

PARISH – MISSION- PREACHING

RECAPTURING THE SPIRIT OF FR MERMIER, OUR FOUNDER

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

1: Following St Francis de Sales and his missionary zeal in the conversion of Chablais, Fr Mermier found parish-mission-preaching the best way to bring renewal of faith in the parishes of Savoy devastated by the secular and irreligious spirit that post French Revolution times brought, along with its positive gains for the society.

2: No doubt other religious like the Capuchins, the Jesuits and the Redemptorists worked successfully as groups of missionaries. Fr Mermier wanted to bring to parish-mission-preaching his own spirit, approach and method that reflected his rootedness in sound traditional parish-mission *preaching ministry as well as in salesian spirituality*.

3: There is another factor that has to be noted well. Fr Mermier did not want mere group of missionaries. Even before the foundation of the Congregation Fr Mermier was a member of missionaries who went about preaching missions. He wanted to found a *religious community that would be committed to the preaching of parish missions, besides other apostolates of missions abroad and education of the young*. Therefore, MSFS are not called merely to be teams of preachers, but a mission-preaching team the way the Founder and his early companions were

4: A mission preaching team, like our first **preaching mission team** of Fr Mermier is a blend of community living and apostolic engagement of faith renewal through parish missions. The parish missions are planned together, preached together, evaluated together and improved upon together. The dynamics of planning and executing a parish mission becomes a community way of carrying out the apostolate and giving witness to the values of religious life. The strength and credibility of the team is in their religious living for parish missions.

5: A parish mission preaching was as much a spiritual journey and renewal for the missionaries as it was for the people. In parish mission preaching, there is only one spiritual journey. It is the concomittant renewal of the missionaries as well as of the people that is the ultimate secret of the success and efficaciousness of the mission.

6: It is good for the modern generation of MSFS to understand the approach and methodology used by Fr Mermier and his team, and adapt the same to the situations of the times and ensure the continuity and effectivity of the parish missions as carried forth by Fr Mermier. This is one important way to return to the original sources of the Congregation to recapture the vibrancy and dynamism of parish-mission-preaching ministry of Fr Mermier. Our 19th General Chapter 2013 has instructed us to do so.

7: We will reflect on the parish-mission-preaching ministry of Fr Mermier and his team from the following perspectives:

(i)The preparation for the parish mission

(ii)The methodology and programme of the parish mission

(iii)The evaluation and feedback for ongoing renewal of the people by the parish priest.

PREPARATION

1: The band of missionaries lived as a community and prepared the input talks for the parish mission *by prayer, shared reflections, and jotting down of points*. They would share the same with others and fine-tune the points which then would be circulated to all the members of the group.

2 The *duration* of each parish mission varied from parish to parish. Accordingly, the group prepared a programme that *suited the parish and the time that was available to the group*.

3 The Programme for each parish mission for a particular parish was carefully worked out and made known to the group that went for the ministry to that parish, with indication of who would be the main animator of each programme. It is to be noted that *the entire team members would be present for all the programmes* even if they themselves were not animating a particular programme .

METHODOLOGY AND PROGRAMME OF THE PARISH MISSION PREACHING.

1: Visit to the families prior to the mission : There are records of a number of parish missions which Fr Mermier and his friends conducted in which they ensured a few days of their presence in the parish to go and visit each family *to gauge the spiritual climate* of the parish, the problems and difficulties that the people encountered, and *motivate the people to join the parish mission*. These visits produced marvellous results by way of increased attendance by the people, as well as in *focusing and re-adapting the prepared parish mission plan* to suit the needs of this particular parish. The personal rapport created by the parish team gave *confidence to the people to come for counselling and confessions* during the mission.

2: Motivating people to attend the Mission and creating a spirit of expectancy and eagerness and longing for parish-mission experience : The Mission is announced sufficiently in advance so that a yearning and waiting for this spiritual event is created in the parishioners. The eagerness and waiting is displayed *by the parishioners* welcoming the missionaries at the entrance of the village with fireworks and procession to the Church. In the Church, the missionaries are welcomed *by the parish priest*.

