

## CHAPTER THREE

### MSFS CHARISM AND APOSTOLATES

Founded in 1838 at Annecy, France, by Servant of God, Fr Peter Marie Mermier, the Congregation of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales has a long history of spreading and furthering the mission of Christ and His Church across the world. What began as a small community of men preaching parish missions in a small area in France has grown into a world-wide missionary Congregation engaged in a variety of ministries and missionary endeavors. For a religious congregation, the charism is its soul, and the apostolates are its body. The charism propels and animates the community while the apostolates give visibility to this inner dynamism and spirit. This chapter will discuss the charism of the MSFS congregation and how it is visibly expressed through our three foundational apostolates.

#### MSFS Charism

**To continue the mission of Christ and His Church by living the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales in a religious community of missionaries, as lived and envisioned by our Founder<sup>1</sup>**

#### MSFS Apostolates

- 1. Renewal of Christian Life**
- 2. Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization**
- 3. Education and Formation, Especially of the Young<sup>2</sup>**

#### 1. MSFS CHARISM

The Charism of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales 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 of missionaries, as lived and envisioned by our Founder.”

The XX General Chapter 2019 of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales was based on the theme, “MSFS, Wake up to the Basics.” The four basics of our consecrated life—mission, community life, MSFS-ness, and Spirituality of St Francis de Sales—are embedded in the four fundamental aspects of our life in the Congregation, that is, the History of the Congregation, the Spirit of the Founder, Servant of God, Fr Peter Marie Mermier, the MSFS Charism, and the MSFS Constitutions and General Directory. The General Chapter initiated a Congregation-wide study and reflection of these four fundamental areas of our life, and the findings were presented to the Extraordinary General Chapter 2022 (EGC 2022). The EGC 2022 further studied these four pillars of the Congregation, made certain observations, and formed a committee to develop a sourcebook containing the history, legacy, charism and apostolates, and the constitutions and the directory of the Congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales* (Bangalore: Brilliant Printers, 2006), Art.7 & *Extraordinary General Chapter (EGC) 2022*.

<sup>2</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, d & Art. 22.

One of the significant developments at the EGC 2022 was arriving at a clear statement of the Charism of the Congregation. Article No. 7 of the MSFS Constitutions has a reference to the Charism of the Congregation but it lacked clarity and definitiveness. The EGC 2022, therefore, decided definitively the charism of the MSFS Congregation as “To continue the mission of Christ and His Church by living the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales in a religious community of missionaries, as lived and envisioned by our Founder.”

### 1.1. Charism and Its Implications

Charism, having its roots in the Greek word, “charis,” simply means grace or a freely given favor. In the common or secular context, it refers to a rare personal quality attributed to leaders who arouse fervor and enthusiasm in their followers. In the Christian or ecclesiastical context, charism refers to a spiritual gift or talent granted by God to an individual not primarily for his or her own sake but for the good of the Church and the world. It is to live the gospel in a particular way, and it is always for the benefit of others.

The references to Charisms among the Christian faithful have their basis in the sacred Scripture. St Paul says that there are varieties of gifts but the giver of these gifts is always the Holy Spirit: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone...All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12: 4-11). In another passage, St Paul compares the Church to the human body and suggests that just as the different parts of the body function together for the good of the body, the members of the Church, with their variety of gifts and graces, should work together for the good of the Church (Rom 12: 4-8).

*Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church, reiterates what the Scripture says about the charisms given to the Christian faithful.<sup>3</sup> After Jesus accomplished his mission on earth, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father on the Christian faithful who equips and guides the latter with charismatic gifts to continually sanctify the Church. Taking cue from the analogy of St Paul about the human body, the document says that the members of the Church should use their gifts for the good of the Church and function in a unified manner.<sup>4</sup> The document also says that these special favors or gifts received from God should be received with thanksgiving and they should never be sought after or presumed to be for personal benefit.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, another document of the Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, states that “the Christian faithful, having different gifts (cf. Rom. 12:6), according to each one's opportunity, ability, charisms and ministry (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10) must all cooperate in the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Apostolate of the Laity also suggests that all Christians have a

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 4. Vatican Council II (Vatican: 1964).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, 28, Vatican Council II (Vatican: 1965).

bounden duty to use their special gifts and charisms given by God to make God's message of salvation known to all people in the world and build up the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, rooted in the sacred Scripture and traditions, the Church is very clear about the meaning, source, and purpose of charisms. They are special gifts or favors; the Holy Spirit is the giver of these gifts; and they are meant to build up the body of Christ, the Church, and for the sanctification of the world.

## 1.2. Charism and Consecrated Life

A particular charism is the starting point of all consecrated lives and communities. Moved by the Holy Spirit, the Founder recognizes a special gift given to him or her to further the mission of Christ and his Church. He or she discerns this gift through prayer and dialogue and articulates it in a clear manner, and then looks for and invites persons to share in the same vision. If the Church recognizes this charism or vision as truly inspired by God and for the good of the Church, it gives rise to the foundation of a religious congregation or society. The MSFS Constitutions reiterates this point in its prologue: "Within the Church, the Father, through His Holy Spirit raises men and women of outstanding holiness and vision, courage and conviction, to inspire and gather those who would dedicate themselves totally to Christ and His Kingdom."<sup>8</sup> The members of the religious community need to always remember that the source of their charism is God himself and the purpose of their existence is God and his people. They don't exist for themselves but for Christ and his Church. Fidelity to the foundational charism and the original vision of the Founder is an essential characteristic of every religious community.

*Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree of Second Vatican Council on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, insists that the religious communities need to constantly "return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes."<sup>9</sup> The document further says that the renewal of religious communities must hold "the following of Christ as set forth in the gospels" as the highest rule.<sup>10</sup> "The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels."<sup>11</sup>

All the teachings of the Church are thus very clear about the inseparable connection between the charism and the life of the religious. Led by the Holy Spirit, religious Congregations exist for Christ and the Church. The mission of Christ and his Church becomes the mission of every religious community. Drawing inspiration from the vision of the Founder and dialoging with the foundational charism, they live their religious commitment in the given contexts of their lives.

## 1.3. Fr Peter Marie Mermier and the MSFS Charism

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Apostolicam Actuositatem, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 3, Vatican Council II (Vatican: 1965).

<sup>8</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, c.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Perfectae Caritatis, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, 2, Vatican Council II (Vatican: 1965).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 2 a.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 2 e.

