

FR. PETER MARY MERMIER [1790 – 1862]

Moulded and Groomed by the Holy Spirit; His Spiritual Foundations and Devotions

– Fr. Francis Poovellil msfs

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Dear Confreres, Wish you all a very happy 159th death anniversary of our dearest founder blessed Fr Peter Mermier, servant of God. Founders of religious congregations are charismatic people, prophets in the sense they are visionaries. They see things where others hardly see anything. Our founder Fr Mermier was a visionary who climbed his watch tower and viewed the church, the world, from God's view point. So he saw realities in a different way, that made him a different person.

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Today, on the occasion of the death anniversary of Fr Mermier, let us look into the aspect of Fr Mermier: moulded and groomed by the Spirit: His spiritual foundations and devotions.

Introduction

- God chooses and uses humans who show their willingness and generosity to work with God's plan and He endows them with His divine grace to fulfil His plan for humankind
- Examples are plenty in the Scriptures: Moses in the Exodus (Ex 3), Mary in the Salvation plan of God (Lk 1:28-38), the apostles, called and groomed by the Lord (Mk 3:13-19) and Paul (Acts 9:1-19) the persecutor of the Church becoming the promoter of the Church etc.
- Fr Peter Mermier, the founder of our Congregation of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales, was one of such human instruments in the hand of God who showed his willingness and generosity to work with God's plan in the nineteenth century so as to bring about renewal in the Church on the one hand and to build up the Church on the other wherever the light of faith hitherto did not reach.

1. Fr Mermier's Spiritual Foundations and Devotions

1.1. Mermier: A Man Rooted in Prayer

- Jesus called the twelve with a specific and commanding mandate, "To be with him and to be sent out" (Mk 3:14-15). After having called them to follow him, he kept them at his side and lived with them teaching them "through word and example" before sending them to all mankind.
- So to be with him is a necessary condition to be sent out for the work of the divine master. In order to be spiritually equipped, one is to spend time with the One who has called. Fr Mermier was a praying priest, spiritually rooted in his Divine Master.
- Moses spent forty days and nights on the mountain top alone with God while the people were waiting impatiently at the foot of the mountain for their leader to come down and lead them (Ex 24:12-18).
- Jesus established a close relationship between the ministry entrusted to the Apostles and his own mission. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21). Just as Jesus has a mission which proceeds to him directly from his Father and makes present the very authority of God (Cf. Mt 7:29; 21:23; Mk 1:27; Lk 24:19), so also the Apostles have a mission which comes to them from Jesus.
- Fr Mermier fully aware of his dependence on the One whose mission he was called to carry it out maintained a steady communion with Him. Being convinced of the importance of prayer in the life of missionaries, Fr Mermier exhorts his missionaries in India, "For each one of us, prayer is a need, a duty, a means of obtaining grace and all the graces proper to our vocation..."
- Fr Mermier continues, "The great means is prayer, continual prayer, the spirit of prayer, so did the Apostles, brought up in the school of Jesus Christ understood: 'We will dedicate ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word' (Acts 6:4)" (Peter Mermier, Circular to the Confreres of India, 17 April 1852).

1.2 Eucharist

- "The Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist".
- The Eucharist, as "Christ's saving presence in the community of the faithful and its spiritual food", is the priceless possession of the Church in her journey through the history (*Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, no. 9).
- As Eucharist is the centre of Christian life and Fr Mermier was totally involved in the renewal of the Christian faith in the parishes he knew well the importance of Eucharistic devotion in bringing together the Christians to the Church.
- So it is no wonder that his missions in the parishes were centred around the Eucharistic spirituality, namely, Eucharistic celebrations, forty hour Eucharistic adoration and Eucharistic procession. Every Mission he preached ended with a forty hour Eucharistic adoration and a Eucharistic procession.
- Peter Mermier grew up in an atmosphere of terror and persecution in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Even though public worship was forbidden Eucharist was celebrated frequently at the 'Mermier Farm'.
- Priests who refused to take the oath of loyalty to the Revolution went to hiding, continuing their ministry clandestinely. They often came at night to celebrate Mass in the Mermier farm.
- Thus he had the rare privilege of assisting in the Mass celebrated in his own house in his tender age. Later on, as he was advancing in years, his eye sight suffered much. By the second half of the year 1860 as a result of a serious stroke he had become fully blind.
- Unable to celebrate Mass, while accepting the cross willingly, he received daily holy Communion. "Always first for the Community spiritual exercises, he continued to get up

at 4 a.m. and attended two masses. Thus the spirituality of Fr Mermier was basically a Eucharist centred spirituality.

