

FATHER PETER MERMIER: A PATIENT MISSIONARY

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My presentation is divided into two parts: 1. Father Mermier: A Man of Patience, 2. Father Mermier: A Promoter of Patience. In the first part, an attempt is made to highlight a few instances of his exemplary patience, especially as seen in moments of uncertainties and sickness. The second part highlights his reflections on patience expressed through his letters and personal notes.

1. FATHER MERMIER: A MAN OF PATIENCE

1. 1. Patient Resolve to be a Missionary : With the death of Bishop de Thiollaz in March 1832, the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales lost a father who encouraged and helped their first steps. Bishop Pierre Joseph Rey succeeded him. After his taking charge on October 2, 1832, Fr Mermier and Fr Allard came to see him and requested his approval for the new Congregation. The Bishop asked them to wait for some time so that he could test them and study their project. Fr Mermier was ready to wait, but not his companions. They got discouraged. Fr Allard and Fr Revillord left the group. Even Fr Jacques Martin spoke of giving up. In such a hard situation, Fr Mermier remained patient without any outward show of emotion and spoke with firmness that he wanted to continue the mission: "I want Mission," said Fr Mermier. Then Fr Martin also decided to remain back without leaving Fr Mermier.¹

1. 2. Patient Waiting in Rome : On January 30, 1842, Bishop Rey died in Annecy. He wanted to ask the Holy See's approval for the MSFS Congregation, but died before he could do that. Every year, new candidates were joining the Congregation. In the Spring of 1842, Cardinal Franzoni, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda, invited several dioceses to send missionaries to Africa. He also asked the Bishop of Annecy to offer some of his priests for the African Missions. The letter was received by the Vicar Capitular who forwarded it to Fr Mermier who gladly accepted the invitation. He saw in this request also an opportunity to press his petition for approval for the Congregation by the Holy See. On September 20, Fr Mermier went to Chambéry to meet Canon Louis Rendu who had just been appointed Bishop of Annecy. He told the Bishop of his letter to Rome. Bishop Rendu warned him of the Roman delays and urged him to go personally to Rome in order to obtain the required approval.²

Fr Mermier arrived in Rome on September 30, 1842 and found lodgings with the Basilian Fathers and started contacting people for getting his work done. He wrote frequently to La Feuillette keeping his companions informed of all his undertakings, negotiations, hopes, and disappointments. He met Cardinal Franzoni on October 2. The Cardinal received him very kindly and directed him to meet Cardinal Ortini. On October 16, he was received by Cardinal Ortini. After the interview, the Cardinal refused to read even his application for approbation. Fr Mermier did not give up and patiently explained to the Cardinal how missions began in Savoy and the good results achieved in the Duchy.

¹ Francis Moget, *The Missionaries of St Francis de Sales of Annecy* (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1985), p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

The Cardinal listened more kindly and finally answered: 'If all the missionaries of the four dioceses of Savoy were to unite into a single Congregation, and if the four Bishops were to send their approval, then only we could consider an approbation and examine your Constitutions.'

This reply humiliated Fr Mermier. He wrote to all Savoy Bishops who answered very favourably. On December 2, Fr Mermier was received cordially by the Cardinal who handed over to him the letters of the Savoy Bishops. During the long wait, Fr Mermier continued very patiently to take the necessary steps. On June 2, 1843, based on a favourable report given by Cardinal Ferretti, the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious conferred on the humble Founder and his Institute the Decree of Praise, which is the first step towards full approbation from Rome.³

Letters from Rome⁴

Some of the letters which he wrote to his confreres in Annecy from Rome contains his tryst with patience :

He wrote to Fr Cheminal about the Cardinal prefect who rejected the application for approbation without even reading it.

I assure you that the beginnings are terrible, moreover, if I do anything, it will be by means of humiliations. All the same, I must praise God much, thank Jesus Christ, his Holy Mother, and the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. I must take care against the least bitterness of heart. Continue to pray and to have prayers said for me. Since our Congregation has not established itself outside the diocese [of its origin], and it has only house and the members are not many, His Eminence, the Cardinal Prefect of the Bishops and Religious, is not at all of the opinion that we strive for an approbation. His answer came straight, without reading the petition, not even a part of it. Nonetheless, after listening to some explanations about the beginnings of the missions in Savoy, their good effect in the different dioceses of the Duchy, His Eminence declared that if the missionaries of the four dioceses joined together and the four bishops gave their attestations accordingly, the examination of the Constitutions will begin.⁵

However, Fr Mermier was never tired of doing what is right. He persisted with his request to Rome for approbation of the Constitution in patience and humility. He himself admitted that founding the Congregation and preparing the Constitutions were the most difficult of all his works. The following is an extract from his petition to the Holy Father.

