

## CHAPTER TWO

### LEGACY OF FR MERMIER'S SPIRIT AND LEGACY OF DEVOTIONS

Legacy is something valuable that a person leaves behind for others. Heritage is what we acquire when legacy is valued, accepted, cherished and passed on. In this Second Chapter we have a close look at the legacy which our Founder, Fr Mermier, has left for us. We accept it with the rest of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales as our heritage, cherish it, live it and pass it on to others. One of the secrets of communion and unity in a religious congregation is the knowledge and experience of this legacy. This legacy is expressed by way of the institute itself, its charism, its initial apostolates, physical sacred places and shrines entrusted to it and visible ways of living common life and ministry wherever the MSFS are. Besides what is noted above, the legacy/heritage is also expressed through devotions that the Congregation practices.

#### 1. LEGACY: HERITAGE OF MERMIER'S SPIRIT

The legacy that Fr Mermier has passed on to us as our heritage is his very spirit through concrete expressions which he would ardently desire his confreres imbibe and integrate in their way of life. Here are twelve of them which will be explained briefly thereafter.

- 1.1 Legacy of a Religious Congregation: Missionaries of St Francis de Sales
- 1.2 Legacy of the Charism of our Congregation
- 1.3 Legacy of the Foundational Apostolates
- 1.4 Legacy of Missionary Zeal
- 1.5 Legacy of spiritual Centers and shrines entrusted to the MSFS
- 1.6 Legacy of the Mother House at Annecy, La Feuillette
- 1.7 Legacy of living and promoting Salesian Spirituality
- 1.8 Legacy of living and promoting Community Life
- 1.9 Legacy of building local churches through Evangelization
- 1.10 Legacy of Partnerships in Evangelization
- 1.11 Legacy of Hospitality
- 1.12 Legacy of Preferential Love for the Poor and Marginalized

#### 1.1 Legacy of a Religious Congregation: Missionaries of St Francis de Sales

The greatest legacy Fr Mermier has left us is the foundation of the Congregation of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales as a religious community dedicated to Christ as missionaries in the spirit and Spirituality of St Francis de Sales. The original beginnings of the history of this congregation and its ongoing movement down the centuries are explained in Chapter 1 of this Source Book. The historical narrative of the Congregation is carefully recorded and preserved in many works of our confreres like that of Fr Adrien Duval, Fr Jean Rey, Fr Philippe Gaidon, Fr Francis Moget, Fr Henry Jose K and editorial team.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Rey, *Father Peter Founder of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod*, (Visakhapatnam: SFS Publications, 1980). Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, (Visakhapatnam: SFS Publications, 1985). Francis Moget, *The Missionaries of St Francis de Sales of Annecy*, (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1985). Francis Moget, *Vagabonds for God: Story of the Catholic Church in Central India 1846-1907*, (Visakhapatnam: SFS Publications, 1990). Francis Moget, *Early Days of Visakhapatnam Mission 1846-1920*, (Bangalore: IIS Publications, 1997). Francis Moget, *Shepherds for Christ: Story of the Catholic Church in Central India 1907-1956*, (Bangalore: IIS Publications, 1994). Thomas Cherukat, *Fransalians in India – A historico-theological study on the Apostolate of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales in India from 1845 to 1890*, Licentiate thesis, (West Germany: University of Wurzburg, 1982), Henry

## 1.2 Legacy of the Charism of our Congregation

The specific charism that characterizes the legacy of the Congregation is well articulated by the Extraordinary General Chapter 2022: “*Our charism is to continue the mission of Christ and His Church by living the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales in a religious community as missionaries, lived and envisioned by our Founder.*” It is explained in detail in Chapter 3 of this Source Book. The recent doctoral thesis of Fr. Francis Poovelil is a first attempt to study the charism of our Congregation in a scientific and systematic manner. It offers very good insights into this legacy of our charism.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.3 Legacy of the Foundational Apostolates

The Apostolates of Renewal of Faith, Education of Youth and Pioneering Evangelization in mission territories abroad is another legacy that has been handed down to the generations of confreres. This legacy is explained in detail in Chapter 3. As MSFS, it is not enough to revive the first apostolates, it is also very important to do so with Salesian Spirituality, with ongoing study and research, and in practice of its entire legacy.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.4 Legacy of Missionary Zeal

If the core of Salesian Spirituality is love, then its dynamism is ecstasy. It is an overflow or superabundance of divine energy and selflessness that reaches out to others. True love is ecstatic, a flow of pure sacrifice, self-emptying, and caring that gives life to others. God’s love towards us is ecstatic and so is the life of one who is filled with God’s love. Bishop Joseph Rey tells the first community of MSFS that being full of gentleness and compassion for sinners like St Francis de Sales is to be full of apostolic zeal.<sup>4</sup> This apostolic zeal of St Francis de Sales is seen in his mission at Chablais. It was zeal that was expressed in patience, endurance, persistence, courage and trust in God. Such zeal brought about the miracle of conversion in the people of Chablais. Fr Mermier absorbed this spirit of zeal, and revealed it in bold decisions he took in opting for parish mission preaching and pioneering evangelization. “We do a lot in doing little - if we do it for God, when and as he wills.”<sup>5</sup> Confronted with financial difficulties, Fr Mermier wrote to Bishop Neyret not to yield to despondency and await patiently. He encouraged him saying: “It could be said that zeal for a good work, instead of slackening off, increases it still further.”<sup>6</sup> Fr Mermier undoubtedly wants his confreres to be full of this zeal. That is also his legacy for us today.