The MSFS charism is the fruit of the special inspiration received by our Founder, Servant of God, Fr Peter Marie Mermier. From his early age and very specially as a priest, Fr Mermier was on fire for God and his Church. For the Church, one of the signs of the authenticity of the charism is the outstanding holiness of the Founder and his or her experience of God and intimacy with God. Fr Mermier was one of such kind. He was moved by the Spirit and began to voice that fire within himself. The Congregation of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales is the result of this God experience and fire within Fr Mermier. The MSFS Constitutions very clearly articulates this charism or the special gift that Fr Mermier received from God: “In His infinite wisdom and love, God moved the heart of the Servant of God, Fr Pierre Marie Mermier (Fr Peter Mary Mermier), to found at Annecy, France, a religious community of men, the Congregation of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales, also known as the Fransalians, to continue the missionary task of the Church in a unique manner, following the way of St Francis de Sales, Apostle of Chablais and the Doctor of Love.”<sup>12</sup>

*Perfectae Caritatis* reiterates the duty of religious Congregations to return to and continue the foundational charism and vision of their respective founders. The document states that being aware that they “have their own particular characteristics and work,” religious communities must faithfully hold in honor and follow their patrimony, which essentially consists of their Founder’s spirit and their sound traditions.<sup>13</sup> The MSFS charism that our constitutions states and definitively defined and articulated by EGC 2022 was a restatement of the foundational charism of Fr Mermier. We are “To continue the mission of Christ and His Church by living the spirit and spirituality of St. Francis de Sales in a religious community of missionaries, as lived and envisioned by our Founder.” Thus Fr Mermier’s charism becomes the charism of the MSFS Congregation.

#### **1.4. Three Dimensions of MSFS Charism**

The MSFS charism is tridimensional. It involves a missionary commitment, which is a response to the call of Jesus to follow him and build up his kingdom. It draws inspiration from the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales, which we commonly refer to as Salesian Spirituality. And it is lived and followed by the members in the context of community life.

##### **1.4.1. Missionary Commitment**

The Church has no second thoughts about the purpose of religious Congregations. It is to continue the mission of Christ and his Church. The mission of the Church, as our Constitutions states, “is to bear witness to Christ, the Light of all Nations, and to the Father’s love which called her into existence.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus, the first missionary, calls his followers to continue what he had begun. He said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt 9:37-38). Jesus’ mission is never complete until every human being on earth is brought into his company and friendship. Building up the kingdom of God that he inaugurated and preached is a mandate given to every Christian and very specially to every priest and religious. Priests and the religious by their very

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<sup>12</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, c.

<sup>13</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2 b.

<sup>14</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, b.

vocation are called to be missionaries. We are not here for ourselves but for him and for his Church. The purpose of our Congregation is not anything else either. It is to continue the mission of Christ and his Church to further the cause of His Kingdom. Our constitutions explicitly states it in the following words: “It is His purpose that we proclaim His plan of salvation to all. The daring and passionate affirmation of our Founder, ‘I want Missions,’ is the inspiration behind our apostolic ventures and missionary initiatives. Ours is a call to be missionaries by remaining constantly attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and by imbibing the spirit and vision of both our Patron and our Founder.”<sup>15</sup> We are thus a missionary Congregation and our call is to participate in the mission mandate of Jesus. Every MSFS needs to constantly remind himself of this fact of his vocation to be a missionary.

When Fr Mermier found that a few of his companions, who had gathered around him, had decided to leave, he was disturbed but not disheartened. As there was delay in getting the approval for the Congregation, some of them became impatient and were disheartened thinking that they were wasting their time. Even those who remained with him were wavering. But Fr Mermier remained resolute in his decision to have a religious community committed to missions. It is in that context that Fr Mermier says to Monsieur Gaiddon: “My friend, you are free, just make up your mind which side you have to take. If you leave me, after ten years of trial, I shall be alone. My resolve is unshakeable, my longings are the same. I want mission work.”<sup>16</sup>

The missionary in Fr Mermier was also a result of the influence and inspiration of his dearly loved saint, St Francis de Sales who was a great missionary. Fr Mermier knew that the saint had a tremendous success story with his missionary endeavors in Chablais. St Francis de Sales was resolute and determined in his missionary work in spite of all the hardships he faced. He did not turn back until he found the fruits of his labor. Fr Mermier had the same determination and resoluteness. With great fervor and zeal he kept moving ahead in his decision to found and build up our missionary Congregation.

### **1.4.2. Salesian Spirituality**

St Francis de Sales is at the heart of the life and spirituality of the MSFS. We are named after him, and living the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales, which is popularly known as the Salesian spirituality, is the distinguishing mark of the Fransalian missionaries. Our Constitutions states: “Our Founder, Father Peter Mermier, presents to us St Francis de Sales as our Patron and model...Therefore, our Founder wants us to become more like Christ after the example of St Francis de Sales, our Patron.”<sup>17</sup>

While giving approval for the Congregation, Bishop Joseph Rey of Annecy presented before Fr Mermier and his companions, how St. Francis de Sales had to be at the heart of our charism and day-to-day living. He said, “Yours is a triple task: study St Francis de Sales, imitate his virtues, form your method of guiding people on his: full of gentleness to sinners.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, there

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<sup>15</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, e & f.

<sup>16</sup> Adrien Duval, *Monsieur Mermier, Founder of our Religious Congregation* (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1985), 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Art. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Art 9.

is a special mould in which the MSFS are to be shaped and transfigured into Christ, and that is the mould of St Francis de Sales and his Spirituality.

St Francis de Sales is a saint that everyone can relate to. He was a gentle soul, a passionate pastor, and a zealous missionary. His wisdom and knowledge were unparalleled. He is known as the Doctor of Love and his spirituality is the spirituality of Love. It is the spirituality of intense love for God and fellow human beings. He invites us to seek holiness in our daily life by conforming ourselves to the divine will and sharing God's love by practicing little virtues such as, humility, gentleness, patience, joy, and optimism. Learning from the life of the saint and putting into practice his teachings and exhortations are basic to our life as Fransalians.

