>Spiritual reading-Imitation of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03.30 - 04.30 P.M</td>
<td>Way of the Cross in the church-Rosary etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04.30 - 05.00 P.M</td>
<td>Preparing the Altar, placing flowers inside the church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05.00 - 06.15 P.M</td>
<td>Spiritual relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06.15 - 06.30 P.M</td>
<td>Preparation for meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06.30 - 07.30 P.M</td>
<td>Meditation of the external verities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07.30 - 08.00 P.M</td>
<td>Spiritual relaxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08.00 - 08.30 P.M</td>
<td>Prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08.30 - 09.30 P.M</td>
<td>Meals, Recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.30 - 10.00 P.M</td>
<td>Spiritual reading on the external verities. 10 mts examination of conscience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00-12.00 P.M</td>
<td>sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00-05.00 A.M</td>
<td>Meditation on the passion-Practice of other permitted ascetical acts. 5 minutes examination of conscience in the end.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thresia was very happy that she could lead a complete solitary life. Actually Mariam Thresia had been following this life style on her own quite early. The three companions also observed the rules and followed the timetable prescribed for Thresia by the Spiritual Father. Thus, this 'Ekantabhavan' became literally a house of prayer, atonement and centre of apostolic concentration. However, they did not withdraw into solitude to forget those in need. They continued to visit the sick and the dying. Their dedication to the invisible God did not stand in the way of their services to fellow human beings. They did not know of any conflict between the life of contemplation and a life of action, of prayer and apostolate.98

**Congregation of Holy Family**

Thresia was residing in the *Ekantabhavan* engaging in prayer and humanitarian activities. The people of Puthenchira and the neighbouring places were impressed by the life and activities of Thresia. On 13 May 1914, Bishop John Menacherry visited this solitary house of Thresia.99 He was satisfied with the inmates and their way of life. When concluding his visit, he expressed his desire to convert Thresia's *Ekantabhavan* into a convent where a new religious congregation is to take its shape. Bishop

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shared his view with Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, the Spiritual Father of Thresia: "Why not make this house of Thresia a convent?" Fr. Joseph Vithayathil gladly supported the idea of the Bishop. Then the Bishop asked him, 'By what name the Congregation was to be called'? He answered that he would like it to be called the Congregation of Blessed Mary. Bishop remarked that there were so many Carmelite convents named after Mary. ‘Let it be the Congregation of Holy Family’ he said. This suggestion was also agreeable to Fr. Joseph Vithayathil. Bishop then ordered him to do the necessary arrangements for the canonical erection of the Congregation of the Holy Family. This action and decision of the Bishop is a clear proof of the sanctity and holy life of Thresia. The Bishop was convinced of her spirit of renunciation, absolute freedom from vanity and ostentation, her virtue of humility and obedience, service of the poor and the fruits of family apostolate. At the end of the canonical visit he was convinced of and felt it his duty to give it hierarchical recognition. The parishioners of Puthenchira received the news with great joy that they were going to have a convent in their Parish.

On 14 May 1914, Bishop John Menacherry officially proclaimed the erection of the Congregation of the Holy Family in the presence of Fr. Joseph Vithayathil and many other priests and a vast assembly of

101 CHF *Charithrathiloode...*, *Op.cii.*, p.26
Christian faithful in the parish church of Puthenchira. The Bishop announced that he was erecting the Congregation of Holy Family for Thresia and those who would like to follow the Charism of Thresia.

Through these words, Bishop John Menacherry approved the Charism / way of life of Mother Mariam Thresia. The Bishop gave Thresia the habit of the new Congregation and she pronounced before him the three perpetual vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. The Bishop gave her the name Sister Mariam Thresia. He raised ‘Ekantabhavan’ as the first convent of the new religious Congregation, presided over the vestition and the profession of the foundress, Thresia. Thus, she became the foundress and the first member of the Congregation of Holy Family, for it was Thresia who possessed the charism of family apostolate. After her profession, on the same day her three friends received the veil as postulants, with new names: Mariam Karumalikkal – Sister Veronica, Mariam Maliekal – Sister Agnes and Thandamma Maliekal-Sister Clara. The Bishop appointed Sister Mariam Thresia as the Mother Superior of the new Congregation and appointed Fr. Joseph Vithayathil as its chaplain.

Thus, 14 May 1914 became red letter day in the history of the

106 Ibid., p.5
Congregation of Holy Family and in the life of Sr. Mariam Thresia, its foundress. It seems that there is no precedent for such a step in the history of the religious orders in the church; to make a professed religious of an aspirant, who paved the way for the starting of the convent there, and ordaining her as the superior of that house – all in the course of one day. The Bishop must have adopted this bold, unusual, extra ordinary step, possibly because he felt that a further period of novitiate or trial, after the long twelve years of painful preparation which Thresia had undergone, was not necessary for confirming her, in her vocation.\textsuperscript{107} Eight priests and fourteen Carmelite sisters participated in the solemn functions of the day, on which the Holy Family Congregation of Mother Mariam Thresia was officially recognised and raised as a Congregation in the Church.\textsuperscript{108}

The new Congregation had to be provided with a Constitution. Bishop John Menacherry himself brought a copy of rules and regulations of the Holy Family Congregation, Jafna, Ceylon, which was in Tamil. He made arrangements to have it translated into Malayalam. He also introduced some appropriate changes and additions. This newly drawn up Constitution approved for the Congregation of the Holy Family was handed over to Mother Mariam Thresia on 22 July 1914.\textsuperscript{109} The name of

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{CHF Nalagamam}, Vol 1...\textit{Op.cit.}, pp. 4-5
\textsuperscript{109} The constitution of CHF-Regula 1914, CHFA. 014; Also. \textit{CHF Charithrathiloode}, Vol.1...\textit{Op.cit.}, p.31
the Constitution was *Thirukutumba Sabhayum Atinte Kurimanavum*.\(^{110}\)

The Bishop wrote the following exhortation to the sisters and handed over it to Mother Mariam Thresia along with the Constitution.\(^{111}\)

Blessing to Rev. Mother superior and to other sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Family, Puthenchira!