## 1.5 Legacy of Spiritual Centers and Shrines entrusted to the MSFS

### 1.5.1 Les Allinges

One of the two spiritual centers that Bishop Rey entrusted to the MSFS was Les Allinges. Les Allinges is an old fort of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD in Savoy, overlooking Lake Geneva and the plains of

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Jose Kodikuthiyil, George Panthanmackel, Joseph Pullopillil, eds., *Makers of Mission History*, Vol I, II & III (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Poovelil, *Fransalian Charism and Missionary Apostolate: An Exploratory Study on The Charism of The Missionaries of St Francis de Sales*, (Bangalore: St Peter’s Pontifical Institute, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> General Administration, *MSFS Parish Mission Preaching -Manual. Part I & II*, Hyderabad: DSM Resource Centre, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Jean Rey, *Founder of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod*, 67

<sup>5</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, (Vishakhapatnam: SFS Publications, 1985), 208

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 214

Chablais. Later it was renovated in 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and built as two chateaux – Chateau Neuf (new castle) in which there was a chapel and Chateau Vieux (old castle). In 1703 Duke Amadeus of Savoy demolished the fort of Les Allinges as it was difficult to defend it and also to maintain it. The chapel was hidden below the ruins. The parish priest of Les Allinges in 1832 talked to some friends and decided to renovate the chapel in honour of St Francis de Sales, the Apostle of Chablais. It was situated in the ruins of the fort and castle. To this fort, Francis de Sales and his cousin Louis de Sales would retire at night to avoid the perils of a hostile public, during the Chablais Mission. At the beginning of the Chablais mission both the missionaries celebrated the Mass in the chapel. The Bishop of Annecy approved the plan, took possession of the fort, and bought some more land around the fort. In 1835 the work of restoration was completed. From the parish of Les Allinges, a long procession proceeded to the fort chapel and with solemn Masses by two Bishops Rey of Annecy and Devie of Belley, the place was thrown open to the pilgrims and tourists.<sup>7</sup>

This place and the chapel were entrusted to the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales by Bishop Rey to preserve it as a patrimony and the Congregation's Salesian connection. Fr Mermier with the assistance of the Bishop and supervision of Fr Jacques Martin built a house of residence for a community of MSFS to attend to the pilgrims and give necessary spiritual guidance and knowledge of St Francis de Sales. The community also began the annual great pilgrimage: Triduum on 14,15,16 September. It is continued till date. It is worth noting the inspirational words with which Bishop Rey bequeathed this physical place of Les Allinges to the MSFS. He reminds us that the legacy of the physical space had to embody and nurture the spirit which his words indicate: "I bequeath to the beloved missionaries of St Francis de Sales the whole of this property which I acquired at Les Allinges. Although the mother house of this pious congregation is La Feuillette, the Missionaries are to look upon Les Allinges as a center where the memory of their Model and Patron are to be seen at every step. This will inspire them with fervour in the lofty and godly work of preaching missions."<sup>8</sup>

The Congregation through the Franco-Swiss Province has been maintaining a community at Le Allinges even now. Many tourists come in search of archeological history and to breathe the spiritual air of the place. There are pressures from the civic bodies and government to develop the place and make it a tourist attraction. The Franco-Swiss Province is in dialogue with the authorities concerned to ensure as far as we can the rights of the Congregation on this place so that what Les Allinges stands for the MSFS may be physically preserved. Besides the Congregation on its own cannot maintain the cost of renovation that this ancient fort requires. Whatever the future of this place, every MSFS should know that Les Allinges was a heritage place given to the Congregation. May it always be a symbol of their inspiration for missions May St Francis de Sales, whose ministry in Chablais was surrounded by the fort, bless every frontier missionary of our Congregation.

### **1.5.2 Notre Dame de La Gorge (Our Lady of the Gorge)**

Notre – dame – de – la - Gorge "is an ancient place of pilgrimage to which once people came in crowds to beg the help of the one who is called health of the sick, refuge of sinners and consolation of the afflicted."<sup>9</sup> It is believed that the chapel was built by Benedictine monks of Saint -Nicolas de Veroce about twelfth century AD. It became a parish in 1443 with fourteen families and also a pilgrimage center. St Francis de Sales made his pastoral visit to this place

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<sup>7</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

on 28 July 1606. The people were poor. But with the help of donations from the neighborhood, a small presbytery for the priest was built in 1643 and in 1670 a parish school was started. The chapel was damaged in a fire in 1517. It was renovated with private help and the newly renovated church was blessed in 1706. However, in course of time, because of the development of other parishes around, the parish of Notre Dame - de - la - Gorge had to be suppressed and kept as a place of pilgrimage only, with the necessary renovation done by Bishop Rey.

