

FATHER PETER MERMIER
[28-8-1790 – 30-9-1862]
Founder OF THE MSFS and Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod
Jean REY, msfs 1960

1. The Growth of a Vocation :

Environment = Vovray, a village of peasants with some craftsmen and shop-keepers

Family : Father – Francois, landowner of good standing. His first biographer, Fr. Gaiddon tells us that his family cultivated a big farm on the slope of the Vuache, in the parish of Chaumont, in the district of Frangy. He adds : “Due to their wealth or due to their position, his parents were listed among the notable people of the locality”.

Mother – Antoinette Bastian, studied in the boarding of the Visitation Monastery, Annecy; where she received an excellent Salesian education where cordiality, good manners, true and lively devotion as well as all the qualities of spirit and heart were imparted..

“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.” [pg.3]

Childhood = witness to the “reign of Terror”, destruction of Churches, imprisonment of priests, “His infant eyes saw the closing of the Church and the School of Chaumont. The belfry pulled down, the bells destroyed and the presbytery deserted.

In the evenings, he heard his parents and the other people in the house speak in a whisper about the events which devastated the country, about the priests arrested and sent to prison and to penal servitude.

His memory registered all this and his soul was filled with fear which could be ‘*calmed only by the tenderness, lively faith and zeal of his mother for God and His Church*’. [p. 4]

His Home : The family home was a shelter for the priest who were hounded by the revolutionaries. Mrs. Mermier made her home a school for the neighbourhood where she herself taught academic subjects and catechism.

It is his mother who initiated in the child an orientation towards the priesthood. Later, he was to testify : “I owe my vocation to the holiness of my mother”. [p,6]

In 1800, religious persecution ended, the clergy was permitted to exercise their ministry and rebuild the churches. In 1801, Peter was enrolled in the parish college of Villy-le-Bouveret and the next year he joined the Capuchin college at their monastery in Sallanches, that had to be transferred to Melan; although his father would have preferred that his sons Peter and Louis, follow his profession as peasant. Yet gave in to the wishes of his mother who saw in Peter a budding priest.

His studies, the example and guidance of his mother and teachers – priests and professors – led him to the seminary, Fr. Guillet, Superior, and Fr. REY professor of the Major Seminar of Chambéry,) were priests that Peter admired. Fr. Rey preached retreat in preparation for his ordination Peter Mermier was ordained priest on 21 March 1813. “Thirty years later he wrote in his diary : ‘On 21st. September 1942m feast of St. Matthew, Apostle, I had the happiness and consolation of celebrating the Sacred Mysteries in the chapel of the major Seminary of Chambéry, at the spot where the precious remains of Fr. Guillet, my, former superior and director of the Seminary rests. It is there that God of all goodness had offered and granted me so many graces; it is there that he gave me such wise and good masters, and the most fervent and exemplary seminarists as friends”. [p. 11-12]

First appointment (for three years) was as curate at Magland, in 1813. The dispositions with which he came are contained in the Rule of Life he drew up for himself : "As much as it depends on me, I will have a room without tapestry without decoration. It will always be clean and very white. The Cross or Crucifix that I will have will not be gilt but of simple wood. However, I will seek to have one in which the face of Christ is expressive. I will have an earthenware holy water stoup, I will observe this same rule of simplicity and poverty with regard to some other necessary furniture : candle-stick, writing-desk, etc. In my room I will never have a mattress on my bed?. [p. 13]

Fr. DESJACQUES, the Parish Priest of this big Parish was an excellent and very zealous man, who, during the 'Reign of Terror, undertook risky assignments as 'agent of communication between the Vicars General and the faithful priests who exercised their ministry throughout the Diocese. [p.13] He found in Mermier a chosen auxiliary and treated him as a friend and son. As for Mermier, he found in his Parish Priest a prudent pastor who knew how to adapt piety and zeal to the concrete realities of life.

At the parish Mermier was 'an indefatigable worker'. After his work, he would spend part of his nights continuing his study theology and preparing his instructions. This led his Parish priest to jokingly admonish him I will not allow you to burn all the candles of the Presbytery.

