

FR. PETER MARY MERMIER, FOUNDER AND MISSIONARY

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Fr. Peter Mary Mermier, the founder of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales, MSFS, was born in Annecy, France in 1790, where St. Francis de Sales was the Bishop, just a couple of centuries before. He had immense desire to be a priest, even as a boy. With the permission of his loving and religious parents, he entered the Diocesan Seminary in Annecy and after his studies; he was ordained a priest in 1813. He died in 1862 and Pope John Paul II raised him to the status of 'Servant of God'.

Religious Environment in 19th Century France

The French Revolution sparked profound transformations in social, economic and religious field. The subsequent years were characterized by liberal democracies, the spread of secularism, the development of modern ideologies, and unprecedented confidence in man's ability and progress in science. The intense economic revolution in the 19th Century affected France, altered the conditions of the material existence and the whole mode of life. The industrial and social revolution threatened to obscure any feeling for religious affairs. Colonialism threatened to turn the mission calling of the Catholic Church into a political and cultural mandate. The aftermath of the French revolution still continued to weaken the faith and practices of Catholics. The post-French Revolution produced a population who were completely indifferent towards God. Thus, the situation in which Fr. Mermier lived and built up his life's work was favorable for revamping the Gospel values in the lives of Catholics. He heard a call, a challenge to look beyond the parochial state of affairs and move out into the universal Church.

Fr. Mermier- Priest and Founder

As a diocesan priest, Fr. Peter Mary Mermier used to read the activities of the Jesuit missionaries. He was impressed by the missionaries who went out into the 'third world' countries to spread the gospel message. As a man of profound faith, his heart longed for spreading the good news of Jesus in places where Christ was still unknown. He was imbued with the idea of doing more for the spiritual welfare of the Church, especially the foreign mission. This yearning of his heart intensified as years went by. Yet, he also realized the limitations that a single person alone may not be able to materialize his dream of evangelization a country. Therefore, Fr. Mermier shared his heart's desire with some of his fellow priests of the same diocese and he promoted interest in the minds of those priests about the missions.

Knowing Fr. Mermier as a holy man, a few diocesan priests expressed their desire to join him in his missionary venture. Encouraged by the support of his priest friends, he had the aspiration to begin a congregation. The idea of being the founder of a new congregation filled him with great joy. He questioned himself to determine whether such a feeling came from God or was a mere human impulse or even a suggestion of the devil. To settle the matter, he sought God's help. With confidence in the providence of God and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit and the encouraging accompaniment of Jesus, Fr. Peter Mary Mermier founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (MSFS).

The Congregation received the canonical approval on 24 October 1838 from Bishop Joseph Roy, of Annecy, France and the Holy See approved it on March 19, 1860. Thus, Fr. Mermier formed a 'Band of Missioners' from the diocesan priests of Annecy and animated them into a community with a 'Rule of Life'. He wanted them to be committed and dynamic, daring and innovative, creative and responsive, to the signs of the times. He molded them on the example of the 'Apostle of Chablais' – St. Francis de Sales.

Salesian Spirituality

MSFS is the first congregation to be placed under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales. For Fr. Mermier, the Salesian spirituality was all embracing and pastorally effective and he was proud of his native saint. He was fascinated by St. Francis de Sales' exemplary missionary zeal, his ingenious and inventive ways of evangelization, his audacity to preach the good news even among the hostile and difficult people and his advocacy of internal transformation through gentle persuasion. Fr. Mermier's life was infused with the perfume of Salesian spirituality and insisted to have the practice of Salesian spirituality by the members. He wanted the MSFS missionary to be a man of vision, who builds communities, who explores and ventures into the unknown, and sows God's word whenever and wherever possible, by following the spirit of St. Francis de Sales.

The basic mission of the congregation is to pass the love of God to people and to bring the renewal of Christian life. Fr. Mermier was a man of perseverance, like St. Francis de Sales. He would not give up until the good was revealed and he always consulted God. His meticulous preparation of the retreats, mission preaching and homilies, demonstrate his missionary zeal and dedication to the building up of the Church. His eloquent sermons which came from his passionate heart moved the Catholics, which sparked their spiritual rebirth in the Catholic faith.