Sensing the possibility of having spiritual ministry to the pilgrims, Bishop Rey gave the lands and properties to the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales in 1810 and entrusted the ministry to them. Here too Fr Jacques Martin and some companions were asked to renovate and make the necessary modifications for the community to stay here. Fr Mermier was impressed by the ministry of the community. “The presence of the missionaries, their courtesy towards the pilgrims and travelers, their friendly simplicity with the people of the valley, their devotedness to the confessional and the ceremonies that they provided - all created round the shrine an atmosphere of recollection.”<sup>10</sup>

The site was entrusted by the Congregation to the Franco-Swiss Province which faithfully maintained it with one or two confreres in residence till now. Again, due to the exorbitant cost of maintaining the old structures, there is a dialogue in process with the government on how the repairs can be done. Naturally, the control of the place will be more in the hands of the government which would like to promote tourism than anything else. Whatever the future of this place, it is important to note that this sacred place was entrusted to the Congregation by Bishop Rey as our heritage. Notre – dame – de - la Gorge will always be a spiritual reminiscence of renewal of faith of people in the context in which they are found, a reminder to us to create spiritual oasis for people amidst the world.

### **1.6 Legacy of the Mother House at Annecy, La Feuillette**

Le Feuillette in French means many things. One of the meanings is ‘leaflet’. It was the name of the first House of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales in Annecy, where Fr Mermier lived in a community till it was confiscated by the Anti-Clerical Government. The MSFS could never repossess it after the fall of that government on account of the loss of the house papers that were needed to reclaim the house. La Feuillette was also the house where the mortal remains of the friend and guide of the Congregation, Bishop Joseph Rey were interned at his explicit request. The physical house is no more there but the legacy of what it stood for will continue to inspire generations of MSFS. It is indeed the first leaf (page) of the life of the missionaries of St Francis de Sales lived in earnestness after being canonically erected as a Congregation. The value of this legacy is of great symbolic value. It is a reminder of the first home of the first MSFS Community lived in earnestness, fraternal respect, affection and zeal for the apostolates of the mission entrusted to the Congregation.

A short note on its construction and what happened there once it was built can give us congregational emotional connect to La Feuillette. On 2 January 1836 the property was purchased and on 6 April 1836 the foundation stone was laid by Bishop Rey after the clergy retreat in the presence of them. It is the clergy at the request of the Bishop who had collected the sum needed for the purchase of the plot of land and for building a house for the missioners of parish mission preaching in their diocese. The work was entrusted to Fr Jacques Martin. He with the help of the architect planned three floors with each floor having eleven rooms and on

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<sup>10</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, 86

the ground floor there would be offices and the chapel. On 8 August 1837 the building was blessed and inaugurated. Fr Mermier and the first community which resided in La Roche sur la Furon moved into the new blessed house on 20 August 1837. While laying the foundation stone of this house, Bishop Rey said “this house will be the mysterious citadel of David where a thousand shields will be hung for the defiance of the children of faith for the destruction of the power of darkness and for consolidating the reign of Jesus Christ over a people whose Pastor I am.”<sup>11</sup> It was here that Bishop Rey gave the approval decree of the Congregation 24 October 1838. It was here that Fr Mermier and his companions made their first profession with the vow of stability on 24 September 1838. It was here that the Bishop announced the civil approval by the Duke of Savoy dated 29 September 1838 at Turin. The Approval arrived in Annecy on 15 October 1838 and was announced at La Feuillette on 21 October 1838. Le Feuillette is a treasure trove of historical memories of events with far-reaching consequences for the Congregation. It was also here that the good news of papal approbation was welcomed and celebrated. It was here that the first members of our Congregation made their first religious profession: Frs Pierre Marie Mermier, Jacques Martin, Phillippe Gaiddon, Joseph Cheminal, Aime Petitjean, Joseph Lavorel on the second September 1838.

The emotions of Fr Mermier flowed out in a profound heart-warming expression, “One thing I wanted and begged from the Lord - to live among brothers! The burden of my prayers has been to form a society dedicated to showing the path to heaven to souls redeemed by the Saviour’s blood. Today I am witnessing its birth. In advance, I embrace all who will come in future to make the vow I have just made, and which you are now going to make after me.”<sup>12</sup> On 24 October 1840 Fr Mermier, Martin, Cheminal, Petit Jean and Lavorel made their perpetual profession. On this occasion Bishop Rey admired the community of Le Feuillette and prophetically stated what La Feuillette stood for: “What was here six years ago? An abandoned rock. What has it become? A holy mountain where rivers of blessing flow, a cenacle for preparing the Good News, a sanctuary where pastors of souls, my missionaries wearied by their holy endeavours will come to take rest and renew the fervour of their charity.”<sup>13</sup> The mother house of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales will always be at Annecy. Deprived of the physical house of La Feuillette, a visit to the mortal remains of St Francis de Sales, Fr Mermier, Bishop Rey and other early missionaries now housed in the crypt of the Visitation Basilica, Annecy, will be an experience of capturing the spirit of Fr Mermier and of St Francis de Sales as embodied in La Feuillette. It is significant to note that the present scholasticate house of Chad-Cameroon Delegation at Yaounde is named as La Feuillette. The spirit of the original La Feuillette is the legacy of the Congregation and it lives on.