I approve the above-mentioned Congregation’s Constitution with all the spiritual fruits attached to it by the Holy See. It is not the convent or the habit that makes religious; but it is in the attainment of perfection through the faithful observance of these rules that religious state consists. As members of the Congregation of the Holy Family you should learn to follow the holy example of Jesus, Mary and Joseph through your spiritual reading and meditation. I trust and pray that with their help and protection you will live a holy life and become worthy brides of Jesus Christ and finally attain eternal happiness. Once again I impart to you my pastoral blessing.

Trichur               Yohannan Menacherry
22 July 1914          Vicar Apostolic
sd/

Here we see a bishop, who is not sceptical but is definite about the genuineness of the special vocation of Mariam Thresia and decides to be the father and patron of the Congregation she founded. Mother Mariam Thresia and three postulants followed the new Constitution faithfully as prescribed and approved by the Bishop. The fundamental tenets of the Congregation of the Holy Family did not differ substantially from those of the existing Religious Orders. However, there was a special emphasis in the document on the following points.\(^{112}\)


\(^{111}\) Archives of the Diocese of Trichur, Order No.3065, Dt. 22-7-1914, Doc.11 of the years 1914-1916 of Eparchy of Trichur

\(^{112}\) *The Constitution of the CHF- Regula*, 1914. CHFA.013.
1. To promote religious vocation to the Congregation.

2. That the members of the Congregation of Holy Family should specially concern themselves with the education of girls.

3. That the majority should be taught sewing and other handicraft works.

4. That they should visit houses, nurse the sick, run orphanages and prepare the dying for a happy death and other humanitarian works which the foundress had already performed in her early days.

The sisters of the Congregation of the Holy Family first took up house visiting and family apostolate in Kerala, much before the liberalization of the Church by the Second Vatican Council (1964). Today the sisters of the Congregation, CHF consider it their sublime obligation to work for the families, help them in ‘all ways’ especially to nurse the sick and the dying at home and prepare them for a happy death, giving counseling, both to the individual and the family.

The new convent attracted the attention of young girls. Very soon aspirants from far and near dioceses began to pour in seeking admission in the CHF. It is clear that the fame of sanctity of the foundress and the specific charism and apostolate of the budding Congregation were the chief attraction. The provision, which not only permitted but also bound the sisters to render humanitarian service and perform
corporal acts of mercy among the families in the neighborhood, was surprisingly novel, personally challenging and humanly satisfying and fulfilling. Going outside or visiting neighboring or other houses and serving them were not considered as a suitable or proper course of religious activity for the women religious at that time. So it was a revolutionary break initiated by Mother Mariam Thresia, when the age-old tradition kept women in the backyard.

The zeal of Mother Mariam Thresia nurtured from her childhood days for serving the poor and the sick and visiting their houses, physically and spiritually grew to be the distinguishing characteristic of the Congregation. But many viewed this ministry outside the enclosures of the convent with anxious concern and even apprehensions. But under the divine providence, this highly indispensable service – Family Apostolate – flourished and this specific type of apostolate became the hallmark of the CHF. The Congregation was nurtured and nourished possibly more through this family ministry, the charism of the foundress, than any other form of apostolate.

In the initial years, the Congregation went through serious hardships. Mother Mariam Thresia wanted her Congregation to be a model for other Congregations, not for creating history, but for living up to Christian asceticism centering round hard work, frugality, prayer and service to fellow men. She took great care to instruct all her sisters to
grow ardent in prayer, while engaging themselves in the ministry of serving others. It is really surprising that how a person with little formal education and practically no administrative experience could control and bring up an organization like this Mother Mariam Thresia had to struggle hard to provide the least minimum living conveniences for the first recruits. The local people and some good benefactors of the foundress and the Spiritual Father helped the development of the new Congregation. The fame of sanctity of the foundress reached far and wide. As a recognition of this, on 30 May 1915 Bishop Alexander Choolaparambil of Kottayam and Bishop Thomas Kurialassery of Changanassery along with Bishop John Menacherry visited Holy Family convent, Puthenchira.\textsuperscript{113}

\textbf{Kuzhikkattussery Convent}

When the number of sisters, postulants and aspirants increased, infrastructural expansion became the dire need. Mother Mariam Thresia did not have the land or funds to construct a new building. It was then that Fr. John Ambooken Senior of Puthenchira promised a gracious offer of 8 acres of his own land at Kuzhikkattussery in Cochin State and a financial help of a Rs.1000/- for the establishment of a convent there.\textsuperscript{114} With the permission of Bishop the land was acquired. Since it was the time of depression and devaluation of money due to the First World War, it was impossible to get sufficient financial help for putting up the building. But

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{113} CHF Charithrathiloode..., Op.cit ,p.40.  \\
\end{flushright}
she faced all challenges with poise and went ahead. She jointed the *Kuri Chitties* (*Kuri Chitties* used to lend money for a percentage of interest and it was a flourishing small scale business in Trichur) and by bidding Chitties and collecting donations, she started the construction of the convent at Kuzhikkattussery. On 2 September 1917, Bishop John Menacherry laid the foundation stone for the convent and the chapel.\(^{115}\)
The Maharaja of Cochin donated teak wood (eighty Kandy) for the construction of the convent and the school.\(^{116}\) It is possible that the fame of the dedicated work of Mother Mariam Thresia had reached the Maharaja and other members of the royal family too. She also received donations from people of good will. The construction of the convent was completed in March 1922.\(^{117}\) With the permission of Bishop all the sisters were transferred from Puthenchira and accommodated in the new convent at Kuzhikkattussery.\(^{118}\) Fr. Joseph Vithayathil wrote: "she supervised the construction and returned to the convent (in Puthenchira) in the evening. She also cultivated different crops in the compound. In this way she worked hard for more than five years, disregarding the sun and the rain".\(^{119}\)