1.3 Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

- We know, The Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a special form of devotion to Jesus born out of the devotion to the Eucharist.
- The Eucharist came to be seen with an ever increasing clarity as the supreme gift of the Heart of Jesus.
- St Francis de Sales, the doctor of love, had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus who speaks of the Divine heart pierced by the sword by human hands (*The Treatise of the Love of God*, Book VI, Chapter 15).
- St Francis de Sales, who presented the heart as the symbol of love and therefore the heart of Jesus as the symbol of his great love for the humans, desired greatly the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus be known and therefore, popularized all over. Jordan Aumann, in his book treating the historical and doctrinal roots of devotion to the Heart of Jesus, writes,
- On January 29, 1868, St Margaret Mary testified in writing that St Francis de Sales made me understand very clearly the ardent desire he had that the Sacred Heart be known, loved and honoured in his whole Institute.' A few months later she wrote: "It is our holy Founder who desires and solicits that this devotion be introduced into his Institute because he knows its effects." The following year the Blessed Mother appeared to St Margaret Mary, accompanied by St Francis de Sales, Blessed Claude de Colombiere and the nuns of the Visitation. Each one was holding a heart and was accompanied by his or her guardian angel. "Look", said the Blessed Mother as she showed them the admirable Heart. "This precious treasure is particularly manifested to you by the tender love which my Son had for your Institute, which he regards and loves as his dear Benjamin. It is necessary that not only members of this Institute be enriched by this inexhaustible treasure, but that they abundantly distribute this precious wealth". (Jordan Aumann, et al., *Devotion to the Heart of Jesus*, p. 127).
- So it was only natural that Fr Mermier imbibing the Salesian spiritual heritage was not only a great devotee but equally a great promoter of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
- The Original Constitution of MSFS written by Fr Mermier asks its members to follow a true devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which expresses his mind and his core spirituality by an act of dedication on every first Friday of the Month either as an individual or as a community.
- He fervently asks every member of the Congregation, "They shall profess a special devotion towards the most Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ, source of all virtues and of all graces, to which they shall be careful to offer their good works, their prayers, their persons, and the inexhaustible riches of which they shall delight in celebrating". (Peter Mermier, *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales of Annecy*, no. 123, p. 55).
- In his advice to the Sister-in-charge of the Daughters of the Cross at Chaumont, among the spiritual exercises he proposed to his very daughters which are necessary for them in their spiritual journey he gives a prime place for daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Virgin... fervent and humble, to learn to know, to love and to serve Jesus and Mary at the foot of their altars. ., (Family Annals, p. 97).
- For him love for Jesus is expressed through the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

- Fr Mermier sharing the Mission news from India to Mother Claudine Echernier, mentions that the health of many of the Missionaries had been in a bad condition and so Mgr Neyret requested the whole Congregation to make one or more novenas to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in order that the Missionaries would be preserved from deadly sicknesses.
- So it is a clear indication of the culture of the Missionaries having a great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which they inherited from its founder.

1.4 Passion for Christ through the Devotion to the Cross

- The death of Christ was a fitting way for God to accomplish our salvation, because it gives a supreme example of love. "For no greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). "Because of Christ's passion and death", the humans, are "more moved to the love of God".
- The Redemption is totally carried out by the Son as the Anointed One, who came and acted in the power of the Holy Spirit, offering himself finally in sacrifice on the wood of the Cross. (John Paul II, *Dominum Et Vivificantem*, no. 24)
- Fr Mermier was particularly keen on the *via Crucis*, Way of the Cross. As a faithful follower of St Francis de Sales, Fr Mermier had the same intensity of devotion to the Cross as Francis de Sales had. Francis de Sales had a special devotion to the Holy Cross and to the Way of the Cross. He wrote a book under the title *The Standard of the Holy Cross*. Francis de Sales ended his 40 hours adoration in different centers in Chablais, during his crusade to recapture the region from the Calvinists, with a Eucharistic procession through the streets of the city and concluded it with the erection of a Grand Cross on the central square followed by veneration of the Cross by all the participants often led by the Duke on bended knee embracing and kissing the Cross. (E.J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, vol. I, p. 340).
- Fr Mermier too used to erect the Cross, going in procession in many parishes after he had prepared the people by a three-day retreat.
- His great devotion to the Cross of Christ which is also evident in his naming the second religious congregation he started for women. He had no second thought in naming the new religious institute in the name of the Holy Cross, The Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross.
- Devotion to the Cross was one of the main attractions of the parish renewal missions. Veneration to the Cross, conducting the Way of the Cross and erecting huge Cross in the prominent place of the township were some of the special attractions of the mission.
- In every mission, there were special sessions of talk on The Cross, passion of Christ etc.
- His advice to his niece, Sister Louise Mermier, "The interior sorrows are a beautiful cross which we should carry with resignation and even joy... When St Paul tells us that we should rejoice, he adds: *in the Lord*. True joy is not without thorns and without sacrifices."
- These writings are nothing but his attitude towards the Cross of Christ and how Fr Mermier looks at trials and difficulties of life as crosses given by the good Lord. They are in fact talents given by the Lord (Mt 25:14-30) from his bounty for our benefit.