### **1.7 Legacy of Living and Promoting Salesian Spirituality**

St Francis de Sales through his reflection on the Word of God and through prayer focused on deep, personal, spousal relationship with Jesus as an expression of the story of God’s love with human persons. This finds concrete expression in becoming what we love. If we love Jesus, we become Jesus. Therefore ‘living Jesus in mind, heart and the entire person is what life is about. Therefore, St Francis elaborates what this mystical union is in the *Treatise of the Love of God*.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Rey, *Father Peter Founder of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod*, 5

<sup>12</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, 66

<sup>13</sup> Jean Rey, *Father Peter Founder of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod*, 6

He fathoms its birth, growth, and decay. He elaborates the various types of unions between God and a person. He unfolds the ecstatic nature of love, which makes the life of a human person an overflow of selfless, generous, and joyous outpouring of service to others. Then in *The Introduction to Devout Life* St Francis accompanies the directee step by step through the normal stages of spiritual growth of purgation, illumination and union with repentance, and reconciliation, practice of virtues, practice of meditation, contemplation, constant awareness of the presence of God and union with God's will till one learns to live Jesus, (i.e., to love) 'frequently, *immediately and carefully*' in all circumstances of life. Such a spiritual treasure cannot be kept to ourselves. It has to be shared. One of the historical outcomes of such a legacy is the desire to establish Fransalian Associates. - an organized band of lay-people in all countries and cultures to disseminate the knowledge and practice of Salesian spirituality and enhance the Church and its missionary vitality. Wherever possible we share the love of God with people in words and deeds the way St Francis de Sales did.

This living legacy of the Congregation is seen in the various attempts made by our confreres to translate the works of St Francis de Sales from French into other languages and also disseminate the spirituality by confreres of different provinces like Fr Vincent Kerns, Fr Francis Moget, Fr Ivo Carneiro, Fr Agnaldo, Fr Suresh Babu, Fr Antony Kolencherry, Fr Noel Rebello, Fr Augustine Tharappel, Fr Antony Mookenthottam, Fr Mathew Kozhuppakalam who were in the forefront of dissemination of Salesian spirituality through Salesian literature. There are a host of other confreres who through their articles and short notes spread the knowledge of Salesian spirituality. This legacy is also enhanced by the books and/or the doctoral dissertation thesis of several of our members like Fr Joseph Tissot (*translation by Carneiro Ivo*), Fr Thomas Perumalil, Fr Claude Morel, Fr Noel Rebello, Fr Devasia Manalel, Fr Bavri Suresh Babu, Fr Kolencherry Antony, Fr Koottanal Benni Gregorius, Fr Mookenthottam Antony, Fr Pathiyil Johnson Mathew, Fr Panthanmackel George, Fr Mathew Edattu, Fr Francis Moget, Fr Francis Poovelil, Fr Cherukat Thomas, Fr Adrien Duval, Fr Jean Rey, Fr Henry Jose-Kodikuthiyil, George Panthanmackel, Fr Joseph Pulloppillil (editors), Fr Valakada Sen.<sup>14</sup>

This legacy is offered worldwide through websites on Salesian spirituality like the one initially uploaded in our Congregation website by Fr Joseph K.P. of Southern Africa Region and lately by Fr Wilson Abraham of Nagpur Province, Now these websites are coordinated into the Salesian website of DSM Center in Hyderabad, India. Besides the websites of the Congregation as well as those of most of other Provinces have sufficient material on Salesian spirituality. The General Administration of the MSFS has taken several initiatives to make Salesian spirituality accessible to the confreres by offering Recollections with SFS from July 2002 to 2012; a booklet on MSFS Profiles: Core identity of a Fransalian in ministry; a booklet of MSFS Personal Spiritual Directory. The opening of De Sales and Mermier Center (DSM) at Hyderabad with its periodic publications is a serious and committed attempt to promote Salesian spirituality, and the spirit of Fr Mermier. There are sustained efforts in various provinces and formation houses to compose poems and songs in honour of St Francis de Sales and present vignettes from his life through art, drama, essay, and quiz competitions. There are

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<sup>14</sup> MSFS Source Book,

monthly Salesian themes for motivation in schools; Salesian three-weeks retreat for those going to be perpetually professed; an academic course on Salesian thought in the regular curriculum of Lumen Christi Institute; the Salesian Programme at Annecy for confreres representing the different provinces to learn and experience the heritage of Salesian spirituality, organized by Franco-Swiss Province, and the organization of the Fransalian Associates in various parts of the world. These initiatives speak volumes of the efforts in the Congregation to disseminate Salesian spirituality.

All these initiatives indeed promote this legacy of the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales. Let us not forget what Fr Mermier wrote to Fr Gaiddon on 24 February 1849: “ Our ministry obliges us to show ourselves to the people, to society, as other saints Francis de Sales, utterly unselfish, afire with zeal for the salvation of souls, filled with compassion at the sight of the evils which distress people –without bothering to waste our time in useless ranting – with a lawful mission, blameless doctrine and, above all, a good life.”<sup>15</sup> To be another St Francis de Sales in our times and for our times is all that a Fransalian has to do to live Jesus.