Requests for new convents started to come in. In 1917 Sri. Thekkakara Parokkaran Lcna Kunjuvareeth, a member of the Velayanattu parish church, offered a plot of land at Thumboor, his native place, to start a convent and chapel.\textsuperscript{120} He also promised to donate the required land and render all possible help for the construction. He met Bishop along with Fr. Joseph Vithayathil to inform him of his offer. He got a favorable order and on 29 November 1923, Bishop came to the spot and laid the foundation stone for the convent and the chapel.\textsuperscript{121} He and some other people of the parish gave financial and manual help for the construction of the convent. Their respect and love for Mother Mariam Thresia was the chief reason behind their selfless hard work. With the help of people, Mother Mariam Thresia could finish the construction within two years. On 10 May 1926, Bishop Francis Vazhappilly blessed the convent and the chapel.\textsuperscript{122} This was the third convent founded by Mother Mariam Thresia during her lifetime. A new primary school was started adjacent to the convent, Thumboor.\textsuperscript{123}

On the day of the blessing of the convent, Thumboor, Bishop admitted new members to the Congregation and the aspirants were given

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, p.5.
the habit of the Congregation.\textsuperscript{124} Mother Mariam Thresia attended the ceremony standing in the sanctuary. As a result of the rush of the crowd, a portion of the railing of the sanctuary collapsed and fell on Mother Mariam Thresia’s leg.\textsuperscript{125} As a result, she sustained a deep wound and felt severe pain on her leg. On the same after noon, the first election of the convent was held in the presence of Bishop. Bishop Francis Vazhappilly, in consultation with Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, the chaplain of the Congregation appointed the superiors and assistant superiors for Kuzhikkattussery and Thumboor convents. Mother Mariam Thresia was appointed as the novice mistress of the Congregation and it was a happy event for those who were in formation.\textsuperscript{126} The local superiors and their assistants helped Mother Mariam Thresia in carrying out the administration of the Congregation.

Mother Mariam Thresia some how knew that her death was fast approaching and used to refer to it casually. Sr. Metilda, one of her junior sisters, wrote in her written testimony:

“While I was in Thumboor convent, after the blessing of the convent one day Mother called me also, when she went to the compound and showed me how to cultivate the vegetables. There was swelling in her leg. While we were returning from the compound, Mother told me, “I shall not live long. This sickness of my leg is sent by God in order to take me from you”. Then I asked Mother “Why do you say

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} CHF \textit{Charithrathilooode} Vol.1..., \textit{Op.cit.}, pp. 87-88; Seven novices were given the habit of the Congregation and six postulants were given the veil.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} SHC \textit{Nalagamam} Vol.1..., \textit{Op.cit.} p.5.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} CHF \textit{Nalagamam} Vol.1..., \textit{Op.cit.}, p.63; Also HFC \textit{Kuzhikkattussery Nalagamam} Vol.1..., \textit{Op.cit.}, p.61
\end{itemize}
so? Because of this wound on your leg you will not die” Then Mother said, “No: that, I shall not live long, I will be gone soon. Don’t think that you are young, but learn everything and do every thing”. Hearing this I stayed behind and started to cry. Then Mother saw me crying she held me close to her and tried to make me happy”.

The wound on her leg became inflamed and Mother Mariam Thresia was taken to government hospital, Chalakkudy. She stayed there because “the medical officer of the hospital at Chalakkudy wanted that she should reside nearby for his inspection and care as she had a dangerous wound on her leg. Though special care and attention were given, her condition deteriorated and was declared fatal. She was taken to the motherhouse at Kuzhikkattussery as directed by the Bishop. Fr.Joseph Vithayathil, her Spiritual Father, gave her the last sacraments on 7 June 1926. The inmates and boarders of the convents of Thumboor, Trichur and Kuzhikkattussery assembled around her. Sr.Gemma states: “Even in such acute sufferings and pains she did not forget to console me for the sad demise of my mother on 26 May of the same year”. Mother Mariam Thresia called the sisters near and gave them her last blessing and told them: “My children, why are your hearts troubled like people of little faith? You know that I shall not be relieved of this illness. If it were the will of the heavenly bridegroom that I leave you very soon

127 George Nedungatt, Crucified with Christ for All..., Op.cit., p. 120.
128 Positio..., Op.cit., p. 80
in answer to 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. Deal with the superiors sincerely and lovingly. Love one another, help one another.”

On the morning of 8 June 1926 she was still conscious and gave her blessing to all those around her. As the day advanced, her condition worsened and became more and more critical. At her own request, she was laid on the floor on a mat, while her Spiritual Father and the sisters knelt down and kept praying for her. She kept repeating ejaculations prayerfully and consciously, “Jesus Mary and Joseph, I entrust my heart and soul into your loving hands”, and at 10 P.M. she expired peacefully.

Mother Mariam Thresia had directed the sisters not to give the customary bath to her dead body. The body was buried in the basement of the chapel at Kuzhikkattussery on 9 June 1926. A good number of priests, her daughters, nuns from different religious Congregation and a large crowd were present at the funeral. Fr. Joseph Kayalakam delivered the funeral homily. Msgr Mathew Edakullathur, Vicar General to Bishop of Trichur was the chief celebrant at the funeral rites. Though Mother Mariam Thresia, who started the CHF, adorned the position as the Mother

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of the Congregation only for twelve years (1914–1926), her tenure marks the golden period of the Congregation. At the time of the demise of Mother Mariam Thresia there were fifty-five members in the Congregation and thirty boarders and few orphans under her supervision. The table given below will give the details regarding CHF for the first 12 years, from the inception till the death of the foundress Mother Mariam Thresia.