3: Programme is intense and dense to create the appropriate spiritual climate : There is intensity of exercises in the Programme, with a view to create a *spiritual climate* that will induce the people to respond to the grace of renewal and deepening of faith.

It may not be possible to replicate the density of programme today as it was at the time of Fr Mermier. But the message is that during parish mission, demands for prayer. *Reflection and spiritual exercises should be more than usual*.

3. Let people see you at prayer as a religious community that preaches to them the mission : The Missioners would be the first to arrive in the Church at 4.20 am. They said their office together and meditated in the Church.

4 They prepared for the Mission Preaching of the day by taking part in “The Comment” : After the morning Mass at 5.00 am there was a short morning exercise called the Comment. It consisted in :

- short morning prayer : with a meditation on one point of that prayer;
- examination of life based on the meditation and on the sermon of the main service.

5. Main Service (Morning)

- (i) The main service was in the morning at 8.00 am or 9.am.
- (ii) The service **began with a hymn** . The missionaries insisted on singing and singing by everyone so that communion hearts and the spiritual tenor of the group is sufficiently raised before the service proceeds further.
- (iii) There **was examination of conscience for 3 quarters of an hour** . It may be looked at as a way of having a good look at oneself and where one is. Today we would call it as self-assessment, evaluation, confronting oneself of the true situation of one's life so that one is filled with a deep sense of humility and need for God and for His grace. For Fr Mermier this exercise was important and so he had produced a detailed 45 pages note-book on how this exercise was to be conducted based on the commandments of God and of the Church
- (iv) There was the celebration of the Mass with singing
- (v) The **sermon of the mission preaching (teachings)** which lasted for 45 minutes. At the time of Fr. Mermier the talk or sermon was not integrated into the Mass, but it was outside the Mass. Today too, it may be advisable not to insert this long teaching aspect of the mission preaching in the Mass but could be kept separately for obvious reasons of sustaining the attention of the people both in the Eucharist and in the Mass. (The themes of the sermons for morning were worked out. *For further enlightenment , please see the end part of this document*)
- (vi) In the context of the times when **frequent communion** was not a custom, and in keeping with the spirit of SFS, our missionaries encouraged the participants in frequent communion. Today, we could adapt and encourage people to have devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and spend some time personally before the Blessed sacrament

6. Evening Service

- (i) It began either at 2.30 pm or 3.00 pm so that people could reach home before nightfall. Note: In organising the timings of the various programmes during the mission, the needs and situations of people should be considered.
- (ii) **Half –hour of catechism** . This input was necessitated on account of total ignorance of faith and of the sacraments by the people. Perhaps a pointed reminder to us in modern world that this input or component should be an essential part of parish mission preaching today
- (iii) **Visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or Visit to the Altar of our Lady or Visit to a saint's shrine**. This input was the continuation of catechesis through inspiration of spiritual icons like Mother Mary or the saint or the Eucharistic presence of the Lord himself. These visits were guided by the missionaries. Fr Mermier had composed a book on these "Visits"
- (iv) **Second Sermon (Teachings) lasted for one hour** (The topics on faith were carefully worked out. We have records of the sample topics that were taken up during this second sermon. *See the end part of this document*)
- (v) **Methodology used was not only oral preaching but also dialogue**. As very often people did not know to formulate the question, one of the missionaries would formulate the question and the preacher would answer in very simple and clear language. The missionaries loved this kind of dialogue. It was in fact a method that SFS used during the Chablais mission.

7. Special sermons for special groups of people were prepared and kept ready : for fathers of the families, mothers of the families, young men, young women, and children. In this way the mission reached out to all categories of people in the parish and so the entire parish experienced renewal.

8. Use of Ceremonies, Demonstrations and Devotions to get people involved and active in the spiritual journey.

(a) The ceremonies were popular educational method of presenting the truth in a striking and concrete way. They allowed people's participation, gestures, singing, invocations and litanies.

This method is a hint for us today where we can use so many innovative educational methods, street-play method, power point presentation, short drama and skits, etc to be in sync with this interest of Fr Mermier.

