

Fr. Peter-Mary MERMIER in His Context and Social Scenario [1790 – 1862]

XVIII - XIX century Environment :

This epoch sparked profound changes in social, economic and religious fields that radically transformed the geo-political scenario : feudal societies and erstwhile bourgeois-dominated nations became by liberal democracies, scientific and technological inventions gave rise to unprecedented confidence in man's ability - secularism replaced recourse to the sacred and religious practice.

Agricultural revolution gave way to industrial revolution ushered in economic prosperity for the few as opposed to the majority. These changes altered the living conditions and compromised the traditional life-style of entire populations of Europe. The market economy found an instant boost in the newly available avenues for trade opened up by colonialism.

The Catholic Church generally aligned with the erstwhile segments of power – monarchy, nobility and aristocracy – found itself isolated and at the receiving end. Atheistic socialism, anti-clerical uprisings against the Church, and plunder and destruction of ecclesiastical holdings and institutions (parishes and schools) were the order of the day.

Geo-Political Situation :

The French revolution broke into 1789 (one year before Fr MERMIER's birth). The starting point of the French Revolution was the convocation of the States General by Louis XVI. They comprised three orders, nobility, [clergy](#), and the third estate, the last named being permitted to have as many members as the two other orders together.

Within three years its consequences were felt in Savoy the native place of Fr. Mermier, who was born in 1790. Savoy, at the time was a Duchy under the Kingdom of Piemont-Sardinia, (with Torino as the capital, followed by Chambéry and Annecy in order of importance).

Although Savoy was an independent State, bordering France. the "Reign of Terror" was unleashed by the French on the neighbouring Savoy countryside. Churches were destroyed, parish schools forced to shut, members of the nobility, and clergy (religious men and women, priests), who refused to take the ambiguous *Oath of Allegiance to the Constitution* were suspected of being enemies of the Revolution and were sent to the guillotine, persecuted or exiled.

Besides attacking the faith of the Savoyards, the Calvinists in Geneva reviled their traditional monarchic and hierarchic allegiance (as against their Republican ideology) – focusing their attack on the nobility and clergy. The clergy of Annecy were distressed by the fact that "the population of Geneva, not only prided themselves on being anti-Catholic, but vigorously opposed their return to the Catholic Church; their interactions with Catholics was only to highlight their doctrinal errors, to ridicule the sacraments, the liturgy and rituals, and to exaggerate the decadence of the morality of the clergy.

Socio-economic Situation :

Mermier observed that emigration touched almost two thirds of the population (men and youth [already from the age of 10-14]). He bemoaned the fact that away from the protective family hearth and the healthy atmosphere of the rural mountains, the migrants in the anonymity of the town, imbibed the licentious morality and succumbed to religious indifference. He was distressed by the fact that the scandal was visibly propagated from persons exercising authority in the higher strata of society and the church : Husbands lording it over their wives, Heads of family over their children, the feudal lords over the serfs, masters over their servants, ... Poverty was in fact raising its ugly head in the agrarian dominated economy of Savoy, with the industrial cities of neighbouring France luring prospective migrants.

A case in point was the Calvinist dominated Swiss city of Geneva, bordering the villages of North of Savoy, that offered employment for unemployed peasants ready to take up difficult semi-skilled manual tasks as chimney sweepers, millers, etc. This phenomenon of migration made serious dents in family life that was the mainstay of socio-cultural and religious fabric of society.

Religious Context :

The priests had to make an oath (Constitution civile du clergé) ; those who refused were persecuted. In the diocese of Chambéry (including the Upper Savoy), 650 out of 750 priests, were led to exile; some of them were martyred. However, about sixty priest opted to live '*underground*' in the forests risking their lives to offer pastoral service to the people.

During the reign of terror, the "*underground priests*" were sheltered in the farm of the Mermiers', who risked their lives and property for the cause of the faith. It is in the cellar that little Mermier assisted at Holy Mass celebrated by these devoted priests, learnt the rudiments of Catechism and of the 3 Rs from his valiant mother, who besides her three children taught the children of the neighbourhood.