All the same, let me say: for twenty years and more I have preached missions. I have often borne many unpleasant things during these exercises, but the most difficult and certainly the most serious with priests to form this society and to prepare the Constitutions and Rules. Often it seemed to me that the work begun was too hard and impossible due to my weakness. Then I took the advice of many wise persons. All were encouraging me to keep up such a useful work. My advisers were not only diocesan priests but religious among whom were many Fathers of the Society of Jesus.⁶

³ Ibid., pp. 38-41.

⁴ All the letters in this article are taken from *Selected Letters and Writings of Fr. Peter Marie Mermier (1790-1862)*, Edited by Adrien Duval and Translated by Antony Mookenthottam (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2007), and henceforth the name of the Book will not be mentioned.

⁵ From the "Letter to Fr Cheminal on October 29, 1842," p. 71.

⁶ From the "Petition to the Holy Father drafted on October 29, 1842," p. 73.

He also remained very close to the Lord amidst agonizing and humiliating experiences in Rome. He had to wait impatiently for replies to his letters sent to the Bishops of Savoy. He felt that he was not able to proceed further with his work because the offices and some of the public officials were not yet in active service. He had to struggle against all odds.

My main occupation, I would say almost my torture, has been within myself. What a struggle....I was thinking over the steps already taken, I was afraid of having lacked prudence. Everything was opposed to me. The persons who at first seemed to be interested in me soon regarded me with indifference. They appeared to look at my affairs and my embarrassment as things which did not deserve their attention. I was trying to offer my sacrifice and to be resigned, thinking that it was the will of God and the obstacles were not a bad sign. But soon, other thoughts occurred to me reproaching me for my faults, my lack of mortifications, my negligence, my ignorance, my rudeness etc. It appeared to me that God should treat me in this manner due to my pride....For me: ***'It is good that you have humiliated me.'***⁷

1. 3. Patient Suffering of Misfortunes and Illness : Fr Mermier never believed that we should suffer blindly without any specific and noble purpose. For him suffering is necessary and meaningful when it is recognized as the Will of God. "It is necessary that we suffer in one way or other without which we never reach."⁸

Fr Gaiddon described the last days of Fr Mermier's illness as one of purification and edification. These were days of agony marked with powerlessness, acute suffering, misfortunes of all kinds. The doctors promised no hope of recovery. Those who looked after him were often moved to pity or lost in admiration. But he always resigned himself to the will of God with great patience. Towards the middle of July there was an appreciable change. He made rapid progress.⁹ When Fr Mermier arrived at La Feuillette he had lost three-fourths of his sight and could read only with extreme difficulty. He knew that his head was becoming weak, incapable of prolonged reasoning. Although his mind was clear, he felt a certain heaviness. He was heard to say very patiently: 'How I was in need of this lesson! How good is God! I was proud; He humbled me! I was always on the move, always away from interior life, always active. He compels me to take rest. He binds me to inaction. He makes me retire within myself. Blessed be the name of the Lord!¹⁰

2. FATHER MERMIER: A PROMOTER OF PATIENCE Fr Mermier esteemed and promoted patience through his writings, especially through his letters and Personal Notes.

2. 1. Patience in his Letters

Practice of Patience: Fr Mermier confessed that he practiced patience when things went slowly. "As regards our affairs, they are going slow. I practice patience, I learn a little how to live. When I am preaching Missions, I give orders. Here in Rome, I obey."¹¹

⁷ From the "A Real Agony: Personal Observation of Fr Mermier on November 16, 1842," pp. 79-81.

⁸ From the "Letter to Fr Brifford on April 7, 1857," p. 59.

⁹ Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier 1790-1862* (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1985), pp. 268-269.

¹⁰ Francis Moget, *The Missionaries of St Francis de Sales of Annecy*, pp. 100-101.