### **1.8 Legacy of living and promoting community life**

Among the pillars of promoting community life namely common prayer, common meals, community meeting and common recreation, the last pillar is worth noting as special to the Fransalian community life. Fr Mermier valued all the four pillars of community building. He was aware that grace builds on nature; that divine affection is built on honest, respectful, transparent and spontaneous fraternal affections for all in the community. Therefore, he insisted that the confreres should spend time together in recreation. His advice and encouragement for his sons will be as relevant today as it was during his time. With the fast pace of life and the inroads of digital world into members of the community, common recreation becomes a real concern. Just as we say a community that prays together stays together, we can also say a community that plays together gives a powerful witness together. Common recreation as a legacy is to be consciously promoted as the needed psychological and human wisdom to build community life. Common recreation has the ability to break down cultural and language barriers, psychological hang-ups of tensions in relationships Common recreation has the power to establish bonding with the members of a community with ease, and without inhibitions. There needs to be a debate, not on whether to have it or not, but on the duration of this practice of community recreation and how members can take part in it, with a certain sense of priority and with all-inclusive participation. A religious community that prays, plays, and works together will remain together.

### **1.9 Legacy of building local churches through evangelization**

Once the confreres from France landed in India, the MSFS worked very hard to develop the church in Vizag Mission and Nagpur Mission, by building churches, building communities of faith and serving them. To train local vocations, diocesan and religious, the MSFS had initial recourse to the ‘bullock cart seminary’ The students were taken with the missionaries on their

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<sup>15</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier: Founder of two Religious Congregations*, 149

missionary journeys, and necessary instructions were given and formation programme followed while journeying in the bullock cart. Later they built a major seminary in Gopalpur (in 1890 in Surada Mission); transferred it to St Anne's Cathedral, Vizag (in 1898), then shifted it to Kamptee for a while; a little later to the Bishop's House Nagpur and finally to Seminary Hills, Nagpur at St Charles Seminary, (the red building) in 1898. In 1950s a new structure was built not far from the red-building and which is the present St Charles Seminary, Nagpur, owned by the Archdiocese of Nagpur and run by the Dominicans. The MSFS Congregation, over the years, has also focused on formation of candidates within the Congregation itself, through its own institutes of formation like Suvidya College, Bangalore, for philosophical studies, Tejas Bangalore for integrative and experiential theological formation; Lumen Christi Institute Arusha for philosophical studies through its department of Philosophy. There are significant number of scholasticates and novitiates in different provinces, delegations and regions. Besides these initiatives, the Congregation continues to offer services in formation to interdiocesan seminaries like the Morning Star College in Calcutta, India and the Inter-diocesan Philosophate at Naugaon in Guwahati Diocese, India.

From the vast area where the MSFS initiated their missionary work in the Vizag Mission and Nagpur Mission, the following 13 dioceses have been carved out, or areas, where our Fathers worked, have been added to these dioceses: Archdiocese of Vishakapatnam, Diocese of Srikakulam, Diocese of Berahampur, Diocese of Balasore, Archdiocese of Nagpur, Diocese of Amravati, Archdiocese of Bhopal, Diocese of Jagdalpur, Diocese of Jabalpur, Diocese of Chanda, Diocese of Raipur, Diocese of Khandwa and Diocese of Aurangabad. In the early history of evangelization of the two vast Missions of Vizag and Nagpur, the Congregation has provided able confreres as Bishops: seven Bishops in Vizag Mission area and eight Bishops in Nagpur Mission area.

The above details suffice to see how this legacy of building local churches was carried forth by the Congregation. Indeed, the confreres sowed in tears and reaped a harvest in joy for the Lord. Is the Congregation ready to engage itself with the local Bishops to continue this legacy today? What new perspectives are needed if we wish to pursue this legacy of our Congregation?

### **1.10 Legacy of Partnerships in Evangelization**

Synodality is the buzz word today in the Catholic Church. It was practiced in earlier times in its own way in the given situations of the time. In the initial stages of our history a close partnership with the Bishops of the place and the diocesan clergy was very much there and the healthy relationship promoted the growth of the Church. Right from the time our confreres landed into the mission of Vizag, they felt the need to have the missionary presence of Sisters (nuns) Congregations in the field to attend to the various catechetical, social, medical and educational needs of the people. The contribution of the following congregation of Sisters in the early and growing time of the Mission has to be acknowledged with profound gratitude: Sisters of St Joseph of Annecy, St Joseph of Chambery, catechist sisters of Mary Immaculate, Sisters of the Cross and St Anne's Sisters of Lucerne. This legacy of partnership in mission



with MSFS by various congregations of Sisters still continues today at mission centers run by the MSFS and with their precious contribution to the mission of Christ.

### **1.11 Legacy of Hospitality.**

To those who follow the spirituality of love, as did St Francis de Sales, hospitality to persons is a natural corollary. It is shown in openness to welcome others, friendliness and making others feel at ease and at home with us. It also means readiness to help in whatever way we can. This kind of hospitality is given especially to the poor, the weak and those who live on the peripheries of life. Our Congregation in its early history had a tradition of welcoming the diocesan priests. Most of the first priests of our Congregation came from the Diocese of Annecy. The clergy of the Diocese of Annecy materially and emotionally supported our missionaries and provided them the scope for preaching parish missions. Therefore, there has been a legacy of cordiality and friendliness with the diocesan clergy. We are told that the priests of the Diocese were most welcome to La Feuillette community to have occasionally meal and relax in the company of the community. Some of them would come for spiritual renewal and re-orientation. This legacy has continued as the Congregation roots itself into the local churches. It is a special feature that indicates that our pastoral bond between the Bishop and his clergy strengthens us in living our charism in the local church and being at its service.