When normalcy returned in 1801, the Savoy countryside offered a pitiable spectacle, most of the churches were destroyed, presbyteries ransacked and abandoned, parish schools were abandoned (the State had not yet set up education services), there were hardly any priests, ...

The youth and young adults born during and after the French Revolution had no practice of church attendance, lacked catechism and religious instruction, had no access to the sacraments because of the scarcity of priests; they were bereft of parental guidance and the formative influence of male adults (who were absent, for long periods of time from the home and village as they were engaged abroad as migrant labour), and subjected to bad example of these on their return to their homes from their urban environment and *alien culture*. The women and children were the victims. What is worse is that the impression created was that catechism was only for children; and that church attendance was only for women folk.

During his visit to the parishes Mermier observed that the Jansenist doctrines served less to project the *narrow door* of the Gospel, but more to project Catholicism as an oppressive religion, a morality that is meaninglessly rigorous and the sacraments least accessible to the faithful.

Furthermore, the tenets and practices of Jansenism¹ & Gallicanism² continued unabated in the formation of priests. Even in 1815 the Chambéry Seminary used textbooks of Jansenist authors COTTET, BAILLY.

The Parish priest did his best either personally or by inviting priest to preach missions – to no tangible effect since these approaches were not coordinated nor focused.

Ecclesiastical Scenario :

Over the centuries the Catholic Church presented itself as a *homogeneous community* of faith and morals, despite linguistic and cultural diversity and barriers of class and social structures. Peer pressure and insularity characteristic of small communities had the effect of keeping virtually everyone within the overall sphere of the Church's influence.

The Church was an accepted part of the establishment, consorting with the European political elite while also providing spiritual comfort to the masses. And like other pillars of society such as the military and government, those who had been born into privilege dominated the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, to the neglect of the well-being of the lowly 'country' parish priests and their poor village folk.

Religious practice in nineteenth century Europe evolved into a multifaceted reality influenced by factors such as geographic identity, class affinity, and even gender bias that eroded its pristine uniformity ensured by conformity to the dictates of the Roman Papacy.

The twin forces of **industrialization and urbanization** that permeated the socio-economic fabric of European society had serious consequences on the traditional political, cultural and even ecclesiastical framework of the Holy Roman Empire, that was by now seriously disintegrating. The traditional feudal socio-cultural elite (the feudal lords who dominated the serfs) had now to give way to the new dominant urban elite of the Merchants and Industrial entrepreneurs (urban *bourgeoisie*). It was imperative that the Church *redefine its role* in communities of faith where families were increasingly split because of urban migration that attracted the men-folk and youth to the fast developing manufacturing centres leaving behind their women and children in the villages.

The CHILD - His home and upbringing :

Peter Mary MERMIER was born on 28th. August 1790 at Vouvray, in the parish of Chaumont belonging to the district of Frangy, Savoy.

His Parents : The parents of Fr. Mermier, because of their land-owning and lineage enjoyed a high social-standing in the area. Peter Mary was one of two sons (his sibling was Louis). From his father he inherited the qualities of a peasant, namely, good sense, practical mind, prudent audacity, tenacious and calm perseverance.

His Mother, Antoinette BASTIAN, was born into a family blessed with an ancestry of eminent lawyers and illustrious clerics, was brought up in the Boarding of the Visitation Monastery of Annecy, where she received an excellent Salesian education.

Already in 1793 the 'Reign of Terror' unleashed on Savoy by the protagonists of the French Revolution. The infant eyes of Peter Mary, barely four years of age, witnessed the demolition of the Church, the village presbytery deserted and the belfry destroyed. His ears heard the dreadful accounts of whispered by people huddled in his house whispers about persecution, imprisonment and exile of priests. These nightmares registered in his infancy could be gradually calmed only by the tenderness of his mother.

QUOTES : "I repent for not having written anything about my mother. My God, how much I owe her. No, no, she was not an ordinary woman". And again : "I owe my *vocation* to the holiness of my mother."