Table 5.1

CHF in 1926

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 Expired)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding Students</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphans</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CHF Nalagamam (Manuscript), Vol.I. page 63

A Model of Woman Spirituality

When we analyse Mother Mariam Thresia’s life through her own ‘writings’, it is clear that she was a mature woman having her own vision of life and strong convictions. Natural qualities related to her wisdom, imagination, mind and heart are well blended. She strengthened her
devotion and spirituality through her commitment and contemplation, prayer, sacraments and penance. When we go through the *Autobiographical Notes* of Mother Mariam Thresia and her other writings, what touches us deeply is her ardent desire to love God and to participate in the Pascal mystery of Christ, through a heroic effort of practice of Christian virtues and a life of grace. For her, these were the means of union with God, so that her child-like trust would be firmly rooted. Her prayer – vocal or any other kind, meditation, contemplation, novenas – deepened her faith in the Lord. Her sacramental life impelled her to lead a faithful life, both towards God and fellowmen. Mother Mariam Thresia practiced penance bodily and otherwise, not as means to please God and get favours, but as a way of sharing the pain of Jesus and the suffering humanity, in order to identify herself with them, out of love and compassion.

In the words of A Mathias Murtdadan:

"She (Mother Mariam Thresia) used to hear gentle mysterious voice of the spirit in the interior of her soul for a divine mission, and it followed her like a shadow. Eventually it became a passion and a challenge ... Many were the criticisms, misunderstandings, calumnies raised against her from all directions. It has been her firm belief that nothing happens that has not been permitted and willed by God. She turned to God with complete trust and remained unmoved in the presence of numerous obstacles and became more resolute and valiant. She grew more and more in sanctity and gathered greater strength to practice heroically virtues of faith, hope, charity and humility. She also cultivated a love of solitude and recollection, which helped her to go out, and serve the suffering brethren"
around. Her penitential life, acts of charity and sacramental life strengthened her soul.\textsuperscript{136}

With childlike simplicity she trusted the teachings of the Church that were handed down to her by her mother, by the catechism teacher and by the parish priest. She believed that God is omniscient and all-knowing, and everything will turn out to be good and beneficial for her even if it appeared otherwise.\textsuperscript{137} In fact, during her lifetime she had faced innumerable crises with the strength that comes from her trust in God's providence. Mother Mariam Thresia had not only to think of the daily bread for the members of the Congregation, but also to meet the educational expenses of those under formation and of the aspirants who were studying at Trichur. There was no capital and no regular income. Indeed, trusting in God's providence she not only met these needs but ventured upon the establishment of four convents, three schools and one orphanage. Such was the daring of her hope.

Mother Mariam Thresia's devotion to Eucharist and her piety was another aspect of religious life and spirituality. The keen interest of Thresia as a child, to recite the prayers, her participation in the family prayer, her desire to make confession before the customary age, her ardent desire to receive Holy communion, her insistence on attending the

Holy mass daily, her devotion to Eucharist, her veneration towards heavenly patrons and saints – all these were expressions of her spirituality.

For Thresia, God was no distant being but the ‘God with us-Emmanuel’, the Son of God incarnate and abiding with the church sacramentally. It was through Eucharistic worship that Mother Mariam Thresia tried to identify sacramentally with the person of Christ, the principal subject of the sacrifice on Calvary. She became so identified with Christ that she lived his passion and death as her own. Holy Eucharist was the supreme act in her spiritual life. Thresia regularly attended Holy Communion as often as she was allowed to. There was, however, something very personal and peculiar in the manner in which she participated in the Holy Mass. Exceedingly careful, intelligent and meditative was her attitude and approach. She has got a very elaborate recollection of how she prepared for and participated in the Holy Sacrifice. In her ‘Autobiographical Notes’, a section tells how she participated in the Holy Mass, using the allegorical method of meditating on the passion and death of Jesus.\textsuperscript{138}

Thresia had an intense desire to attend the ‘Fifty Hour Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament’. Thresia wanted very much to take part in it, but she was down with illness. She prayed to Mother Mary sorrowfully.
and fervently. As a result, on the day of adoration she was cured and she went with a companion to the monastery, and there she participated in the adoration.\footnote{139}

The spirituality of Thresia centres on the passion of Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality is a participation in the mystery of Christ. Many great saints of the church meditated on the sufferings of Christ and cultivated a strong desire to suffer and die for Christ.” Either suffer or die” for Christ was the motto of St.Teresa of Avila.\footnote{140} For St.John of the Cross-, it was “to suffer and to be humiliated” for Christ.\footnote{141} Thresia used to steep herself in the passion of Christ even from her childhood. Her mystical vision and life emerged from her recollection and meditation on the sufferings of Christ. Her penitential exercises were not only fasting and abstinence, but kneeling on the floor spread with gravel, adding bitter stuff to food, keeping awake all night, wearing jacket with thorns etc; All these show her irresistible thirst to suffer for Christ.\footnote{142}

Thresia received the Stigmata for the first time when she was twenty-eight years old. It first appeared in 1905. Her Spiritual Father writes: “One Friday at sunset, a man came to Thresia’s Spiritual Father

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and called him to her house saying that she was seriously ill. When he
[Fr. Joseph Vithayathil] reached her house, he found that she was
suffering from severe heart pain. Her hands and legs were frozen. Some
time later she fell into a trance. Blessed Mary spoke to him through her,
"Don’t feel afraid at this sight. These are the Stigmata that the Lord is
giving her. It will begin at the afternoon of every Friday and continue up
to midnight. This will happen during the time of lent also". Afterwards at
3.00 p.m on every Friday this event recurred and ended at midnight.
Sometimes drops of blood could be seen outside the heart on the chest
and on the palms".\textsuperscript{143} To be united with Christ became a burning passion
in her life. Jesus who was pleased with Thresia’s ‘intense love of God’
willed to give the imprint of his \textit{Five Wounds (Stigmata)} in the body of
Thresia permanently in the year 1909.\textsuperscript{144} She cultivated a holy
indifference or detachment to worldly pleasures and honours. Her’s was a
Christ-centric spirituality.