In February 1816, he was appointed Professor (and later Prefect of discipline) at the College of Melan. He combined kindness with firmness; and offered the tenderness of a mother to the little ones. The firmness of his character permitted Fr. Mermier to substitute a good healthy familiarity which opens hearts and creates trust in the place of fear which keeps the child at a distance.

Testimony of a reputed doctor who attended on him during his last illness : "The care I take of my respectable patient is for me an act of gratitude; I acquit one part of my debt which I had contracted when I began my studies at Melan".

Affair *Polycarp VOISIN* – humble gesture of Mermier and effect on a missionary vocation to the MEP.

As for Mermier's desire for the Missions – herewith the advice of Fr. Desjacques : "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". And he counseled him to remain at his post while awaiting a "clear and more positive" manifestation of the will of God. ... "your students could go to India, and you could become the father of martyrs".

After the demise of his mother (23rd. February 1819) Peter felt strongly attracted towards a more complete detachment, and thought of becoming a Jesuit. Fr. Desjacques persisted : " I commend the good resolution that you have taken; but if Providence does not show you clearly that you should go elsewhere, I think you are where you ought to be". And later : "You will not go to the Jesuits before your soul more at peace hears the voice of God. Embrace the Crucifix and listen to it".

Direction was available on 13th. December 1819, when his bishop transferred him from Melan as Archpriest of Chatelard-en-Bauges – a task he accepted, but not the canonical installation. He would later note that Chatelard was a "terrible spot". Thus arose his quest to establish an Association of priests to foster "holy and true friendships", so that "by means of it, friends animate themselves, help and uphold the well-being of each other".

He zealously strove to promote the spiritual renewal of the parish; suggested and obtained the approval of the Parishioners for a Parish Mission to be preached along with Fr. Joseph Marie FAVRE. "The mission began on 18th. November 1821. Eight days had passed in praying, preaching and in inviting the people to come for the exercises; the expected change did not take place. Humiliated and grieved, the

parish priest and the missionary wondered whether they should continue or give up their preaching. 'Neither one nor the other,' said Fr. Favre, whose infallible resources in great difficulties was to do heaven violence by his austerities and prayers; 'let us set out, let us ask God for the conversion of your people.' And the two of them went on foot to the desert of Grande Chartreuse. Surprised at this sudden interruption, the inhabitants of Chatelard asked what had become of the parish priest and the missionary. 'They have gone to pray and fast for your conversion', replied those who were confidants of the secret. The point hit home. The entire parish much moved, clamoured for the return of these "two saints" and a few days later, the mission began again. It bore the most abundant fruits".

Since 1809, an imperial decree had forbidden the preaching of missions in Savoy; however, with the return of its Dukes to Savoy marked the resumption of the missions. Fr. Favre on 8th. August 1834 and in another letter writes to Fr. Mermier : "It is through you that God called me to the work of the missions. You are the first father and the prime mover of this work."

In 1822, with the erection of the diocese of Annecy, Frs. Favre and Mermier had to be separated : the former was given charge of the missions in Chambéry, and Mermier was appointed spiritual director of the Major Seminary of Annecy. Fr. Favre writes : "I am happy to see you at the head of the seminary. I think you will form the seminarists for the missions and in a few years' time you will come out of it with a band of missionaries in order to go and renovate the parishes. Assuredly, you will conduct the first missions of Anecy."

In 1825, Fr. Mermier undertook parish missions in the Church of St. Maurice at Annecy. Both Favre and Mermier desired to form a band of missionaries bound to one another by a rule and formed into a community approved by the Bishop; but Mermier thought of realizing this dream through joining a religious congregation already in existence. "No," said Favre, "to enter into a religious congregation would hardly be in keeping with God's plan. Today, it is a question of arousing the people and the clergy and that must be done by priests. Only (diocesan) priests can make other priests believe, the religious can make only the laity believe."