Fr. Mermier exhorted his members to be sensitive and constructively critical towards whatever life-situation was at hand, whether it be political, economical, social, cultural or religious. He further encouraged his members to be creative and innovative in their service to people, holding fast to the values of the Gospel.

Mermier-a Man of Faith and Prayer

Fr. Mermier was a zealous person springing from his prayerful life and submission to the will of God. He was rooted in prayer and lived in communion with Jesus. He realized that prayer is the soul of the apostolate of a missionary. With the presence of Jesus in us, we can be effectively present to the people. This inspired his every action and the sanctity of Fr. Mermier is revealed in all his activities. He wanted the members of his congregation to be contemplatives in action and mystics of God's love.

Initial Missionary Activities

Fr. Mermier sought to strengthen the faith of the people and renew their Christian lives. He realized that people need to be re-evangelized through mission preaching in the parishes. Therefore, the members of the new congregation had steadfast zeal and commitment to the promotion of personal and family renewal of the faith in the post-revolutionary period in France.

The members dedicated themselves to visiting families, preaching parish missions and animating spiritual exercises in almost every parish in the diocese of Annecy and the adjoining diocese of Savoy.

Fr. Mermier also realized the importance of the faith formation of youth. The education apostolate would be a springboard to infuse the spirit of renewal of faith in the minds and hearts of children. The seed of faith that is sown in the young minds can flourish in adulthood. Therefore, he gave special attention to the education of youth, together with the missionary outreach programs in parishes.

Mission Abroad

The creative and missionary mind of Fr. Mermier began to widen its perspective towards the entire world. He yearned for the missionary activities abroad. He used to say "I want mission"- mission abroad. His heart's longing for the 'missions' began to stimulate his being. The invitation of Pope Gregory XVI to extend the missionary activities to the church in Asia and Africa was the answer for his prayers and longing. The MSFS congregation was invited by the 'Propaganda Fide', to take up pastoral services in the Indian Mission Territory of the 'Apostolic Vicariate of Visakhapatnam' in 1946. Thus, the dream of the founder to extend his congregation's services to the cause of Evangelization to a foreign land finally materialized. Later on, he took up the mission to England. Reaching out to other countries to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, was both a symbolic and tangible gesture of reaching out to human situations to address and heal the brokenness of people.

The First Missionaries

The missionary horizon of Fr. Mermier was extended beyond Savoy and Annecy in France, to serve distant mission territory of India. A group of seven missionaries (from a total of 14 members) landed in Indian soil, to serve a wide mission territory (measuring almost 435,000 kms), presently covering parts of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra.

Fr. Mermier had special love for the mission in India. He transmitted his missionary zeal to his confreres in India, through his prayers, his regular correspondence and encouragement, his insistence on strict discipline and observance of the rules of the constitutions of the congregation. Living and encouraged by the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales, and being deeply rooted in Christ, and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the first MSFS missionaries made a great impact in India and England, in fostering genuine faith in the hearts and minds of people.

MSFS Congregation Today

The historic and missionary commitment of the founder is alive and dynamic today. The vision and mission of the founder Fr. Mermier is carried out by the MSFS missionaries to people of different cultures, languages and religions geared towards the renewal of Christian life as well as the education and formation of the young. The initial call of our founder for "Missions" is further strengthened and enriched through diverse missionary activities of the MSFS priests throughout the world.

The missionary tasks that were undertaken by Fr. Mermier were extended ornately to twenty six countries including India (in 1845), England (1861), Switzerland (1880), Brazil (1926), America (1975), East Africa (1988), Philippines (1993), Namibia (1998), South Africa (1999), Chad (1999), Mozambique (2000) Cameron (2000) and Poland (2003).

Every MSFS confrere strives to remain faithful to the yearnings of the founder's heart, to be a missionary with Salesian Spirituality, to be a mystic, deeply rooted in our spiritual heritage and to be prophets, being faithful to the voice of God speaking to us in different ways.

It is time for a new evangelization in the face of the onslaught of secularization and de-Christianization.

Each MSFS confrere entails to have a "Mermier-Salesian Outlook" to launch various missionary activities, and become catalysts of the renewal of faith, thus becoming effective and exemplary missionaries in the 21st century.

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