### **1.12. Legacy of Preferential Love for the poor and marginalized**

To be a missionary without love for the poor is indeed an anomaly. To live their missionary vocation amidst the people right from the early history of our Congregation, our confreres reached out to the poor in whatever way they could. There are experiments of purchasing land and distributing the same to the homeless so that the people could stand on their feet. Some experiments were successful and some did not materialize the way they should have. Our European missionaries and first missionaries from India individually and personally through all the gifts they received from their home and friends used them generously to help the poor and help in defraying the cost of their education. This movement continued and slowly became a legacy of integral mission work. Today it exists as social work in poor countries.

In affluent Europe it was in the form of service to the migrants, or rescuing the persecuted Jews from the Nazis as in the case of Fr Joseph Favre, or greening of a suburb of a city for environmental concerns by Fr Thomas MSFS from Netherlands, in Tangua; or organizing of sponsors and benefactors in Europe and USA for helping the mission countries of Asia and Africa. The outstanding example is that of the Procure office of Franco-Swiss Province and that of Fr Emile Mayoraz, our dear departed former Superior General; and the mission appeal programme of USA Vice Province and authorized mission appeals of individual confreres in various provinces. All these efforts speak of the way this legacy was sustained by the members individually. Many of their works are not known nor recorded. But that does not take away the concern that the members showed to the poor as part of the MSFS legacy. In recent past the social works and services in growing Provinces are systematized to ensure a wider network of offering these services. The services are offered through established institutes and centers and

through legal bodies in the country. The Generalate administration has Mission Development Office in Rome.

Some of the services to the poor given by the Congregation in an organized or non-organized way are the following: children's homes for the handicapped, orphans, destitute adults; women empowering groups; non-formal literacy and education; wholistic healing; help to the tribal people and economically backward classes; legal help; service to the poor intelligent children to rise in life; out-reach services in times of natural or man-made calamities. The details of these centers and activities can be easily had from the various Provinces of our Congregation. We will be startled to see the network of such social works for the poor that complement the mission work of Christ to give fullness of life to all.

## **2. LEGACY: CONGREGATIONAL DEVOTIONS AND PRACTICES**

Another aspect of the legacy of a congregation is the congregational devotions and practices initiated by the founder or other members and practiced by the members of the Congregation over a period of time in a meaningful manner. There are a number of Congregational Devotions that have been handed down from one generation to the next. These are the 12 devotions and practices of the missionaries of St Francis de Sales:

1. Legacy of making Personal Meditation, Annual Retreats and Monthly Recollections
2. Legacy of Devotion to Mother of Sorrows
3. Legacy of Devotion to the Passion of our Lord
4. Legacy of Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament
5. Legacy of Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus
6. Legacy of Devotion to the Holy Spirit
7. Legacy of the Celebration of the Feast of St Francis de Sales
8. Legacy of the Celebration of the Feast of Mother of Sorrows
9. Legacy of the Celebration of the Founder's Day
10. Legacy of the Foundation Day of the Congregation
11. Legacy of the Devotional renewal of vows by the perpetually professed members
12. Legacy of reading the obituary and praying for our departed confreres

Let us understand these devotions and how they have been practiced in our Congregation.

### **2.1 Legacy of Making Personal Meditation, Annual Retreat and Monthly Recollections:**

2.1.1 Daily Personal Meditation inserted into the community time-table was a regular feature in the programme of the MSFS Communities till 1970s. With new thinking on making, it more effective, there were proposals to leave the personal meditation out of the community time-table. Many communities fell for this new thinking. However, such practice has not increased greater personal commitment to personal meditation. Personal Meditation is a requisite and personal disposition for deeper personal prayer life. Is there a need to restore the old practice of personal meditation in the daily community time-table?

2.1.2 Annual Retreat done in the local community or province community and in exceptional cases individually with permission from the major superior, is a practice that is part of our Fransalian way of life. It is an annual opportunity for every member to review his life, renew it

and redirect it in keeping with the demands of our charism. The retreat is for five full days. The temptation to attach other programmes during the retreat-time are not appreciated by the members. The Retreat is conducted in an atmosphere of prayerful silence and sincere appreciation for the other and his sacred space.

2.1.3 Monthly Recollections are also a practice that has been with the Congregation from the very beginning. It is a time given to members of a community to take monthly stalk of their spiritual life and growth, to orient themselves to their vocation and mission with renewed vigour. It is also a time and opportunity to make one's Confession. The practice of monthly recollections is indeed a healthy legacy which all should promote with great benefits for the spiritual health of the individual confrere and that of the community. It is a monthly springboard to plunge into the fresh waters of our faith in Jesus and His self-emptying love.

## **2.2 Devotion to the Mother of Sorrows:**

Fr Mermier had special devotion to the passion of our Lord and which he expressed in his devotion to Mother of Sorrows and to the way of the Cross. Let us understand this devotion to the Mother of Sorrows also known as the Mother of Compassion. As soon as Le Fueillette our first community house built in Annecy was completed, Fr Mermier dedicated one of the side altars to the mother of compassion. Every day he would kneel before this altar and pray. Fr Mermier was convinced that in the missionary journeys of the confreres they would have to stand amidst the sufferings of humans the way Mary stood at the foot of the Cross. The picture-image that was commonly used was the heart of Mary pierced by seven swords. However, in course of time the '*Pieta*' was also accepted as depicting the mother of sorrows. Our Constitutions says, "God suffers where human suffer". To be a missionary of Christ is to take part in God's sufferings today and that is in the sufferings of humanity.