### 1.4.3. Community Life

Community life is a non-negotiable character and constituent of religious life. The religious are not simply pious and devout men or women engaged in some charitable works but rather a community of brothers or sisters bound together by the evangelical counsels and fraternal charity. They share their life in common and they are to be united in prayer and spirit. Speaking of the important place that community life holds in the life of the religious, *Perfectae Caritatis* states thus: "Common life, fashioned on the model of the early Church where the body of believers was united in heart and soul (cf. Acts 4:32), and given new force by the teaching of the Gospel, the sacred liturgy and especially the Eucharist, should continue to be lived in prayer and the communion of the same spirit."<sup>19</sup>

The document further says that a religious community is to be a true family gathered together in the name of the Lord, and God's love should be the basis of their rule of life and daily life. Such a community will have the presence of the Lord in their midst, and they will be bound together in unity. The community will become a source of strength and energy for their daily life and apostolic activities. Living together as brothers or sisters in love would help the religious to live their evangelical counsels faithfully and fully. Such a community will also be a prefiguration of our eternal life where we will be gathered together as brothers and sisters with the Lord. Speaking of religious communities as extensions and signs of the ecclesial communion, Saint John Paul II says in *Vita Consecrata*, "The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion."<sup>20</sup>

Fr Mermier wanted to found such a community of religious men bound together by evangelical vows and fraternal charity. Coming from the background of being a diocesan priest, Fr Mermier longed to live in a community of brothers. His charism for missionary life had community life as an inevitable constituent. Our Constitutions says, "God, our Father, has gathered us from various tribes, languages, cultures, and nations (cf. Rev 5:9) to live as brothers united in heart and mind."<sup>21</sup> When Fr Mermier said that he wanted mission work, he was firm in having it through a community of religious men constituted as a Congregation. Therefore, without doubt we have to affirm that it was the mind and heart of Fr Mermier to have a religious community dedicated to the work of missions. It is possible to be missionaries without being a religious community or

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<sup>19</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Vita Consecrata* (Vatican: 1996), 42.

<sup>21</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, e.

Congregation. But that is not what Fr Mermier wanted. For him, it was a gift from God that he should found a community to which was entrusted the work of missions. For an MSFS, community and mission go together. Our missionary endeavors are only an extension of what we live and experience in our community. Bound together in God's love as brothers, we go out to teach that same message of love and unity to our brothers and sisters in the world.

The reasons for Fr Mermier to consider community life as an essential part of religious life are in line with the teachings of the Church as suggested in the document, *Perfectae Caritatis*. The life together in a community would provide stability and continuity to the apostolate of preaching parish missions. Devoid of it, the parish mission preaching would be hollow and ineffective. Community living would sustain their personal spiritual growth and vitality. For the missionaries, community would be the school of ongoing formation in religious life. Brothers living together in unity and fraternal love would also help them to live their vows faithfully and fully.

When our Congregation was founded, Fr Mermier and his companions lived as a community in one part of the major seminary of Annecy. They lived intense community life in prayer, simplicity, work, recreation, and joy, and at the same time attended to parish mission preaching ministry. The seminarians were touched by the witness of this first MSFS community and a few joined the first band of missionaries. Later, the community stayed in a rented house in La Roche Sur-la-Furon, close to the town parish. The members continued the same prayerful, joyful, and united life with more detailed planning and execution of parish mission preaching and writing the first MSFS Constitutions. Fr Mermier, at last decided to have his own first MSFS Community house in Annecy, known as La Feuillette, built under the supervision of Fr Jacques Martin, the first superior of the MSFS Community sent to India and who died at Yanam. La Feuillette became the mother house of the Congregation until it was taken over by the civil administration on account of political controversy of the time and never returned after the crisis was over.

If any of the three dimensions of the MSFS charism, that is, missionary commitment, Salesian spirituality, and community life, is missing in our understanding or living, then the MSFS charism is not yet a living reality in our life.

## **1.5. The Relevance and Implications of our Charism Today**

### **1.5.1. Missionary Commitment**

Missionaries of God's love are the need of the world today. In varied ways the world is hungering for the type of love that Jesus shows us in his life and death. Secularization, relativism, and materialism are feeble and confused attempts to get what the world cannot give. The MSFS are called to embody and carry that message of God's love to all sectors of society, especially to those places and people who have not heard of Jesus.

There are not only geographical areas that await the Good News of the Gospel, but also new situations, contexts, forums, and organizations that need to be evangelized in the spirit of Jesus and his gospel. Together with all Christians to whom this mission is entrusted at the time of their

baptism, the MSFS by their religious consecration and by their specific charism of being refiners of faith, are called to be at the forefront of new frontiers of the mission of Christ in today's world. Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*, refers to all such people as those on the "periphery" and exhorts all Christians to reach out to them in love. He says, "Every brother or sister in need, when abandoned or ignored by the society in which I live, becomes an existential foreigner, even though born in the same country...No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life."<sup>22</sup>

Our Charism very clearly states that we are missionaries, and our mission mandate is to continue the mission of Christ and his Church. Christ is for all, and the Church is universal. Our approach and attitudes shouldn't be any different. Our missionary commitment should be directed towards all people, irrespective of caste, culture, language, race, religion, nationality, socio-economic differences, or any other difference. We see all people as children of God, and the whole world becomes our mission territory. We need to mould our personalities and preferences in view of this global mission placed before us. That would mean that we become available for God's mission as and when required, and wherever and for whatever ministry is demanded of us. When an MSFS insists on certain preferred ministries or mission territories against the will of the Congregation, for whatever reason, he goes against the very nature and fabric of our life as missionaries. We have beautiful examples of docility to God's will and availability to his mission in our own patron and founder. Although St Francis de Sales was holding a very important and enviable position in the diocese, he was asked by the Bishop to go to Chablais to take up the challenging mission when everyone else appeared to be skeptical and reluctant. The saint could have refused the request and held on to his position, but he willingly made himself available for the mission. Fr Mermier would have preferred to have a mission territory in Africa for evangelization for his new Congregation, but Rome assigned to the MSFS the vast and unknown mission territory in India instead. Without a second thought, he willingly accepted the challenge and sent missionaries to India. Besides these saintly men, we have many stalwarts of our Congregation who have done the same. Many of them remain unknown and unacclaimed, but they willingly offered themselves to God's mission whenever and wherever required.

Our missionary commitment also places a great challenge before us to venture into areas of mission and ministry that remain unexplored. The outlook of the MSFS should be that of Jesus who said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt 9:37-38). Wherever Jesus looked, there were opportunities to do God's mission. He was a missionary who moved into the "peripheries," bringing the good news of God's love to those who were deprived of or skeptical about it.

Therefore, our great call and challenge with regard to our missionary commitment is our ability to be available for God's mission wherever and whenever it is required. If we refuse to do that, we become everything else except being Missionaries of St Francis de Sales as envisioned by our Founder, Fr Peter Marie Mermier.

### **1.5.2. Salesian Spirituality**

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<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti, Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendships* (Vatican: 2020), 97 & 215.