¹¹ From the "Letter from Rome to Canon Chalamel, Vicar Capitular on January 22, 1843," p. 5.

Patience as an Important Virtue for a Missionary: Fr Mermier spoke of an ideal religious missionary life in his memoirs written in 1839. His desire in establishing the Congregation was to have a closely and solidly united community. The first missionaries who joined Fr Mermier also had the same purpose when they renounced all goods of this world and made every form of sacrifice. In his view, the missionaries were looked upon by the people as extraordinary men destined to combat the greatest disorders, to correct the greatest abuses and to remedy the greatest evils in society. This opinion of the people, in his view, should be fostered and encouraged. For this a Congregation of well-prepared, well-trained and well-tested men is needed. He also includes among other things, patience as one of the important virtues which a missionary ought to have.

Patience as a Quality of Zeal: Fr Mermier understands patience as one of the characteristics of a holy zeal. "What a motive for gratitude, for zeal! of a holy zeal, humble, disinterested, prudent, gentle and patient. It is not, then, a passionate zeal, ambitious, impetuous, angry, overbearing, blind, imprudent, selfish, totally human, carnal jealous, curious, full of vanity etc."¹²

Patient Acceptance of Suffering: Fr Mermier held the view that trials are necessary for a missionary, who has to patiently pass through the crucible of suffering that comes from the paternal hand of God. "It is not enough for you to have left everything...to have laboured much.... Other trials are necessary for the disciple of Christ, the missionary: he has still to be refined...through his infirmities....Accept, then, with confidence the chalice which the paternal hand of God offers you; rejoice at being found worthy to suffer...."¹³

2. 2. Patience in his Personal Notes : For Fr Mermier, the success of one's ministry, especially ministry of education in this particular context, very much depends on regularity and devotion, unity and cordiality, and integrity and patience. "More regularity and devotion. The fruit and success of their ministry depend almost entirely on prayer and good example....More unity and cordiality, one would say integrity [lit. honesty] and patience....Never any harsh words, hurting words, abuses, sulking between one another."¹⁴

Conclusion : "Success is never ending, failure is never the final".

Throughout the human history, God has sent different people at different times and places to renew the life of humanity and the Church. We have the Biblical personalities like Abraham, Moses, prophets, judges etc. Jesus, prepared the apostles and sent them into the world, saying, "I am sending you among the wolves like a lamb" but assured them "Remember I am with you till the end of the world."

God even today, in the life of the Church intervenes through different personalities, such as religious founders and foundresses, charismatic leaders, missionaries both small and great. They are imbued by the spirit of the Gospel, have a dream, vision and mission. They commit themselves fully to it. Fr. Peter Mary Mermier was one of them in the history of Church in France.

¹² From the "Letter to Fr Lavorel on July 28, 1852," p.20.

¹³ From the "Letter to Fr Lavorel on April 17, 1855," p. 54.

¹⁴ From the "Advice to Teachers (Personal Notes) on September 7, 1856," p. 142.

He can be described as man of Integrity: who *discerned* what was right and what was wrong and *acted* on it with prayer and deep reflection, committed to it even at personal cost. He was a humble man: As effective Leader he was aggressive and assertive but tempered with genuine humility. He was a Passionate missionary with vision and mission and firm conviction.

Vision: He saw the things which other did not. He grabbed the opportunities, other missed it. He saw potentials in other which simply other did not.

He was patient and Persevering . He did not allow the oppositions and temporary setbacks to determine the future of the congregation. He was decisive and willing to fail for he was sure that failure is never the final. It opens the door of a great success.

It was possible because Fr. Mermeir was in personal relationship with Jesus and spiritually disciplined. Thus we have in Fr. Mermeir a man of confidence, conviction, commitment, compassion, communion and patient with oneself and others.

Questions for group discussion

1. How does personal life and good example of a Missionary enhance the renewal of Christian faith.
2. For Fr. Peter Mary Mermeir, "Prayer and patience are the soul of the Apostolate of a Missionary". How relevant are they (prayer and patience) today in our mission context.
3. How does "the family visits, preaching parish mission and spiritual animation" help the renewal of personal and family life of our lay faithful.
4. Do people perceive the Missionaries as "well-prepared, well-trained and well-tested men".