In his introduction to the life of Mother Mariam Thresia, the late
Dr. George Alapatt, former Bishop of Trichur wrote: “I have heard during
my primary school days in 1912 a detailed description of how our rector
Rev. Fr. John Ukken and the reputed physician Chev. Antony Tarakan had
gone to see the Lenten passion of Thresia Mankidiyan. In 1928 when I

returned from Rome after ordination Mariam Thresia was no more”.

Mrs. Rosamma Vithayathil speaks as an eyewitness, and tells us of a ‘relic of the Stigmata’ kept in her house. “One day Thresia Mankidiyan came to our house wearing ‘mundu and chatta’ and a white veil on her head. That afternoon, while she was talking she fainted suddenly. After sometime bleeding was noticed around the head in the form of a crown of thorns, on the chest, like a small ‘pappadam’, and on the back of the feet and inside the palm, the size of a small ‘paisa’. After a while she regained her consciousness and she changed her dress. The dress she wore was retained in our house, and it is still kept there as a precious gift”.

We have examples of saints who ardently aspired for a share in the passion of Jesus and were granted the blessings of the Stigmata. The whole world knows of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. We have heard of similar experiences in many persons like Theresa Newman of Germany, Father Pio of Italy. Mother Mariam Thresia too was a Stigmatist. Msgr. Thomas Moothedan called his first biographical account of Mother Mariam Thresia “The Stigmatist of Kerala” (Keralathile panchakshetha).

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146 Ibid, p.69. and also Mrs. Rosamma Vithayatil, Testimony, Docu. 112, pp.426-27.
Mother Mariam Thresia had particular devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Family, and St. Joseph etc. She had a tender and childlike devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary from her childhood onwards. During her infancy she chose Mary as her Mother and was particularly devoted to her.\textsuperscript{148} It is said that, Blessed Virgin Mary taught her how to recite the rosary in her infancy.\textsuperscript{149} Regarding Mary as her own mother, Thresia consecrated herself, body and soul, to the Blessed Mother of God. She received frequent visitations from Mary, who counselled her and comforted her during her trials, temptations and diabolic attacks. Her name was changed during one such apparition from ‘Thresia’ to ‘Mariam Thresia’, with the addition of “Mariam” (Mary), as directed by Blessed Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{150} Blessed Virgin Mary often gave her directions about her apostolate of house visiting in its early phase.\textsuperscript{151}

Mother Mariam Thresia had a special affection to the Holy Family. Her child-like dependence and devotion towards the Holy Family can be seen in the accounts of Fr. Joseph Vithayathil. In order to show her love and respect towards Holy Family, on the feast of the Holy Family she used to invite three poor persons for a meal – a man, a woman and a child- representing the Holy Family, a custom that her Congregation still

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, p.156.
keeps up. She had a filial devotion to St. Joseph. On his feast day she used to make it a feast for the poor people by serving them food.\textsuperscript{152}

Forgiveness is the touchstone of genuine spirituality. Mother Mariam Thresia was a symbol of forgiveness. She never showed revenge against her enemies. Her attitude towards Bishop Menacherry is edifying. Bishop put her in severe tests.\textsuperscript{153} She survived all the rejections and came out victorious. She always obeyed him and showed great respect and love towards him. In 1918, Bishop issued an order forbidding Mother Mariam Thresia to go out of Puthenchira or enter Bishop’s house.\textsuperscript{154} She did not show any resentment, but took it well and abided by the order. But the finale of the story is magnificent. Forgetting the injury, Mother Mariam Thresia went to see Bishop when he was on the point of death (1919) and asked for and received his blessing.\textsuperscript{155}

Mother Mariam Thresia’s openness to her Spiritual Father was an important aspect of her spirituality. Her self-awareness, courage and self-confidence helped her to make constant examination of who she was. She was fully aware of her own strength and weakness. Hence she could understand others and their needs. She fully opened her mind in front of her Spiritual Father. The Spiritual Father, in turn, acted as a true mirror to


\textsuperscript{153} Joseph Vithayathil, \textit{Life...}, \textit{Op.cit.}, pp.323-37 (Prohibition on food); p.364 (Restriction regarding food); p.491 (order of exorcism); pp.532-33 (sent her to Ollur convent).

her self. Because of the transparent relationship that she had with Fr. Joseph Vithayathil she could lay bear her innermost feelings and fears before him, thereby making her life an open book. He knew her through and through. The changes taking place in her physique, her plans, aspirations, visions, inspirations, revelations, extraordinary experiences, temptations, trials, struggles, diabolic attacks etc.\textsuperscript{156} She regarded the voice of her Spiritual Father as the voice of God and obeyed it faithfully without questioning. From her letters we can see: "I trust in your words",\textsuperscript{157} "I submit to all your orders very strictly",\textsuperscript{158} "I am ready to obey what you tell me, from your wisdom",\textsuperscript{159} "Please forgive me if there is anything unbecoming in my letter- Give me counsel and help me",\textsuperscript{160} "Please have mercy on me and point out the faults in me and make me practice necessary penances," \textsuperscript{161} "Father you know the limits of my intelligence and ability."\textsuperscript{162}

Letters of Mother Mariam Thresia reflect her sanctity of life. Her humanness and womanliness are very clearly expressed in the letters. For

example, she accepted her sufferings, she cried at the physical pains, felt like complaining to God. Her concern for the health of the sister of Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, her small gifts to her Spiritual Father on occasions like his feast day, all these exemplify the woman in Mother Mariam Thresia. Her womanliness can also be seen in some letters: "I am badly in need of cloth and a jacket. For a long time I have been asking my father for the same, so far he hasn't given me these things. I am wondering what to do! I count on your advice and God's help ..." In another letter she mentions the criticism made by her aunt. In letter number 55 Thresia expresses herself. "I find it hard to let you know how great my love for you, Father is. But you know well, Father, that I am a poor woman and a sinner who is unable to show that love or to give something in return, or do an act of gratitude or charity."