St Francis de Sales is a man for all times. His spirit and spirituality are ever appealing and practical to people of all backgrounds and ages. His spirituality of the universal call to holiness and finding perfection in the everyday life and particular state of life to which God has called us becomes an appealing concept to both the lay and the religious alike. A genuine quest of the human heart for love and for the best in life ought to lead to God's love. St Francis de Sales is one of the finest guides for pilgrims on that journey of love. We become true Fransalians when we learn from the life and teachings of St Francis de Sales.

His theology of God and God's love as the ultimate goal of human soul should be the guiding light for all of us as religious and missionaries. Everything that we are and everything that we do should be geared toward this goal. Animated by and filled with God's love, we are to reflect Jesus in our daily life and actions. The Salesian virtues of gentleness, humility, simplicity, patience, optimism, moderation, honesty, and all others are to become part of our everyday living.<sup>23</sup> The followers of the "Gentleman saint," for example, should be gentle in being and action. But these are not virtues that can be acquired overnight. The saint himself took several years to tame himself and turn from being a quick-tempered person to a gentle soul. Every MSFS is to strive towards acquiring these virtues that make us truly Salesian and Fransalian.

St Francis de Sales faced many crises in his life at various levels and forms. In his crisis of faith and vocation in his youth, with reference to the philosophy of predestination and family expectations respectively, he held on to his faith and the daily practices of devotions and virtues. He did not doubt God's love but doubted about his own worthiness for it. He did not want to disappoint his father or family but his love for God and priesthood was greater. The crises passed and he was stable and well again. As religious and priests, occasions of crisis in faith and vocation could occur to some, but our patron remains as a great model to hold on to our faith and continue with our devotions and practice of virtues. As a missionary in Chablais, St Francis de Sales faced many crises, but he overcame all of them with deep faith in God, determination in spirit, and die-hard attitude toward the tasks entrusted to him. As missionaries, we might face many challenging situations, but our patron shows us the path to success by his own example.

St Francis de Sales was a man of great learning and wisdom. "He was highly educated and qualified for his duties and responsibilities as a pastor, missionary, preacher, teacher, and bishop... He was a student until the end of his life. He read widely, reflected deeply, and wrote prolifically."<sup>24</sup> As the Bishop, St Francis de Sales realized that many of his priests in the diocese were ignorant. Hence in one of his first exhortations to his clergy, he said: "I say in truth that ignorance in priests is more to be feared than sin, because by it we do not ruin ourselves alone, but dishonor and degrade the priesthood. I beseech you then to give yourselves seriously to study. Knowledge, in a priest, is the eighth sacrament of the ecclesiastical hierarchy."<sup>25</sup>

The Second Vatican Council has been very vocal about the importance of having adequate knowledge and wisdom for the leaders of the Church. *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on

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<sup>23</sup> Francis de Sales. *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Translated by A. Mookenthottam, A. Nazareth, and A. Kolencherry (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2016), 137.

<sup>24</sup> Binu Edathumparambil. *Live Jesus: The Salesian Imperative of Christological Formation*. Edited by T. Kochalumchuvattil and D. Manalel (Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2021), 120-153.

<sup>25</sup> Henry B. Mackey. *Four Essays on the Life and Writings of St. Francis de Sales* (London: Burns & Oates, 1883), 42.

Divine Revelation, reminds the leaders of the Church of their bounden duty to have deep knowledge of the scripture: “All the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word...For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”<sup>26</sup> “A leader in the Church is a teacher of faith and an animator of the flock. One cannot teach and animate if he or she is ignorant. One cannot live Jesus without being wise and learned like the Master himself...One cannot give what one does not possess. And one cannot possess something unless it is given and sought.”<sup>27</sup> As priests and religious, we have a great responsibility to be teachers, primarily of faith and morals. For that, we need to be men of great learning and wisdom after the example of our patron.

St Francis de Sales was a pastor par excellence. “He was a model bishop and a good shepherd. He was a man for all, irrespective of who they were and what class or group they belonged to. He took the role of a catechist, teaching his people the basics of faith and love of God. He engaged in pastoral visits to the parishes of his vast diocese, enquiring about the welfare of his people and spending time with them. He took upon himself the great task of reforming his clergy and the religious orders in his diocese.”<sup>28</sup> We have a great legacy in our patron for pastoral fervor and zeal. As missionaries, the Fransalians are called to be pastors with great fervor and zeal, irrespective of the type of ministries we engage in.

Another great lesson that we learn from our patron is his ability to remain simple rather than being carried away by honors and titles. “Francis de Sales often declined titles and benefits offered to him. King Henry IV, the King of France, for example, was so impressed by Francis’ preaching and erudition that he offered to nominate him to become an archbishop in France. But Francis politely refused the offer. Later the King had desired to make him a Cardinal and see him as the Archbishop of Paris, but that was not meant to be. Again, he was offered the position of coadjutor bishop of Paris by Cardinal de Retz, but Francis declined and preferred to stay in Annecy...Francis never got elated or gloried in his titles or achievements...Francis refused the temptations of higher positions and benefits and kept his focus on the mission entrusted to him.”<sup>29</sup> As priests and religious, often holding positions of great importance in the society, there would be offers of titles and honors and temptations of going after them are highly likely to come. Our patron’s example cautions us about falling into such temptations and the need to stay focused on the mission entrusted to us.

Salesian Spirituality is meant not only to influence us, Fransalians, but also to be disseminated by us so that more and more people can grow in it and gain from its richness. Although it is meant for all, when it is introduced to the lay faithful, they take an immediate liking to it and show keen desire to live it in their daily lives. The concepts of the universal call to holiness and finding perfection in one’s own chosen vocation and context of life help them to feel one with the larger family of the Church. The two great classics of St Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the*

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Paul VI. *Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 25, Vatican Council II (Vatican: 1965).

<sup>27</sup> *Live Jesus: The Salesian Imperative of Christological Formation*, 150.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

*Devout Life*<sup>30</sup> and *Treatise on the Love of God*<sup>31</sup> are great companions to those who seek to grow in holiness of life. The scope of spreading Salesian spirituality through Fransalian Associates, conducting of Salesian retreats, and the use of media is much, and we have a long way to go in disseminating the relevance of the spirituality of St Francis de Sales in the modern world.

### 1.5.3. Community Life

Community life is at the heart of religious life, and the source and summit of this communion is God himself. Just as the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are unique in themselves and yet are united and inseparable, the religious community consists of members who are unique in themselves and yet are inseparably united. We come from various nations, cultures, races, and languages, but as religious and MSFS, we are one family.