This devotion to the Mother of Sorrows is expressed in the recitation of the Rosary of the Seven sorrows on special seven-beads rosary, given to the members at their first profession. There is a tradition to recite this Rosary in common as a community at least once a week, preferably on Fridays of the week. The legacy is made visible by installing a picture of Mother of Sorrows or a statue in our chapels. The first missionaries placed the statue also in the cemeteries. There are other evidences of installation of the statue of the Mother of Sorrows in the church of Surada, in the church of St Joseph in Gopalpur at Sea; in the chapel of St Aloysius school, Vishakapatnam; and in the construction of Our Lady of Sorrows Shrine in Kothavalasa, Vizag. This devotion is popularized with the faithful in nine Fridays novenas before the Feast of Mother of Sorrows at the chapel of St John's High School, Nagpur; in promotion of personal devotion to the Mother of Sorrows before her statue at the MSFS Provincialate, Vinayalaya, Bangalore and in the basement of the SFS Church Hebbagodi, Bangalore. Whenever the members of the Congregation meet for retreats or seminars, members have been encouraged to recite at least once this Rosary of the Seven Dolours. Possessing the beads of the rosary of seven sorrows is also considered an external mark of this Fransalian devotion.

Devotion to Mary in the Congregation is also manifested by recitation of the Prayer of St Bernard of Clairvaux, the *Memorare* (Remember O Most Gracious Virgin Mary). It was a prayer dear to St Francis de Sales and which he recited before the Statue of the Black Madonna

to overcome his crisis of faith when he was a young student in Paris. The MSFS recite it personally as well as in community as part of their Marian Devotion.

We also have a precious legacy of devotion to Mother Mary as seen in the lives of generations of MSFS who recited the daily Rosary personally or in community. The value of such devotion and legacy can never be sufficiently emphasized. It roots us in Jesus. St Francis de Sales encouraged his directees to live close to the mysteries of Jesus' life, passion, death and resurrection so that constant reflection and affection to these mysteries would transform them into Jesus.

### **2.3 Devotion to the Passion of our Lord**

St Francis de Sales tells us that Calvary is the Mount of Lovers. All lessons of highest form of selfless love are learnt on Mount Calvary. St Francis tells us to meditate often on the life of Jesus especially on his passion, death and resurrection so that constant meditation on these sublime mysteries will transform our minds, hearts, wills and deeds like that of Jesus himself. To live Jesus, devotion to the Cross and Calvary is an important dimension of growing in true love of God and neighbour. Such a conviction was concretized by Fr Mermier and many confreres of the early days by their fidelity to the way of the Cross. This devotion was ingrained in the students who came to our seminaries be they MSFS or diocesan. Even when the administration of St Charles Seminary, Nagpur passed on to the Dominicans in the 1960s, and 70s, the personal devotion continued to be practiced by a large group of diocesan students through a rapid way of the Cross moving from station to station within 10 minutes. It is a practice that is rarely seen in our communities and houses as a regular exercise. Would it not be beneficial to all if this private devotion to the way of the Cross is revived?

The devotion to the Passion of our Lord found a natural attraction to the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales in the recitation of the Divine Mercy Rosary. Today we can include the practice of the recitation of the divine mercy rosary in the expression of our legacy of devotion to the Passion of our Lord.

### **2.4 Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament**

Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is another devotion that our Congregation actively promotes not only in the context of the parish mission preaching ministry but also in the daily life of the community. Eucharist is the center of all spiritual exercises and the continuation of our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the blessed sacrament. This faith is expressed through visit to the Blessed Sacrament and through holy hour or common or individual adoration. The concrete practices of this devotion vary from community to community, but the legacy of having adoration for one hour at least once a week is part of the Fransalian legacy. Time and experience have indicated that a community that spends time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament at a regular frequency enjoys the fruits of fraternal communion and spiritual power and effectivity in their apostolates.

The legacy of one hour of adoration as a community at least once a week is the minimal way through which we should live this legacy of our Congregation. Our Superior General has encouraged all religious communities to expose the Blessed Sacrament for at least 30 minutes every day and adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. It is worth noting what Pope Francis said during the third World Retreat for Priests on June 12, 2015 at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, Rome: “The Tabernacle can be boring and dry; it’s not a television (internet/smart phone), but love is there. Stay in front of the Lord in the tabernacle and let him look at you and let the Holy Spirit pray for you from within. That is the dialogue of love, without words. To evangelize implies this love, it implies being enamoured and letting oneself fall in love. How much time do I spend every day before the tabernacle?” Such words do indeed root us more firmly in this powerful Catholic devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