2. The achievement of a Foundation :

The first bishop of Annecy, Mgr. De THIOLLAZ was succeeded on 2nd. October 1832, by Bishop Joseph REY, who already as bishop of Pignerol desired Missionaries in his diocese; and so Mermier expected much support and encouragement from the new Bishop, in his project. Accordingly, along with Fr. Allard, Mermier exposed to him their plans and eagerly solicited the favour of constituting themselves into a regular congregation. When the Bishop sought time for reflection, the impatient Fr. Allard withdrew. This was a blow to Mermier and a source of discouragement to the other priests associated with the project (Frs. Revillod, Martina and Ducroz).

Only young Philippe Gaiddon remained, to whom Mermier addressed these words : "My friend, you are free, see for yourself what decision you have to take; if you leave me after 10 years of trial, I will remain all alone. But my resolution is unshakeable as also my desires. I want the Missions." Frs. Cheminal and Petitjean were the new associates of Mermier, encouraged to do so by Mgr. Rey. Later Mermier was to confide : "Although you see me so miserable and although Frs. Favre and Allard are much more talented and virtuous than I, I have been told that they will not succeed in forming a missionary body; this work is reserved for me."

Mermier was now both missionary and founder; as such he had to look for a residence to house the fledgling community of missionaries. Plans for moving to the promised (by Fr. Martin Ducrey) spacious monastery of Chartreuse at Melan fizzled out as it was given to the Jesuits; prompting Mermier to exclaim "They must increase and I must decrease). Providence welcomed the six missionaries in the spacious presbytery of La Roche-sur-Foron in 1834, where they resided for four years – as a community, sharing everything in common. Mermier sought to draw up the Constitution on the basis of the Rule of the Lazarists founded by SVP who himself was inspired by the Directory that SFS proposed for the sisters of the Visitation.

On 2nd. January 1836, a property between the Major Seminary of Annecy and the little Visitation was purchased and to Fr. Martin was entrusted the task of drawing up the plans for the residence. The laying of the foundation stone on 6th. April was attended by the canons of the Cathedral. The clergy of the town and of the Major Seminary and a crowd of faithful of Annecy. Mgr. Rey concluded his address : "This house will be the mysterious citadel of David where thousands shields will be hung for the defence of the children of faith for the destruction of the power of darkness and for consolidating the reign of Jesus Christ over a people whose Pastor I am". La Feuillet was blessed on 8th. August 1837, a day before the closing of the annual Clergy retreat whom Bishop Rey addressed : "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." Fr. Mermier took up residence there on 20th. August 1837; and immediately set up the Way of the Cross and enthroned Our Lady of Seven Dolours in a private Chapel prepared for her.

It is here, on 24th. Sept 1838 that Fr. Mermier, followed by his associates took the vow of stability that would protect them "against inconstancy natural to all men and even to religious men". "I am going first and whole heartedly," said Fr. Mermier, "to make the vow of perseverance, in the presence of the adorable Trinity, under the protection of the Holy Virgin and St. Francis de Sales." He then pronounced the formula of the vow, and continued enthusiastically : "I desired only one thing and I asked it of the Lord, that is to be able to live with brothers ! The object of my prayer has been to form an apostolic society and it has been realized today. I embrace in anticipation all those who will follow and make the vow that I myself have just made and which you are going to make after me."

The letters patent of King of Sardinia, Charles Albert, giving civil status to the new Institute in formation in his territory was signed in Turin on 29th. Sept. 1838, received in Annecy on 15th. October and announced by the Bishop on 21st. October and ratified by the Senate of Savoy; the Decree of Bishop Rey conferring canonical status to the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales of Annecy, was dated 24th. October 1838.

"Up to now you were just a team, but you were not guided. Charity has united you, but the smallest incident can break your unity. 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 the gentleness of St. Francis de Sales; it is true, but gentleness in my opinion is not enough to characterize him. 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".

On 24th. October 1840, Frs. Mermier, Martin, Cheminal, Petijean and Lavorel, made their perpetual profession in the presence of Mgr. Rey.

3. The Blossoming of an Undertaking :

"Great joys, great prosperity, are often closely related to great trials". Within a month, the founder of fledgling Congregation, was denounced, by an influential man close to the Bishop, as an extravagant and fanatical man. Rather than giving credence to this allegation, the Bishop was more than solicitous of the needs of Mermier and his confreres.