Pope John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata*, calls on the religious to be “true experts and architects of communion” and to practice the “spirituality of communion.”<sup>32</sup> As the MSFS are called to live in community, they are called to be “builders” of communion. In a world with a lot of divisive forces at work, the MSFS are very much relevant to be heralds of communion, and reconcilers and builders of bridges. It will be an anomaly to have Fransalians who consciously or unconsciously become agents of one form of division or the other within the Congregation or outside. The MSFS, through the dimension of community life, must be “gatherers” and not “scatterers” in the modern world. Our prayer must be the same as that of Jesus: “That they may be one as you Father are in me and I in you” (Jn 17:21).

“The glue that unites the Holy Trinity is love because the very essence of God is love (1 Jn 4:8-9).”<sup>33</sup> So also, the glue that unites us is love. Love in its very nature is giving and uniting. It brings people together, and it leads them to give themselves to others. Our vocation to religious life mandates us to be self-giving and unifying persons wherever we are.

Community life also includes the aspect of confreres living together in one house as far as possible, unless the given ministry requires him to stay separately. Even when living separately, the confreres are to be bound together as members of local or apostolic communities, with the possibility of coming together frequently and sharing their life as brothers in one mission. Knowing clearly the mind, intention, and living of community life by Fr Mermier and the first missionaries, it would be odd to have confreres staying alone without a community. Hence the XX General Chapter 2019 reasserted the need to establish local communities to have confreres live and share their life together. If we are to be faithful to this aspect of our MSFS Charism, a conscious and active effort for community living is absolutely necessary. Marked signs for or against community spirit and living during the initial stages of formation should be taken into consideration for discerning the call of a candidate to MSFS way life.

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<sup>30</sup> Francis de Sales. *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Translated by A. Mookenthottam, A. Nazareth, and A. Kolencherry (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Francis De Sales. *Treatise on the Love of God*. Translated by A. Mookenthottam, A. Nazareth, and H. J. Kodikuthiyil. (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Binu Edathumparambil. *The Christological Model and the Configuration to Christ* (Bengaluru: SFS Publications, 2021), 243.

Community life does not mean that one's own personal growth and development are not to be promoted. When we live our lives to the best of our abilities and potential, we bring glory to God.<sup>34</sup> A good community finds a balance between individual development and common mission. Some might think that our lives can be lived in isolation. And some others might think that individuals don't matter. But religious life is about living a life of love in union with our confreres in the community, promoting each other's development and working together with one common mission in mind.

Our commitment to the mission of the Lord and related apostolates are to be an extension of our life in the community. Having lived and experienced a life of love and communion, our call is to share that experience with others around us. Our larger mission is to build a community of love with the rest of the humanity and the creation. Speaking of our universal communion, Pope Francis says: "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, community life is "not only a rewarding relationship that enhances our personal development but also a responsibility placed on us"<sup>36</sup> to build up a life of common brotherhood and fraternal charity.

## **1.6. Congregational Charism and Personal charisms**

Every person is blessed with various physical, moral, intellectual, and social gifts and skills. Some of them are obvious and easily noticed, while others may not be so. When we think of charisms, they are special gifts given to individuals by the Holy Spirit. They are more than good traits or qualities of a person. They are given to accomplish something special for God's kingdom and his people. Similarly, a Congregation has its Charism, and its purpose is to build up Christ's Church and her mission. When an individual becomes a member of a Congregation, he or she needs to find ways to integrate his or her personal charisms with that of the Congregation. The two cannot be in a conflictual and dichotomous situation. Otherwise, the ultimate goal of charisms, that is, building up the kingdom of God and serving God's people, will remain unfulfilled. When the harmony and integration are attained, every individual member who lives sincerely his or her vocation becomes a miniature Congregation. It is the same principle that is followed in the life of a Christian at every step of the way. The Church does not have a separate mission or identity from that of Christ. Religious Congregations do not have a separate mission or identity from that of the Church. Individual members of a Congregation do not have a separate mission or identity from that of the Congregation. Christ belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to Christ. The Church belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to the Church. The Congregation belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to the Congregation. When this principle is rightly understood, there is no room for any conflict between personal charisms and Congregational Charism.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Christological Model and the Configuration to Christ*, 241.

<sup>35</sup> Pope Francis. *Laudato Si* (Vatican, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> *The Christological Model and the Configuration to Christ*, 242.

There may be certain individuals, such as Mother Teresa of Kolkata, who might receive a very special charism for something other than what the Congregation follows. But the focus of their unique charism should be the same, the mission of Christ and his Church, and not their personal interests. Such charisms are to be discerned through a process of prayer, dialogue, and due ecclesiastical approvals. All other claims of personal charisms within a Congregation need to be dealt with utmost caution and care.

Being called to be a Fransalian is a call for acquiring a new identity in which all other identities must coalesce and be integrated. Without this process of integration, there is a dangerous possibility of living a dichotomous life within oneself and ineffective lives in mission. If initiation and discernment to MSFS way of life is done appropriately during the formation period, the members would realize that the charism of the Congregation is a common gift in which they share while the individual gifts are well-integrated into the charism of the Congregation. Therefore, formation for the integration of personal charism and the charism of the Congregation must go hand in hand at all stages of formation. When integration is extremely difficult, it could be a clear sign that the MSFS way of life is not for the concerned person.

## **2. MSFS APOSTOLATES**

The apostolates are the ways and means through which the charism of a religious congregation is manifested. Reading the signs of the times and seeing the need of the Church in the given historical context, the Founder responds with specific apostolates. The foundational apostolates thus embody the foundational charism. For the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales, the foundational apostolates consisted of three areas:

- 1. Renewal of Christian life**
- 2. Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization**
- 3. Education and Formation, Especially of the Young<sup>37</sup>**

### **2.1. Our Apostolates and their Historical Background**

Fr Peter Marie Mermier was a holy and zealous priest of the Diocese of Annecy, in the Duchy of Savoy, which was later annexed to France. The French revolution had done much damage to the Catholic Church and practice of faith. Anti-clericalism was high, the Church properties were confiscated, and priests and nuns were expelled or executed. The practice of Catholic faith became difficult, and consequently, the faith of the people had become shallow. People had become indifferent to the faith and the sacraments, and there was lack of catechetical knowledge. There was a lack of sustained care of the flock by the pastors. Education was so much secularized that Christian beliefs and values had little influence on the children. Fr Mermier was born in this post-French revolution era, and he was deeply disturbed by the situation of the people.