Ministry of Family Apostolate

Mother Mariam Thresia is the progenitor of the idea of Family Apostolate in Kerala. She was the pioneering model of a nun, divinely inspired to enter into the agonizing world of the underprivileged to promote their welfare with relentless effort. Mother Mariam Thresia paved the way for a new course of life, when she dedicated herself to the service of her brethren in the world, overcoming all objections and hurdles. Long before the modern world awakened itself to the new realisation, she believed that Religious Orders were not to confine themselves to their institutions, but should engage themselves in service to the fellow beings. She not only realized it in principle but also implemented it in practice. Her heart brimmed over with compassion towards the suffering brethren. With merciful love she went about giving solace and comfort to all, irrespective of caste or creed. She shared their pains and agonies and helped them to solve their problems. The sick and the dying found support and strength in her.

A whole chapter in her ‘Biography’ by her Spiritual Father is devoted to the humanitarian acts of Mother Mariam Thresia. Another work ‘Life of Mariam Thresia’ also shows very many examples of her service to the sick and the dying. Several witnesses also give evidence for the same. Mr. M. K. Devassy has vivid memories of the charitable

service of Mother Mariam Thresia “... she was actively involved in rendering social service to all people, irrespective of caste and creed particularly in nursing the sick and giving spiritual advice to people in danger of death. This was very unusual in those days, as girls did not do such an apostolate. Unmarried girls were not permitted to enter other houses, where she went even during the night to nurse the sick and the dying, for which she received abuse from others.”\(^{173}\) The words of Fr. Mundadan are noteworthy:

“Brushing aside all oppositions and prevailing customs and conventions, she took up the challenge of her special mission of *family apostolate* to win souls for Christ. She engaged herself in acts of charity, not for worldly appreciation but for love of Christ. She hastened to the midst of the poor and destitute, to the sick and to the sinners, to the down trodden and to the abandoned, with great apostolic zeal to wipe off their tears and to lift them up from the rut of their sinful life and to fill them with Christ’s spirit. Many appreciated her ways, some despised her and still others branded her as an obsessed woman. But the undaunted Thresia, motivated with the spirit of Christ visited the houses of all who needed her service irrespective of caste or creed, and attended to their spiritual and temporal needs such as preparing them for happy death and for receiving sacraments, praying for them, doing sacrifices for their recovery, even collecting funds to meet the needs of the poor.”\(^{174}\)

A lot of incidents prove Mother Mariam Thresia’s concern for the destitute, sick, sinner and the dying. To cite few, quite at a distance from Thresia’s house there lived an orphan woman. She had no abode of her

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\(^{173}\) *Positio..., Op.cit., p.28*
own. She was living all alone. While living a vagrant life she fell ill. Her relatives refused to accept her and give shelter. Thresia went to nurse this woman. She constantly advised and remained with her long hours and took care of her. The medicines prescribed by the Ayurvedic physician were prepared by Thresia herself. She met even to the least needs of her, both physical and spiritual. When it was time for patient to die, Thresia remained close to her with inspiring holy thoughts in her and had a happy and peaceful death.175

Fr. Joseph Vithayathil reports the case of a cancer patient who in life time used to bury alive persons afflicted with small pox. Formerly in Kerala people were afraid of nursing small pox patients and so the attenders fully drunk had their own way of nursing. The patient in reference was in despair and used to utter disgraceful words. Thresia carefully looked after and advised him, and finally prepared him for a happy death.176

Mother Mariam Thresia had great concern for the orphans. There was a hindu prostitute who became a victim of a contagious disease. Mother Mariam Thresia picked her with her child and brought to the convent and nursed her. Later the lady died, and Mother looked after the

girl child and married her to a young man.\textsuperscript{177}

There are similar incidents we get from the life of Mother Mariam Thresia. e.g., daughter of Sri. Lona Alapatt of Karanchira,\textsuperscript{178} Fr. Joseph Vithayathil’s sister,\textsuperscript{179} another sick man\textsuperscript{180}, souls in purgatory.\textsuperscript{181} It is said that no one in Puthenchira died without experiencing the divine touch of Mother Mariam Thresia. Medical aid was difficult to be obtained in those days at that place. People had to travel long distance to get the help of a doctor or a nurse. Hence the poor people cherished the service of Mother Mariam Thresia. She helped many to restore their health. It was sheer heroism on the part of Mother Mariam Thresia, for she had to risk everything just to help the abandoned and sick. She wanted to impart the divine love that burned in her heart to everyone. Mother Mariam Thresia also helped alcoholics and sinners through her advice, ardent prayer and penance. Her zeal for the souls in purgatory was another aspect of her apostolate. She fasted and performed acts of penance for saving souls from purgatory.\textsuperscript{182}

Mother Mariam Thresia had to suffer harsh remarks, severe criticisms and ridicule from many. In adversities and disheartening

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid, p.40.
\textsuperscript{180} Copia publica transumpti, Vol.I CHFA/DC.1, p.250. Also in Sr. Yohannan CHF, Testimony, witness 8, Positio, p.122.
\textsuperscript{181} Copia publica transumpti, Vol.I CHFA/DC.1,p.44
experiences Mother Mariam Thresia did not give up her sublime mission. Her selfless service in attending the patients helped many to repent and receive the last sacraments and die peacefully. Though some criticized, many welcomed, encouraged and appreciated her works of mercy at a time when hospitals and dispensaries were rare or even absent in the villages of Kerala.

