

## Fr. Mermier in His his own Context

### THE SETTING

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. Most of the 750 priests were exiled; only about 60 hid themselves 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.

### PASTORAL ABERRATIONS

The tenets and practices of Jansenism & Gallicanism continued unabated in the formation of priests. Even in 1815 the Chambéry Seminary used textbooks of Jansenist authors COTTET, BAILLY.

EXAMPLES : I have in my parish people who do not commit a single *mortal* sin during the year; yet I prefer to keep the eucharist confined to the tabernacle rather than distribute communion, before chastising the faithful. ... I would rather allow a penitent to die without (the viaticum) communion, rather than take the risk of offering it to a known sinner. For the same reason some parish priests forbid the youth from approaching the Eucharist more than once a year.

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. Accordingly, he sought solace (besides SFS) in the encouraging doctrine of Alphonsus Ligouri, the saintly theologian of his times

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS AND ABUSES

Annecy was in the neighbourhood of the city of Geneva, erstwhile metropolis of Savoy. The reformation under the influence of Calvin made Geneva the, Rome of the Protestants; Geneva also enjoyed a strategic geo-political location in Europe with a flourishing trade connections that attracted the rural populations (for business and employment opportunities).

During his time 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, ...

Besides attacking the faith of the Savoyards, the Calvinists in Geneva reviled their monarchic 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.

The youth and young adults born during and after the French Revolution, for dearth of priests had no practice of church attendance, lacked catechism and religious instruction, had no access to the sacraments, were bereft of parental guidance and transforming influence of adults (being 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 rural return from the urban *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.

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.

## BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

Peter Mary MERMIER was born in 1790, in Savoy, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when Christianity was abolished and the cult of Reason was instituted. Peter Mary MERMIER was a son of a peasant, who belonged to a land-owning family of good standing. From him he inherited the qualities of a peasant, namely, good sense, practical mind, prudent audacity, tenacious and calm perseverance. His Mother was born into a family blessed with an ancestry of eminent lawyers and illustrious clerics, was brought up in an institution of the Visitation.

Initial schooling under his mother in the company of children of the neighbourhood [till 1802] After the Treaty signed by Napoleon with the Pope in 1800, Peter Mermier was able to continue his schooling, 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. 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. “I owe my *vocation* to the holiness of my mother.”

From Pastor (1813 – 1816) : Assistant in the Parish of Magland. Reveled in catechism classes during the day and ‘indefatigable worker’ who devoted much of the night to person theological study.

To Professor (1816 – 1819) : at the college of Melan, and Prefect of Discipline (and part-time assistant 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).

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**.

Again Pastor (1819 – 1822) : Parish Priest of Chatelard. 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. It is here that he encountered Fr. *Joseph Marie FAVRE* that was to change the course of his life.

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.

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.

Fr. Mermier devoted his time to preaching missions in the different parishes of the diocese. This experienced impressed on him 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 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.

For this Sunday sermons were not enough, what was necessary was necessary was the concerted and sustained effort of a band of missioners. He set to work towards realizing this **vision**. This was not to happen in a hurry. He began by preparing for his seminarists a Rule of Life, Meditation points, Recollection and Retreat notes. With the permission of his Bishop, from 1825 he was able to gather around him some priests who would reside in the Major seminary and proceed to the parishes together for Mission preaching

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]

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 Gaiddon took up the *clarion call* of Fr. Mermier : **I want the missions.** The crisis that occurred early October 1832, dissipated shortly thereafter, with Frs. Cheminial 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 8<sup>th</sup>. August 1837.

At the inauguration, 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.

The birth and blossoming of an undertaking : MERMER – Founder of two Congregations