He was convinced that he had to do something to respond to this situation and bring the people back to the Catholic Church and practice of faith. A few of his companions shared in his vision and gathered together with him to materialize the dream. They began with preaching missions in

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<sup>37</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Prologue, d & Art. 22.

the parishes and then extended their ministry to other areas. Fr Mermier desired to have this band of missionaries to be established as a religious Congregation to provide stability and continuity to this vision for the Church. Constituting them into a religious community was also necessary to help them sustain their personal spiritual growth and vitality without which their apostolates would be hollow and ineffective. With this goal in mind, he founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, and it was canonically established by Bishop Pierre Joseph Rey of Annecy on October 24, 1838, and approved by His Holiness Pope Pius IX on May 19, 1860.<sup>38</sup> Gradually, the little congregation began to spread its wings to other areas of ministry and parts of the world.

## **2.2. Our Foundational Apostolates**

Our foundational apostolates are three: The Apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life, the Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization, and the Apostolate of Education and Formation, especially of the Young. These apostolates are the ways and means through which we try to manifest the charism of our Congregation. Therefore, all these three apostolates should have a missionary outlook, a Salesian touch, and a communitarian approach. In other words, our apostolates should speak for who we are as Missionaries of St Francis de Sales or Fransalians. After being the recipients and witnesses of our apostolates, no one should have a second thought about who we are and what we stand for.

### **2.2.1. Apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life**

The renewal and revival of Christian life was one of the priorities of Fr Mermier and his companions, and that became one of our foundational apostolates. Fr Mermier was convinced that mere parochial ministry would not bring about the desired renewal of faith of the people. The solution he found for this problem was preaching parish missions. It consisted of a week- or fortnight- or month-long intensive mission preaching, catechetical training, counseling, confessions, family visits, etc. This was intended to rekindle the faith in people along with a sustained catechetical exposure and practice of fervent Catholic devotions.

The style and approach of the parish mission preaching was a reliving of the missionary activities of St Francis de Sales, the endearing and lovable saint of the place who was once the Bishop of Geneva but a great missionary to the Chablais, the Calvinist dominated area which he converted back to Catholicism. His missionary efforts were first met with opposition but gradually the people began to respond to his preaching, and he won them back to the Catholic faith. Fr Mermier and his companions used a similar methodology in reaching out to the people and reviving their faith. Just like St Francis de Sales, Fr Mermier and his companions also faced cold responses from the people at the beginning but slowly their efforts began to bear fruit. People began to listen to them and return back to active faith.

Fr Mermier's vision of renewing and reviving Christian life continues to guide the work of the MSFS missionaries all over the world. We have been at the service of the Church locally and globally, employing creative and innovative ideas and methods to renew the faith of the people.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, Prologue, c & d.

### **2.2.2. Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization**

Fr Mermier did not simply stop with the apostolate of the renewal of Christian life or preaching the parish missions. He offered himself and his Congregation to the service of the Church in yet another way, specifically, for the evangelization of the peoples through foreign missions. When our Congregation was just a few years old, with just 11 members, Fr Mermier wanted to go to missions abroad. Thus, the second apostolate of the MSFS, the Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization, is very much linked with the foundation of our Congregation.

Following up on the mission command of Jesus to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (Mk 16:15),” the Church has been missionary in her outlook and operations right from the beginning. Fr Mermier’s time was no different. The Church has been turning to missionary Congregations to extend their apostolates to faraway places where the gospel had not reached. Responding to this need of the time, Fr Mermier placed his young Congregation at the service of the Church. His personal desire was to go to Africa, but obedience to the Holy See made him to take up another mission territory. The Holy See assigned to the MSFS Congregation the vast Vicariate of Visakhapatnam in India for evangelization. This territory extended from the east coast of India to the central parts of India. The tiny Congregation divested itself of the personnel and financial resources at Annecy to attend to this vast mission in India.

The vast terrain with poor or no roads, meager transportation facilities, health hazards, strange languages, cultures and customs, unfriendly weather, unfamiliar food habits, and lack of personnel had an adverse effect on the life of our missionaries. Many of them died young and most of them were separated from each other due to long distances and lack of communication facilities. But they courageously held on and progressed. The seeds of faith were sown, and they began to sprout and grow. Local vocations were promoted, and the Congregation began to grow, both in the number of missionaries and mission centers. Today the seed of missionary endurance and tenacity has borne much fruit for the Church and the Congregation with several dioceses carved out from the area where the pioneering missionaries worked and the MSFS Congregation becoming one of the largest Congregations in India. We have seven Provinces in India with a large number of missionaries and mission territories spread out to all parts of the country.

### **2.2.3. Apostolate of Education and Formation, especially of the Young**

The third apostolate of the MSFS, Education and Formation, especially of the Young, also had its origin at the time of Fr Mermier. Due to the French revolution and its after-effects, the education and formation of the young people was one of the areas mostly neglected and compromised with. Religion and religious values were suppressed and the educational system was proliferated with extreme secular values and thoughts. The condition and standard of the Catholic schools and colleges were poor, and the Church leaders were concerned. This was an equally important concern and priority for Fr Mermier. He was a teacher at heart. As a young priest, he was a teacher and in charge of discipline at the school at Melan from 1816 to 1819. It was not any kind of education that he wanted but education that instills in the students Christian values and principles.

The bishops turned to Fr Mermier and his young Congregation to take charge of some of these schools and colleges to raise their standards and impart Catholic education. The Congregation was small and the main focus was on preaching missions, but after consulting with his confreres, Fr Mermier responded positively to the Bishops' requests and took charge of some of the Colleges. In 1848, the Bishop of Annecy offered to the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales the management of the College of Evian. In 1856, at the request of Bishop Rendu of Annecy, Fr Mermier accepted the management of the College of Melan. Besides the stated goals of the revival of faith and academic excellence, Fr Mermier saw the ministry of education and formation of the young as a means to promote vocations to his young missionary Congregation. The long vision and commitment of our Founder and pioneering missionaries have borne fruit. Today the apostolate of the education and formation of the young is one of the most vibrant and thriving ministries of the MSFS.

This apostolate also includes the education and formation of those preparing for religious life and priesthood. Fr Mermier was a spiritual director to the seminarians of the Diocese of Annecy. He knew the importance of educating and forming the seminarians for the life ahead of them. The little Congregation that started at Annecy has grown large in numbers over the years, and today we are one of the largest Congregations in the world. Our confreres, with their education and expertise in various fields, render yeoman service to the Church and the society all over the world.

### **2.3. The Relevance and Implications of our Apostolates Today**

The hearts of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales must resonate with the heart of the Founder in having affection for the apostolates around which the Congregation was born and has grown. One who is attracted to the MSFS Congregation should be appreciative of all the three apostolates of the Congregation, not excluding one in favor of the other. A passion to make Christ known, loved, and followed should never be diminished in all these apostolates.