On 14th. Sept. 1836. on the anniversary of the arrival of SFS in the Chablais, the faithful gathered at the Chapel on the hill of Allinges; the Bishop announced his desire to bequeath to the MSFS this site, which Fr. Mermier's graciously accepted. The Bishop wrote him : "My heart beats with consolation knowing that you are at Allinges. That is your place and the important centre of your congregation. For all times, the MSFS will guard, care for, decorate and frequent this sanctuary on whose walls so many souvenirs have been written in ineffaceable characters".

In 1837, Fr. Mermier while preaching a retreat in Chavanod met Claudine Echernier; and providence led them to found a religious congregation for the poor, uneducated girls working as maids – who were neither called to married life, nor, could they enter the convents as they had no fortune to pay a dowry.

This project began to take shape during the course of a retreat he preached there in 1838. In May 1839 during the retreat he preached to the band of 10 ladies as novices, he confirmed that choice of superior, in Claudine Echernier. The skepticism about the success of this enterprise expressed by some of the local priests was countered by others with the remark : "It will succeed only because of the *humility* of the founders". On 4th. November 1841, Mgr. Joseph REY gave a letter of approbation by which he constituted the "Daughters of the Cross" as a religious association; approved the first draft of their constitutions and placed the new family under the direction of the Superior of the Missionaries of St. Francis de sales.

This is the spirit in which Fr. Mermier sought the approbation of the Holy See for the Congregation : "I acknowledge that I possess a mediocre intelligence and knowledge. I am without virtue and merit, yet it has pleased divine Wisdom and my superiors, to assign me to the Missions; although fully unworthy, I have thought of the Rules and Constitutions without which there can neither be order nor sanctification of the Missionaries, or a fruitful work". ... Mgr. RENDU, Bishop of Annecy, (Mgr. REY died on 31 January 1842) not only encouraged Fr. Mermier, by provided him with the finance for his trip and sojourn in Rome, where he arrive edd on 30th. September. In his words : "*The beginnings were terrible*". On 2nd. October, he was presented to Cardinal Franzoni, but as he had no friends, he was to encounter only closed doors. On 16th. October, when he met with Cardinal FERRETTI, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishop and Religious, even without examining his documents, was told not to expect approval for the Congregation since it had only one house. However his perseverance paid; and he could write on 5th. January 1843 : "I have the confidence that everything is going to turn out for the good of our little Congregation". The Decree of Commendation of the Congregation for Bishops and Religious was conferred on 2nd. June, which was duly confirmed by Pope Gregory XVI. He left Rome and returned to Annecy, (as SFS did in his time) via Loretto and Turin (where he sought, for the Daughters of the Cross, the letters patent of King Charles Albert of Sardinia

Mermier was not a man of *eloquence* but of *conviction*. His eloquence was the voice of the soul; he had no other eloquence but that of simplicity, lucidity and conviction that attracted a great number of listeners to his instructions.

In his personal notes he describes his study of the geography of Malta Brun (?) during the spare time he had in Rome : "Although this sort of work seems a little irrelevant to my ministry, apart from the knowledge it gives me, I make use of it to inflame my zeal towards so many unfortunate countries buried in darkness and ignorance, in misery and in sin. It has convinced me more than ever of the need to have missionaries who are filled with the spirit of God, who pray, who study, who mortify themselves, who love their brethren and also the women religious who love the Lord and his holy Cross".

Initially earmarked for the mission of Guinea, in Africa, the Congregation on 2nd. May 1845 was allotted the Mission of Visakhapatnam in India, requesting the Superior to send his missionaries there, without delay. In his addressed to the Missionaries, which they received in Bordeaux prior to their departure on 8th. June 1845, we read : "What joy, what consolation to set out together as a family ! Go, Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales in the peace of the Lord, in the hands of Mary, under the protection of the Guardian Angels ! Go, be happy on your journey. Fulfil your spiritual exercises well each day. Obey and meditate on your holy Rules. Do not forget us. The ties that unite us have no distances. Once more, blessed are you".