THE MERMIER 'HOME'

God had the first place in the Mermier-home. Far from succumbing to the trials and misfortunes of the time, Mermier's God-fearing and resolute parents provided shelter in their home for the priest being tracked down because of their loyalty to the Church, by the revolutionaries. On Sundays, when these priests celebrated Holy Mass in the cellar, the child Mermier was always, in admiration, beside his mother.

The home also served as a classroom for the children of the neighbourhood that had their school shut down after the French invasion.

With the restoration of peace in Savoy in 1800, the clergy resumed their Ministry, to the best of their ability and with meager resources, in the parishes and schools.

Spiritual and Secular Education : [1801 – 1809]

Thus, after his initial schooling under his mother in the company of children of the neighbourhood, Peter Mermier was able to continue his formal education, initially at the presbyterial college of Villy-le-Bouveret (1801) and then at the college of Sallanches housed at the capuchin convent (1802) that was subsequently shifted to the Carthusian monastery Melan.

Although his father's desire was that his son continue the family tradition as an industrious peasant, his mother had other plans for him. Divine Providence prevailed ! She was able to win over her husband.

QUOTE : "Sallanches and Melan were the first witnesses and the first admirers of the tender piety and the recollected penitential life of Fr. Mermier. His fellow-students were unanimous in representing him to us as having been a model of virtue." ... adding "In him was found none of those talents which compel admiration, placing those in possession of it high above their rivals. But he had an upright spirit and a sound judgement. He was also studious, reflective, attentive to the lessons of his teachers, he was a good student who did well in class." (Fr. Gaidon, in Jean Rey, p. 9)

Seminary Studies and Ecclesiastical Formation : [1809 – 1813]

His studies, the example and guidance of his mother and teachers – priests and professors – led him to the seminary where he was ordained priest in 1813.

After the death of his mother in February 1819, he felt strongly attracted towards a more complete detachment. He therefore sought to become a Jesuit. His spiritual director, **Fr. Godinot** told him : "To accept or refuse the candidates who present themselves is my obligation, but to decide for them when they themselves have not resolved is what I am not able to do"

God can call us not only to one state, but to various functions within that state. I think that without having indications of God's will we cannot go away from one path and throw ourselves into another perilous and unknown one. For your project, a simple desire is not a sufficient manifestation of the will of God" ... "I commend your good resolution ... but ;if Providence does not show you clearly that you should go elsewhere, I think you are where you ought to be" = counsel of **Fr. Desjacques**.

THE PASTOR - His Ministry and flock :

Assistant Parish Priest, at Magland : (1813 – 1816)

Reveled in catechism classes during the day and 'indefatigable worker' who devoted much of the night to person theological study.

Professor and Warden (1816 – 1819) :

Professor at the college of Melan, he was also Prefect of Discipline and Warden (and part-time assistant, during week-ends at Samoens). Among his students were Francis JACCARD (who suffered martyrdom in China) and Polycarp VOISIN (who served for forty years in Paris, as Procurator for the Missions, after serving as missionary in China for ten years).

Parish Priest of Chatelard (1819 – 1822) :

While accepting the appointment, Fr. Mermier did not consent to his *installation* as he did not want to *settle down* in a parish. Yet he set to work with ardour to counter the 'spirit of ignorance, licentiousness and corruption' that was rampant among the parishioners in the aftermath of the French Revolution. This was a serious problem that preoccupies Fr. Mermier ...

It is at this stage that he encountered Fr. *Joseph Marie FAVRE*, a renowned preacher and true fellow pastor of the diocese. This encounter was to change the course of his life.

He seeks the assistance of Fr. Josph-Marie FAVRE, The two were convinced of the fact : that religious ignorance and indifference in matters of religion were responsible for the decadence of Catholicism in their revered homeland. The conclusion of their exchanges is that the pastoral mission is the indispensable means of announcing the Word of God to those who have never heard it or those who have not sufficiently grasped it. This is the only means of evangelisation, as we would call it today.

In 1821, along with Fr. J-M Favre he undertook the parish mission : 'praying, preaching and inviting the people to attend the spiritual exercises'. The expected change did not take place. Rather than give up, the two, then and there set out to pray for and do penance at the Carthusian Monastery. Realizing that the reason for the absence of the duo was because of their indifference, the parishioners "clamoured for their return" to continue the mission, which bore abundant fruit.