Mother Mariam Thresia’s contemporaries and other witnesses say with one accord that the family apostolate, which Mother Mariam Thresia started, met a great need of the time. One of the eyewitnesses says, “Mother went out doing family apostolate. She visited the houses, prepared the youth for marriage, settled the family problems and disputes among the parents and couples and brought back peace and joy in the families, nursed the sick people, consoled the suffering, she inspired all to do good to others.” According to Msgr. Thomas Moothedan, “Family apostolate was not heard of in that socio-religious milieu. She felt that this type of apostolate was the need of the time.” She visited even the low caste people in their houses. With her companions she went to the houses of the poor, the sick and the dying, to give them relief. She collected alms for the poor and gave religious instructions to the children. In that period,

182 Committee, Garhiga Sabhavude pravachika,(Mal), (Prophetess of the Domestic Church), Mannuthy, Trichur, Superior General, Holy Family Generalate, 1989, p.116
183 Mrs.Thresia Kannampuzha, Doc.96, Copier Publica Documentorum, Vol II. CHFA, Mannuthy, p.423.
along with the Hindus, the Christians too considered themselves as high caste and would not go to the houses of the low caste and poor people. It was in these circumstances that Mother Mariam Thresia and her sisters began to visit the houses of the poor people and the low caste. Though some people opposed it, the poor and the sick welcomed this with great joy.\textsuperscript{185} Though criticized by the garrulous rabble, people of goodwill, admired her and supported her in her apostolate and helped her to carry out her mission.

Mother Mariam Thresia exhorted the sisters to be with the people in the families, and to work for the uplift of those families. The CHF sisters are called to commit their whole life to family apostolate: to foster, to renew and sanctify the families and to build up families after the model of the Holy Family of Nazareth. One goal of all the apostolates undertaken by the CHF sisters is family welfare – both spiritual and temporal. All the apostolates are family oriented and all the institutions are engaged in one way or other in the service of the family.\textsuperscript{186} The CHF founded by Mother Mariam Thresia is, thus, faithfully carrying on the apostolate started by her, according to the needs of today. Through it, her spirituality and personality live on, making her the pioneer of ‘Family Apostolate’ in Kerala.

\textsuperscript{186} CHF Constitution., Chapter 3.
Educational Institutions

Mother Mariam Thresia’s experience in the field of Family Apostolate and social service activities opened her eyes to a vision, which added a new dimension to her apostolate. She found the immediate need to reach out to the children and the young and to bring them up from the abyss of ignorance and illiteracy. She knew well that education would help the formation of good families. Her aim in starting the school was “educating the children in the knowledge of God”. ¹⁸⁷ The schools founded by Mother Mariam Thresia were primarily intended to help in the formation of children. She had a broad vision and had a clear idea of the services her own religious institute should render in course of time. It is astonishing that Mother Mariam Thresia realised so well the need of higher education.

There was no school at Puthenchira at that time. Therefore, children did not go to school, especially the girls. Fully aware of this deficiency of the village, she suggested to the Spiritual Father the idea of starting a school. Without any finance and competent personnel, she dared to start a school. Her Spiritual Father supported her bold decision. Mother Mariam Thresia stressed the idea that to impart the knowledge of God she intended to start the school. With the permission of Bishop in 1915, Mother Mariam Thresia started a primary school in two rooms on

the southern side of the convent, as the first and second standards. This school was known as ‘Holy Family Primary School’ Puthenchira. As a result of the request of the parents, Mother Mariam Thresia started a boarding for the girls who were coming from far away places. There were no trained sisters in the Congregation for teaching purpose at that time. With all humility Mother Mariam Thresia borrowed the service of sisters from Carmelite convent. For a year, two Carmelite sisters came to teach in the school. Since they did not have the required qualification, qualified teachers were brought from Kozhikode and Kottayam to replace them. With the help of Bishop Alexander Choolaparambil of Kottayam, the school got government recognition.

Students not only from Puthenchira but also from the neighbouring villages flocked to get admission in the Holy Family School. Mother Mariam Thresia had to meet the entire expenses for running the school without any Government help. In her letter to the Director of Education for the sanction of a Girl’s School at Puthenchira, she highlighted the needs of the local people and pleaded for the necessary aid from the government without which the school cannot function properly. This

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letter throws light not only on her awareness of the needs of the people and readiness to respond to them in time, but also on her conviction of the importance of education, especially of girls. 193

To
The Director of Education
Travancore Government
Trivandrum

From
The Mother Superior
Holy Family Convent
Puthenchira-Parur Taluk

Respected Sir,

I beg to submit the following few lines for your kind consideration and favourable disposal.

As there was no girls’ school in this proverthi (locality), the school going girls of this place were not receiving such education as needlework etc., peculiar to girls. Such being the case, the natives of this place have sent a petition for the opening of a girls’ school about two years ago. As a result of this, Srimathi Chinnama, the then Asst. Inspectoress, visited the place and was convinced of the necessity of such a school here and they received from the Inspectoress of girls’ school a memo (Ref.No. 690 dated 12 June 1913) informing them that a departmental school for the locality has been recommended to the Director for Public Instruction.

But till now their grievances were not redressed. At the request of local people a Girls’ school was opened on the first Mithunam 1090 (June 1915) within the precincts of the convent. Now, there are three teachers in it and an average attendance of fifty students. There is a bright prospect of increasing its strength. As far as the pecuniary resources of the convent are concerned, we are not in a position to run the school properly, without the usual financial aid from the government. So I humbly request your honour to recognise

our school and grant us proper aid, according to the Educational Code. I remain here,

Your obedient servant,
Mother Superior.

With the establishment of a convent at Kuzhikkattussery, Fr. Pathrose Pazhayattil of Puthenchira Parish donated his St. Mary’s School at Kuzhikkattussery to the Holy Family convent. Mother Mariam Thresia soon started to expand the school building and added a lower secondary school along with it. Later it was raised to a High school. In A.D. 2000 this school was raised to the status of higher secondary school. Mr. P. C. Kunju Vareed observes: “Even though (the servant of God) Mother Mariam Thresia was not educated, she was very earnest and interested in the education of others. Whenever the sisters opened a new convent, they were keen to build schools also.”