#### **2.3.1. Apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life**

The foundational apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life is continued even to this day. While keeping up with the conventional methods, the MSFS confreres have been finding new ways of reaching out to people to revive their faith. At the time of Fr Mermier, preaching parish missions was one of the best ways to bring about the renewal of Christian life. This method continues to occupy a prime place in our missionary endeavor. The Parish Mission Preaching (PMP) has been given much importance at the Congregational level in the recent years. Attempts have been made to develop modules and versions of parish mission preaching according to the contexts and geographical areas.

Besides the traditional method of preaching parish missions, the renewal of Christian life could be realized through many other means as well. In today's world, we can think of various other forms of renewing the faith of the people. The establishment of spiritual care centers in most of the Provinces is a sign of our commitment to the renewal of our people. Many confreres are engaged in the ministry of catechetical education and animation, counseling, spiritual direction, preaching retreats and recollections, and confessions, all of which contribute to people's renewal



of faith and life. Engaging in these ministries, these confreres become agents not only of spiritual renewal but also of the dissemination of Salesian spirituality.

There is a need to think about new ways of exercising this apostolate, especially in the context of many Catholic and Christian countries becoming overly secular and practice of faith becoming shallow or nearly non-existent. We need to think about how this apostolate can be extended to non-Catholics and non-Christians. Several of the ministries mentioned above can not only renew the faith of the people but also renew the lives of people and plant seeds of faith in those who are not Christians or Catholics. It is also important to think about how science and technology, especially the channels of media and communication, can be utilized for this apostolate. There is a need to provide skills and opportunities to our seminarians at all stages of formation to grow in love for the ministry of renewal of Christian life and parish mission preaching.

### **2.3.2. Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization**

Missions abroad primarily mean setting out to areas where people have not heard the gospel, where people are poor and live on the periphery, and where there is a need to establish local churches, local leadership, and continuity of the mission command of Jesus as St Paul and the apostles did. The pages of the history of our Congregation reveal that Fransalian missionaries must be ready to move on to new worlds, new cultures, and new languages. They are never settlers in their own land.

The legacy of our pioneering missionaries needs to continue in our Congregation. They lived with mission consciousness and zeal. They were zealous and enthusiastic to proclaim the Gospel and eager to plant the Church or Christian faith where it had not been planted. They had a spirit of adventure and missionary daring beyond the ordinary. Readiness for sacrifice, patience, tremendous faith in the providence of God, hard work, tenacity, and energy of positivity were some of their sterling missionary qualities. Their readiness to encounter adverse circumstances and deprivations of comforts is beyond question.

The history of our early missions in India is a story of martyrs and martyrdom. Some of our missionaries were very young and succumbed to harsh and inclement weather and diseases like cholera and malaria. Their life was the seed sown in yester years, but it has borne much fruit today. Adapting to customs and cultures of the people, they remained committed to authentic values in them with a view to promote what is humanizing in them and prophetically challenge what is dehumanizing.<sup>39</sup> They attracted local vocations and promoted young men to be missionaries like them. We have been undertaking many new mission territories for evangelization in the past few years. We have extended our services to the Church in all continents, especially in Africa, East Asia, and South America. There is a need to keep this missionary zeal and fervor going.

### **2.3.3. Apostolate of Education and Formation, especially of the Young**

Fr Mermier had very profound intuition into what education should be. The primary concern must be for the religious or spiritual formation of the students. Education is a work of love.

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<sup>39</sup> *Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales*, Art. 32-33.

Education is the education of the heart, forming integrated and harmonious personalities guided by Salesian spirituality. It is a quest for excellence to fully realize the image of God in every student and build human relationships. A spiritual tenor of integrated spirituality and Salesian atmosphere must be predominantly seen in our educational institutions. A Vision of Education as propounded by Fr Mermier through his concept of “Education of the heart” and the Salesian principles of pedagogy have to be studied, personalized, and lived by all those who are in this apostolate and shared with the non-MSFS partners in the field of education.

The Apostolate of the Education and Formation of the Young is a very vibrant and ever-growing apostolate in almost all the Provinces of the Congregation. The impact we make on the students, their families, the neighborhood, and the world at large through this apostolate is tremendous. This apostolate has been diversified through primary and secondary schools, colleges, evening colleges, tuition centers for poor children, adult literacy programs, skill development and technical education programs, etc. There is much more to do in many other sectors to ensure education for all.

The formation of the seminarians is another major component of this apostolate. Young men who desire to follow Christ as religious and priests need to be well introduced and initiated into the charism and apostolates of the Congregation. Recognizing our contributions in this area of seminary education and formation, the MSFS Congregation has been asked to take up the administration of major seminaries of the diocesan bishops in India. These are indications of our ability to provide solid spiritual and human formation to the future priests and religious.

Although the social and innovative ministries could be associated with the other two apostolates as well, they could also be seen as extensions of the apostolate of education and formation. The MSFS confreres are engaged in a wide variety of social and innovative ministries all over the world, educating and empowering people on a large scale. Most of the social apostolates undertaken by the Congregation can be considered as innovative non-formal ways of educating the people. Education for justice and rights, empowerment of women, and caring for the environment are the new forms of the educational outreach of the MSFS.

## **2.4. The Apostolates and the Associated Groups of People**

Although all the three apostolates could be applying to all categories of people in the world, each one of them could be seen as aimed at some specific groups of people.

### **2.4.1. Ministry to the Christian World**

The Apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life could be primarily seen as aimed at Christians, specifically, Catholics. Looking from the context of the French Revolution, this apostolate was aimed at all those who were already Christians but had grown weaker in their beliefs and practice of faith due to the negative influence of the revolution. Similarly, looking at our world today, especially the Christian and Catholic world, there is a great need to revive and renew the faith of those who are already Christians. Many of them are Christians only in name. Many countries claim themselves to be Christian countries, but the practice of faith is either shallow or non-

existent. There is a need to “re-evangelize” this Christian world, and hence this apostolate remains ever relevant.

#### **2.4.2. Ministry to the Non-Christian World**

The Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization could be seen as aimed at non-Christians or those who have not heard the gospel. The mission command of Jesus to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (Mk 16:15),” has always been a priority for the Church and the MSFS Congregation and it will be so in the years to come until this command is fully realized. Although the focus of this apostolate often leaned toward foreign missions or mission territories outside of one’s country, it should apply to any region or territory within or outside of one’s country where the gospel has not been preached. It is always good and appropriate to expand our missions to new countries and continents, but no one should mistake this apostolate as referring only to foreign missions. In a country like India, for example, although we talk about the Congregation making much progress in terms of missions and ministries, there are still many regions where the gospel has not been preached. That should continue to be our priority when we make our mission plans and strategies for the Congregation.