Fr. Mermier devoted his time to preaching missions in the different parishes of the diocese.

For Fr. Favre, mission preaching would only be effective if the priest had the necessary training. Accordingly, the process must begin with the reform of the Minor and Major Seminary. In his ministry, he was quite successful but failed to get collaborators. He was considered impetuous, lacking leadership skills. Although he was able to motivate many priests to conduct missions in the parishes in the dioceses of Chambéry, Moutiers, St-Jean de Maurienne), he was impatient and not prepared to delay (as required by the bishop) the constitution of a team of preachers. For him the existing religious congregations did not respond to the needs of the times. Accordingly, he drew

up Constitutions for a new “Congregation of the Oblates of SFS – for which he hoped to recruit members from all the dioceses of Savoy and the neighbouring countries. This was not to be.

He parted ways with Mermier, who focused initially on the diocese of Annecy and patiently abided by the directives of the Bishop. Their friendship, however continued. He offered pertinent critical advice (cf. p.38-41). [The MSFS archives has 43 letters addressed by him to Mermier between 1823 and 1831; the latter's replies to him unfortunately have disappeared]

Spiritual Director of Seminarians (1822-) :

In 1822, with the restoration of the diocese of Annecy, (two ‘missioners’ had to part way) Fr. Mermier was appointed spiritual director of the Major Seminary in Annecy, and, Fr. Favre, was relieved of his teaching assignment at the college and was appointed full-time mission preacher in the diocese of Chambéry. But this restricted avenue of mission preaching satisfied neither the *zeal* of Fr. Mermier nor the *ardour* of Fr. Favre. Both, in their own way, relentlessly pursued their apostolate.

He applied himself, besides preaching missions, to preparing for his seminarists a Rule of Life, Meditation points, Recollection and Retreat notes.

MISSION PREACHER :

The experience gained as Pastor in Chatelard impressed on Fr. Mermier that for lasting effect, the parish missions need to have a multi-pronged approach : catechism of the children, focus on the youth, faith formation of the adults that take the form of family visits, counseling and redressal of grievances, ... For this Sunday sermons were not enough, what was necessary was necessary was the concerted and sustained effort of a band of missioners.

For this there is need to organize the exercises of the Mission (sermons, devotions, ritual, etc) according a well-prepared corpus that would respond to the successive stages of conversion of the faithful (reflection, meditation, examination of conscience, reconciliation. The mission should surpass the boundaries of individual parishes.

He set to work towards realizing this **vision**. This was not to happen in a hurry.

THE MISSIONARY :

Fr. Mermier was truly Missionary – a man on Mission, precisely because he was a man of faith, filled with the spirit of humility, abandonment to God and serenity - three traits of the salesian spirituality, that he imbibed, lived and assiduously put into practice. This is what permeated his missionary endeavours. In order to pursue our

mission in the world today, every MSFS needs to imbibe this *Mermierian heritage*. [Fr. Emile MAYORAZ, Superior General, 1977-2001)

Cf. Mermier Document "*Utility of a body of missionaries in the diocese of Annecy in Savoy*" : "You see the problem, but where can you find the remedy ? In religion, not anywhere else... There is no salvation anywhere else. There, certainly, lies the supreme remedy. The Word of God <My words will never pass>, <Behold, I am with you...> it can never fail. The remedy lies in the proclamation of this Promise. This constitutes the missionary mandate." [adapted from IVO tr. of Duval]

On the **3rd July**, the Superior writes a **circular letter** to his missionaries in India wherein he speaks to them about the experiences and the findings of his missionaries in Savoy : "Our European societies have reached the extreme limits of errors, of follies, of perversities of all kinds, they have made a full circle in their wanderings, there is no salvation for them except in a prompt and sincere return to the truth: "I will rise up and go back to my father." Poor prodigal son! ... "This then is our mission: it is sublime, it has to be spread abroad and it is difficult. You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth. This mission should be our main preoccupation, every moment of our lives, just as it should take a complete possession of ourselves." In Fr. Mermier's perspective, a missionary is one who announces the Word of God to people who to those who having heard it have practically forgotten all about it, or those who have never heard it before. [cf. IVO tr. of Duval]