Mother Mariam Thresia felt the need of qualified teachers to teach in the schools. She decided to equip her own team of educated sisters. English education was not only fashionable but became a necessity by 1920s. So in 1918, she hired a house in Trichur, to serve as a boarding house for the sisters who went there for higher education. With the recommendation of Bishop John Menacherry, the sisters got admission in

the Victoria Girls High School, Trichur. The Maharaja gave wholehearted help to these sisters and gave fee concession to those who studied in Government School.\footnote{CHF Charithrathiloode..., Op.cit.,p.48} She sent four sisters and twenty girls there to the Government School for their higher education. It is astonishing that even at the early stage of the Congregation, Mother realized so well the need and importance of higher education. It shows, she had a broad vision and had a clear idea of the services her own religious Congregation should render in course of time, twinning the family and the school. This humble beginning at Trichur, later led to the establishment of a convent and school there – Holy Family Convent and School, Chembukavu.\footnote{CHF Charithrathiloode Vol.1...,Op.cit.,p.48; HFC Chembukavu Nalagamam, p.1, Holy Family Convent Archives, Chembukavu, Trichur.}

Mother Mary Pastor CHF has the following comments to make on the educational efforts of Mother Mariam Thresia, at that time.

"The total transformation of the individual was her goal, so far as her sisters were concerned. Merely nursing the sick or healing the social ills around could not achieve this, she knew. That was why she tried from the very beginning to develop all avenues for the education and even higher education for girls in spite of the fact that her educational attainments were almost nil. Mother Mariam Thresia (the servant of God) so shaped her apostolate as becoming the worthy daughters of the Holy mother church, which held up the ideal of progress and prosperity for all, without just clamouring for the rights and privileges for it."\footnote{CHF Charithrathiloode Vol.1...,Op.cit.,p.48; HFC Chembukavu Nalagamam, p.1, Holy Family Convent Archives, Chembukavu, Trichur.}

Mother Mariam Thresia saw school education as an efficacious means to imbue children with gospel values and social virtues. But
education had to begin at home and the school was a means to reach to the family. Thus, convent, school and family were strung together on a single chord. Along with three convents she started a study house, two boarding houses, two schools and an orphanage. Knowing her selfless dedication to God and to fellow humans, people extended their full support with generous donations.

People appreciated the new venture of Mother Mariam Thresia. "They continued the family apostolate, but at the same time opened schools. Wherever they opened a new convent, they were keen to build schools also... Even though Mother Mariam Thresia was not educated, she was very earnest and interested in the education of others. She was interested in teaching the people the means of earning a livelihood and explored all possibilities to reach this goal. She found weaving as a useful trade in this line. She started an Industrial school in Kuzhikkattussery adjacent to the regular school."201 I remember Mother Mariam Thresia once discussed the matter with me personally."202

Mother Mariam Thresia wrote a letter to Cochin Postal Department requesting to put an Anchal box close to the school at Kuzhikkattussery, which is about eight kilometres away from the nearest post-box at Mala. The only means of transport available at that time was bullock cart. Herein lies the far reaching impact of her request. Her real

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concern for others, especially for the servants, is very evident in this document.\textsuperscript{203}

Letter of Mother Mariam Thresia to the Cochin Postal Superintendent

From
Mother Superior
H.F. Convent
Vadakkumbhagam

To
The Cochin Anchal Superintendent

Sir,
I beg here to bring forward the following few lines for your kind consideration and favourable orders at your earliest convenience.

The nearest Anchal office from this place being at Mala, we find it very difficult to send and also to receive letters, parcels and very often, official covers from the school attached to this convent. If there were an Anchal Box close to this convent or the school, much difficulty and expense of money could be saved. During the winter season, even the male servants object going to Mala to drop letters and official covers from our school, though we give them good wages.

Under the above circumstances, I humbly request you to be kind enough to make arrangements to place an Anchal Box close to the school or the convent and open it at least three times a week. I beg to remain,

Your most obedient servant,
Sr.M.Thresia
Mother Superior
Vadakkumbhagam
20.8.1924.

Mother Mariam Thresia was a revolutionary missionary. She

\textsuperscript{203} CHFA 013..., \textit{Op.cit.}, p.21
listened to the human cry of her times. Her services were extended to all people, disregard of caste, creed or religion. She gave more importance to persons rather than any other discriminating factor. She undertook activities of family apostolate at a time when the religious sisters were expected to spend their time, energy and life within the four walls of their convent. It is really amazing to see how Mother Mariam Thresia had the stamina to break through the strong social barriers and traditions to reach out to the suffering and the needy. She was determined to contribute her might once she was convinced of her mission. No obstacle either secular or ecclesiastical could discourage her. She was a woman of heroic charity, extraordinary piety, attractive simplicity and ascetical austerity. Mother Mariam Thresia outlived the age in the sense that she foresaw the great need for service in the family. In those days family apostolate was unheard of in the socio-cultural atmosphere of Kerala. Thresia felt that this type of apostolate was the reed of the time.

The life and mission of Thresia contributes much to the historical biography of the institution of nuns and women spirituality in Kerala. Shashi Tharoor wrote in his A View of the World about "Unknown Saint" on the eve of the beatification of Mother Mariam Thresia.  

"She died seventy years before Mother Teresa, in the unremarkable Kerala village of Puthenchira, far from the flash bulbs of conscience-stricken press. Another servant of God who found her calling in ministering to the sick and

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dying, another unforgettable heroine to the forgotten. But there was no state funeral for her, no Nobel Peace Prize, not even a profile in the big city papers. Mother Mariam Thresia Chiramel Mankidiyan died aged 50 ...

Seventy four years later, she was beatified in St.Peter’s Square by Pope John Paul II, the penultimate step towards sainthood...And then the curtains parted to unveil five immense tapestries hanging from the Vatican balconies, the last of a stern Mariam Thresia in her nun’s robes, clutching a crucifix and regarding the worshipers with an ascetic eye. How did this woman transcend the obscurity of her geography and genealogy to receive beatification at the hands of the Pope in the Jubilee year 2000, only the fourth Indian ever to have been beatified? The story of Mother Mariam Thresia is a remarkable one..."