#### **2.4.3. Ministry to the World at Large**

The Apostolate of Education and Formation, especially of the Young could be seen as aimed at all people of all religions and regions, cultures and countries, and colors and communities. When it comes to education and formation, we don’t differentiate or discriminate. Everyone needs to be educated and formed. The apostolate specially uses the word, “especially” meaning that education and formation is meant for all, but within that apostolate, special attention is to be given to the young. From a Salesian or Fransalian perspective, education and formation of any individual is primarily to make him or her live as a child of God and as a brother or sister to others. In this, there is no difference between the young and the old, Christian or non-Christian, African or American, or any other denominators or descriptors. All are children of God, and all need to learn to live as children of God.

#### **2.5. Apostolates, Forums, and New Governance**

Although the foundational apostolates of the Congregation remain the same, the mode of evangelization and propagating the message of Jesus changes according to contexts and times. The needs, opportunities, and challenges of the Church and the Congregation today are not the same as those that existed when our Congregation was founded. Reading the signs of the times and responding to the needs of the world today, we have spread our wings to varied areas of ministry. These diversified ministries call for new mechanisms of governance for better functioning and administration. The “New MSFS Governance” was introduced in 2008 with this specific purpose of giving adequate and detailed attention to these new expressions of our apostolates. Accordingly, five Forums were introduced, and all the members of the Congregation were to be included in one or more of these Forums. The Forums are: Mission Forum, Education Forum, Formation Forum, Social and Innovative Ministries Forum, and Stewardship Forum. In the General or Provincial administration, under the leadership of the Superior General or

Provincial, each of the Councilors and Bursar is given the responsibility of animating these forums.

Although there are five forums under this structure of Governance, these forums come under the broad umbrella of our three foundational apostolates. The Mission Forum, for example, could come under the Apostolate of the Renewal of Christian Life. The Education Forum and the Formation Forum could be seen as two wings of the Apostolate of Education and Formation, especially of the Young. The Social and Innovative Ministries Forum could come under the Apostolate of Overseas and Pioneering Evangelization. The Stewardship Forum applies to all the three Apostolates. But in a broader sense, these Forums could come under more than one apostolate as well. For example, the Mission Forum could be seen as applying to all the three apostolates because renewing Christian life is a mission, education and formation of the young is a mission, and overseas and pioneering evangelization is also a mission. That speaks of the need and requirement of the General and Provincial Administrations and all the forums to work as a cohesive team rather than as silos or segments. The division of labor or grouping into different forums is for better functionality rather than for isolating from each other. While our ministries may be varied, our mission is one. Therefore, what we need to understand is that our Apostolates remain the same, but these apostolates take different shapes and expressions according to the needs, times, and contexts. These different expressions of our apostolates might again need a review and resetting after some years if such necessity arises.

### **3 Charism and Apostolates Versus Vision and Mission**

Another matter that catches the attention of many but remains unresolved is the difference between Charism and Apostolates on the one side and Vision and Mission on the other. This issue could be looked at from different perspectives. Charism and Apostolates are terms often used in the religious contexts, while Vision and Mission are used both in the religious and corporate sectors. Religious Congregations or Church-related organizations use the terms, Charism and Apostolates, to speak about who they are and what they are about. The particular charism and apostolates differentiate one Congregation from the other. But in a non-religious context, these terms are rarely used or seen. What they use are Vision and Mission. Many companies or organizations today run their businesses based on a unique vision and mission. They display these in prominent places so that everyone who walks into their premises or hears about them would know who they are and what they are about.

The religious Congregations and Church-related organizations sometimes use both sets of terminologies, and that often creates confusion. One way to solve this issue is to consider both sets of terms as one and the same. In other words, when we say Charism, we mean the Vision of our Founder. Both terms are interchangeable. Others may not use the word, Charism; they might use the word, Vision. Similarly, when we say Apostolates, we mean the original mission or ministries of our Congregation which is sharing in the Mission of Christ. Both terms are interchangeable. This is how they are organized and presented in our MSFS Constitutions. Chapter 1 of our Constitutions speaks of our Foundational Vision and Charism. Although two terms are used, they mean one and the same. Chapter 2 speaks of our Mission under which all the three apostolates are described. Again, Mission here refers to the three apostolates of our

Congregation. All the other subsequent chapters in the Constitutions are elaborations and descriptions of the different facets of our Charism and Apostolates or Vision and Mission.

But we could also say that both these sets of terminologies mean different things and we need to use them. For example, for us, our Charism and Apostolates are what identify us as MSFS and differentiate us from other Congregations. They apply to the whole Congregation, and we display them in all our communities and centers. But when it comes to our particular units or ministries, we might need to formulate a vision and mission that applies only to that unit or ministry to specify the uniqueness and ministry of that community. In some contexts, such as schools and colleges, it is mandatory to formulate and display the vision and mission. Such units or centers may display that in their particular center. That vision and mission may not be applicable to other units or ministries as they may have their own. In all these contexts, what needs to be ensured is that the vision and mission of a particular unit or ministry should be embedded in the Charism and Apostolate of the Congregation. When it comes to our Congregation as a whole, our Charism and Apostolates are primary. If we consider the Vision and Mission as applying to a particular unit or ministry, they should be adequately displayed in those centers as well. Hence if these two sets of terminologies are deemed to be meaning different things and necessary, both should be properly understood and appropriately displayed.

#### **4. MSFSness and the Congregational Character**

“MSFSness” is a term that was used in the XIX General Chapter of 2013. It refers to the quintessence of living the charism and apostolates of the MSFS Congregation. It sums up the entire character of our Congregation as lived by the MSFS down through the centuries. Everything that we have discussed above concerning our Charism and Apostolates pertains to what we call the MSFSness and the Congregational character.

#### **Conclusion**

In this Chapter, we have traced the historical and constitutional perspectives on the foundational charism and apostolates of the MSFS Congregation, and their relevance and implications for our life today. Living of the foundational charism in all its three dimensions and through our ministries linked with the three foundational apostolates by creative fidelity to the customs, traditions, and legacy of the Congregation, the MSFS exhibit a character unique to us, called MSFSness. These reflections on our life as the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales beckon every MSFS to be united in one heart, one experience, and one expression at the service of the Church and humanity.

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