The FOUNDER of MSFS (and SCC) :

Intervention of Divine Providence : Mgr. Joseph REY, formator of Fr. Mermier during his Seminary days succeeded Bishop Thiolaz in 1832 as Bishop of Annecy. By now the band of missionaries – diocesan priests from various parishes, now 10 in number – were regularly conducting parish missions. The bishop however, took his time to discern the need of the times for appropriate pastoral ministry. Most of the missionaries, discouraged by the tardiness of the Bishop, chose to abandon the project; some were undecided.. Only Fr. Philippe Gaidon took up the *clarion call* of Fr. Mermier : **I want the missions.**

The crisis that occurred early October 1832, dissipated shortly thereafter, with Frs. Cheminal and Petitjan joining the Missioners at the behest of Bishop Rey. Reading the signs offered by Divine Providence to transform his "band of missionaries" into a Missionary Congregation, Fr. Mermier requested permission to shift residence so as to live as a "*community*" under a *Rule of Life* focused on the "*mission*" of the Church under the guidance of the Bishop.

Providence led the community to La Roche-sur-Foron – sanctified and evangelized in his time by St. Francis de Sales, revered Patron Saint of Savoy. It is here that the missionaries lived as a community : with an established time-table for prayer, meals, recreation and manual work and rest; preparing for the mission preaching, evaluating each exercise on their return. Fr. Mermier sought to draw up the Constitutions from the Congregations (Lazarists founded by SVP, the Spiritual Directory of the Visitation) already approved by Rome, which had a Salesian flavour.

It now remained to transplant the potential Congregation from La Roche to La Feuillette, Annecy. The process was facilitated by the offer of a plot called La Feuillette adjoining the Seminary and the Little Visitation. With the bishop's approval and financial support of his clergy, Fr. Martin executed the planning and construction of the building. At the solemn inauguration on 8th. August 1837 the Bishop declared in the presence of 240 of his priests : "Venerable and dear Pastors, here are the powerful helpers heaven has prepared for us. They belong to you unreservedly; at your call, they will fly to your help." He expressed his desire to be buried in the chapel of La feuillette.

Fr. Mermier and the community of 12 members moved in on 20 August 1837.

On 24 September 1838 they pronounced the Vow of Stability. The Bishop addressed them thus : "Up to now you were just a team; from now on, your Rules will direct you and protect you from all types of discord. Here, in three maxims you will find your duty : *Study* St. Francis de Sales, *imitate* his virtues and *form* your method of direction on his, filled with kindness towards poor sinners. You will find this

method in his letters; you will see the riches of his heart in his Treatise on the Love of God. ... Usually we speak of his gentleness ... His gentleness seems to have been only a manner of exercising his zeal. This was his characteristic. I recommend to you his *science* as much as his *virtue*. We can be zealous even without knowledge, but it is not the type of zeal which brings about a solid and lasting good." (p. 47)

At the request of Mgr. Rey, King Charles Albert, on 29 September 1938, signed the letters patent giving civil status to the new Institute being formed in his territory. On 24 October 1838 the Bishop signed the order granting canonical approval for the establishment of the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales.

It was not by chance that the Congregation was placed under the patronage of Saint Francis de Sales, whose was still fresh in the mind of the people, and who continued to be loved and venerated throughout his native Savoy. Indeed, revered as the Apostle of the Chablais, Master of true Devotion, and benevolent Pastor, St. Francis de Sales was truly the Gem of Savoy. This popular acclaim and Fr. Mermier's personal attachment to a former Bishop of his diocese impels him to choose the Saint as the patron of the Congregation he was inspired to found.