## **2.5 Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

Devotion to the sacred heart is a necessary corollary to living of Salesian spirituality. “The Salesian teaching uses the heart as a means of describing and understanding the life of God himself. In the same way the heart image is also used as a focal point in the discussion of a person’s relationship to God and others”<sup>16</sup> Thomas Daily OSFS, in his book “Behold this Heart” says, St Francis de Sales and his devotion to the sacred heart shows the closeness of Salesian spirituality to the devotion to the sacred heart. “Gazing upon the Sacred Heart of Jesus draws us into a personal encounter with Him and invites us to dare to come close to love itself. Seeing that Heart of Christ, and being seen by it, helps us realize that our best hope in this world lies not in the fleeting emotions of our human hearts, but in the steadfast grace and power of the divine Heart. We can experience that saving grace and transforming power when we surrender our sins, our wounds, even our desires to Him who has opened His Heart for us with such indescribable mercy.”<sup>17</sup>

Fr Mermier and our Superiors General, especially Fr Joseph Tissot promoted this devotion as it was the offshoot of living of Salesian spirituality. Concretely this legacy is practised in our Congregation by celebrating the first Friday of the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart with due devotion and common consecration of the local community to the sacred heart of Jesus; by installing a picture /statue of the sacred heart in the community; and in celebrating the Feast of the Sacred Heart with Solemnity. The beautiful prayer of St Francis de Sales to the Sacred Heart of Jesus can inspire us to be faithful to this sacred devotion:

May thy heart dwell always in our hearts!  
May thy blood ever flow in the veins of our souls!  
O sun of our hearts, thou givest life  
to all things by the rays of thy goodness!  
I will not go until thy heart has strengthened me, O Lord Jesus!

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<sup>16</sup> John A Abbruzzese, “St Francis de Sales and the heart of Jesus”, in *Salesian Living Heritage* (Fall 1987): 2-16.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Daily, *Behold His Heart*, 161

May the heart of Jesus be the king of my heart!

Blessed be God.

Amen.

## **2.6 Devotion to the Holy Spirit**

With the advent of charismatic renewal movement in the Church, the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation history and in our daily sanctification and renewal is very much recognized, loved and appreciated. This has had influence also on the MSFS Congregation as it supplements its traditional devotions by this devotion to the Holy Spirit. The Feast of the Pentecost is prepared with great enthusiasm through novenas and solemn celebration of the Feast with the people and/or in the religious community. It is up to further discernment by competent authority in the Congregation to make this devotion more widespread.

## **2.7 Feast of St Francis de Sales**

The Feast of our Patron, St Francis de Sales is celebrated throughout the world in our parishes, institutions, mission centers with great solemnity and joy on 24 January. Usually, the feast is preceded by nine days of novenas. Over the years the Congregation, through the efforts of many confreres, has acquired a set of Reflections for the Novenas. They are widely used by the confreres.

## **2.8 Feast of the Mother of Compassion**

This feast is celebrated by the entire Congregation on 15 of September. It is preceded by nine days novenas. Over a certain number of years confreres have prepared very good reflections that can serve as part of the novena.

## **2.9 Founder's Day - a day of commitment to missionary zeal**

The Congregation celebrates 30 September as the Founder's Day. This is the day when Fr Mermier died and we believe he is with God interceding for us. Several confreres have prepared nine days novenas in preparation of the Founder's Day that enables them to capture the spirit and zeal of Fr Mermier and pray for the Congregation through the intercession of Fr Mermier.

## **2.10 Foundation Day of the Congregation**

24 October is always celebrated as foundation day of our Congregation. It was on 24 October 1838 that Bishop Joseph Rey came to our first house in Annecy Le Feuillette and announced that he has canonically approved the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales as a Religious Congregation. It was on this day that Bishop Rey reminded us of our triple task to study St Francis de Sales, imitate him and make his method of gentleness and compassion towards sinners as our own. He goes on to remind the confreres that St Francis de Sales made use of gentleness and humility as an expression of his fervent zeal for Christ and his Mission. This

day when celebrated well with preparation becomes another legacy of our Congregation that roots us in our charism and into the history of our Congregation as a religious family. In many places in our Congregation, there is a triduum of reflections and prayer before the Foundation Day.

### **2.11 Reading of the Obituary and praying for the departed confreres**

Thus, legacy is expressed by the communities by reading in common a short obituary note on the departed confrere on that particular day. This is followed by prayer for the departed. This is another good practice that reminds us of the fraternal bonds we have with our departed confreres. The remembrance is an occasion to thank God for the departed confreres and to be inspired by their lives.

### **2.12 Devotional Renewal of Religious Vows by the Perpetually Professed members of the Congregation**

Under the guidance and direction of the Superior General and other Major Superiors, confreres undertake the devotional renewal of religious vows once a year. This devotional practice is to remind themselves of the total self-gift that they have made of themselves to the Lord and His Mission through the Congregation. This annual practice fans into flames the fire of our entire consecration to God alone. At present, many confreres undertake this devotional renewal of vows on the Foundation Day or during the time of the annual retreat or on any other significant day of the Congregation as indicated by the Major Superior.

### **Conclusion**

The Legacy of Heritage of the spirit of our Congregation and the legacy of Devotions is a rich legacy to keep the confreres ever alert to the call of Jesus to follow him, love him and be spent in His Mission with great joy and selflessness. The hosts of practices when undertaken with the right spirit and with meaningful and ardent participation are constant sources of our renewal in grace and a living memory of our entire belongingness to God and for his purposes. Simple practices as they are they root us into the spiritual ethos of the family of our Congregation and strengthen our communion as a religious family of brothers.

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