1.5 Devotion to Mother of Compassion

- Mary is the compassionate mother of all mankind, gathering up everyone's sorrows and presenting them to her Son.
- Pope St John Paul II describes Our Lady's redemptive suffering with Jesus as "perhaps the deepest 'kenosis' of faith in human history". He says, "... At the foot of the Cross Mary shares through faith in the shocking mystery of this self-emptying. This is perhaps the deepest 'kenosis' of faith in human history. Through faith the Mother shares in the death of her Son, in his redeeming death..." (*Redemptoris Mater*, no. 18)

- As the founder of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and as a true spiritual son of St Francis de Sales, Fr Mermier had a great devotion to Our lady of Compassion.
- Among his many special devotions, devotion to Our Lady of Compassion takes a prime place. Because he believed in the new motherhood of Mary “generated by faith, is the fruit of the ‘new’ love” which reached its maturity in her “at the foot of the Cross, through her sharing in the redemptive love of her Son.” (*Redemptoris Mater*, no. 23).
- On 20th July 1835, Fr Mermier requested his Bishop Mgr Joseph Rey to obtain permission from Rome to bless the scapulars of Our Lady of Compassion (Sorrows).
- Fr Mermier’s instructions to the confreres at Notre Dame de la George on 19 April 1843 to conduct devotions in honour of Our Lady of Compassion on every Friday is another concrete example of his special devotion to Our Lady of Compassion.
- In the opinion of Fr Antony Mookenthottam (happy memories), probably on the same day, that is on 19 April 1843, on the day he gave instruction to the confreres to conduct devotions of Our Lady of Compassion, Fr Mermier gave instruction to conduct devotions in honour to Our Lady of Compassion on every Friday in the Mother House at Annecy and a Novena in preparation for the feast of Our Lady of Compassion. And the devotional practices were to be taken from the book *La Rocolta*. (Piere Mermier, *Cahiers Du P. Mermier*, vol. 4: Missions Et Retraites, 1839-1841).
- The mission preached in Abondance from 1 November 1840 gave special place and honour to the devotion to Our Lady of Compassion.
- His personal notes reveals vividly how devoted he was to the blessed Mother and how his devotion to the blessed mother changed him in his spiritual pursuit. He writes, “Mary taught me to be a different man-humbler, gentler, more mortified, more retiring, more religious, etc... I can say, in short, that the Blessed virgin practically forced me, and continues to force me, to be entirely hers.” (Peter Mermier, *Personal notes*, 1858-1860)
- The MSFS Constitution presented for all the members of the Congregation to practice and make it the very part of their persons, Fr Mermier asks them, “They shall Endeavour to honor and cause to be honored, with special devotion and pious homage, the most holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God, whose most tender heart was pierced by seven swords of sorrow, and who is truly the Mother of their Institute”. (Peter Mermier, *Constitutions*, no. 12, p. 55.)

Conclusion

- To conclude, Fr Mermier, our founder was indeed a chosen instrument of God to execute his plan of renewal of the Church in his time and in the present age. What made him pleasing to God is his profound spiritual insights and closeness to the Lord and our blessed mother.

In short, one can undoubtedly say, Fr Mermier professed what he believed and taught what he practiced. He was indeed a true disciple of St Francis de Sales, who built his house on a rock (Mt 7:24). Let us imbibe his missionary spirit of devotedness and commitment in life as missionaries of St Francis de Sales.