He expressed these sentiments thus "The name of the amiable St. Francis de Sales is most renowned ... and universally held in honour that all (humanists and perhaps also, many among the Protestants) will be happy to learn that a Congregation under the title, "the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales," is coming into existence in Savoy. because this undertaking, offers tribute and pays homage to the virtue of a man who was the greatest friend of his people and most responsive to their distress." (Memoir of 1939, title VIII, p. 27) And he was persistently kept praying : "May the members of our Congregation obtain from the perfect model, the Holy Apostle of the Chablais, a little of that zeal and gentleness which will make us die to ourselves in order to live only for God and for the welfare of the people, like other St. Francis de Sales." [Circular to confrères in India, 17-04-1852]

In 1836, Bishop Pierre-Joseph REY, of the diocese of Annecy, gives a provisional approbation to the Constitutions of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales. He would confirm the canonical approbation only after the King of Sardinia (Sardaigne) signed the decree granting a juridical status to the young Congregation. The royal document bearing this decree arrives at Annecy on the 5th October 1838. Mgr. Rey hastens to La Feuillette, residence of the Missionaries. In order to emphasise the importance he gives to this event, the Bishop takes with him the Reverend Carlin, provost and canon of the Cathedral Chapter and Knight of St- Maurice and St. Lazarus, Poncet archdeacon and canon of the Cathedral, Sallavaud, canon and chancellor, Buttet, canon and vicar of the Church of Our Lady of Annecy and Poncet, secretary to the bishop.

"I shall speak to you about your duties in three words: Study Saint Francis de Sales, imitate his virtues, build-up your method of direction upon his, be full of kindness towards sinners. You will find this method in his letters You will find the riches of his heart in his Treatise on the Love of God, sublime theology, admirable fabric of comparisons to throw a beam of light on truth and make it penetrate in the most hardened heart. Read these pages burning with the most ardent charity.

People generally speak of the gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales; and they are right. But according to me it does not bring out fully his characteristic trait. His gentleness appears to me to be but a means of exercising his ZEAL. His characteristic trait is zeal.

The Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales [MSFS] received the first official approbation from the Holy See in 1843.

You are right to take as your motto "**To God alone be honour and glory**" (**Soli Deo honor et gloria**) Along with gentleness have a strong zeal against vice.

I recommend to you as much knowledge as virtue. You can have zeal without knowledge, but such zeal without virtue is incapable of producing good fruit that will last".

MSFS and education : In their reflections on the religious situation, Frs. Favre and Mermier often speak about the formation of the clergy. Favre is strong in his critique of the formation imparted in the seminaries. The two friends are convinced that formation has to be revamped at

every stage and that it is absolutely incumbent to train the teachers. Very gradually the idea takes shape to found a congregation which would be called "Oblates of Saint Francis". Either Fr. Favre or Fr. Mermier drew up a Rule for these Oblates. This Congregation never saw the light of day, but this is the Rule that remained clear and firm in the mind of the founders and was what Fr. Mermier intended to achieve.

In 1838, the number of the members of the Congregation is grossly inadequate: provisionally all the efforts are concentrated on the parish missions; and in order to bring this work to perfection, appeals are made to local priests in the parishes for assistance. Moreover from 1845 onwards, a great part of the Congregation, more than half, is found in India.

10 SCHOOLS : In 1847, however, the College of Evian is facing a precarious financial situation. Fr. Lamouille, Principal of the College, makes an appeal to Fr. Mermier, but the latter hesitates before giving any positive answer. It is only in 1856 that he finally decides to take up the charge of the institution. In the same period, due to bad administration, the College of Melun is also doomed to close down. The Missionaries take charge of it in the academic year of 1857.

FATHER MERMIER reminds his missionaries-teachers that they should love and be extremely faithful in the observance of their religious Rule. They too are disciples of Saint Francis de Sales, and thus should have a fatherly attitude, full of love, peace and gentleness. He insists on the necessity of strict supervision which is nothing but a loving attention shown to the children throughout the day. Such a method demands a total commitment from the masters who should never lose sight of the children, but stay close to them constantly. Be careful, then, says Fr. Mermier, of frequent absences, whether they be for walks, dinners, preaching, confessions, and so on.

Once the Mission of Vizagapatam was founded in 1846, Fr. Mermier showed a special interest in founding, establishing and developing a number of schools in the mission territories.