(b) Fr Mermier also **highlighted certain devotions in the parish mission preaching** like the Devotion to the Sacred Heart, Devotion to the Mother of Sorrows, the Devotion to the Passion of Christ through the Way of the Cross. Fr Mermier was very fond of the Devotion to the Mother of Sorrows as he believed that it was also the devotion of SFS.

9. Counselling, Confession and Reconciliation. To enable the people to make confession a sacrament of real reconciliation and new beginning, the missionaries encourage the penitents to come to the same missionary over a certain period of days. In this encounter, the missionary would counsel the penitent, encourage confidence and hope in the mercy of God and strengthen his determination to take measures that would help him to overcome his weakness. The absolution would be given only on the last of the meetings with the missionaries. A method that needs to be carefully examined and adapted to our times to ensure that confession does not become routine and mechanical but a significant, hope-filled, joyful and transformative experience of the mercies of God.

10. Revitalizing the confraternities of the Parish was another way of bringing renewal in the parish. In the days of Fr Mermier, confraternities of various kinds tried to keep up a committed fervour in different aspects of spiritual and charitable life of the parish. Lest they sink into stupor and externalities only, Fr Mermier tried to re-found them in the purposes for which they were founded. For us in modern times, there are so many other ways in which parishes are organised, like BCCs or parish councils, church leaders or elders etc. During parish mission preaching these organisations and their leaders could be separately spiritually strengthened.

11. The missionaries served as arbitrators of various disputes. But they very often they were unable to settle economic problems or social misfortunes when these were brought to their notice. This is an indicator to us today, that the parish mission preaching team can also serve as arbitrators of certain types of disputes which the Parish priest may refer to them.

12. Respect and centrality for the Word of God in parish mission preaching. The objective of preaching was catechesis rather than high flown eloquence. Solid doctrine was expressed in simple language that all could understand. This simplicity of presentation was arrived at by careful preparation and profound personal reflection. About Fr Mermier and simplicity of expression and profundity of reflection, it is said "He spoke with such faith, with such conviction that his listeners were bowled over."

13. A week of rest and disengagement from another immediate parish mission preaching Fr Mermier did not like taking up the ministry consecutively. There had to be a break for physical and spiritual rest, for stock-taking, for replenishing the spiritual energy, for evaluation, for critique of the sermons, for preparing for the next parish mission and to live a common life together.

14. Evaluation and critique of the sermons and parish mission. The group, after their work in one parish, would gather together in one place, where they would do the stock taking of the parish mission so as to steer clear of the same pitfalls in the next mission. Fr Mermier encouraged freedom in critical evaluation and he was his own best critic.

This is what he says about himself : “This instruction on devotion to our Lady, on such a lovely day, was fairly badly given as frequently happens to me on Mary’s feasts. For all that, I think the content was good, but..... a bit ponderous delivery, muddled, bemoaning the great difference between children and their mother. Practically nothing sublime, nothing loving, a trite conclusion.”

15. Parish Mission Preaching must be a witness of personal sanctity and a striving for personal integrity and to the spirit and spirituality of St Francis de Sales. This is what he wrote to Monsieur Gaidon, which sketches very well the portrait of a Missionary of St Francis de Sales engaged in parish-mission preaching ministry : *“Our ministry obliges us to show ourselves to the people, to society, as other Saints Francis de Sales, utterly unselfish, afire with zeal for the salvation of souls, filled with compassion at the sight of the evils which distress people - without bothering to waste our time in useless ranting – with lawful mission, blameless doctrine and, above all, a good life.”*

16. A lasting concern for the people whom the missionaries had ministered .

(i) The parish priests of the parishes where the missions were preached very often wrote to the missionaries appreciating their services and seeking their advice on how to sustain the fervour of the parishioners.

(ii) The missionaries, on their part, before parting from the parish, brought to the notice of the parish priests concerns and problems of the people which they had noticed and to which they could not give sufficient attention and which needed a long drawn-out attention and follow-up.

The missionaries never forgot the long term purpose of their mission : namely renewal of faith of the people. They would go to any length to be of service and be the servants of the Holy Spirit in its work of reviving and renewing his faithful .

CHOICE OF THEMES OF SERMONS OF THE MISSIONERS FOR THE PARISH MISSION PREACHING

1: It must be remembered that our Founder and the early missionaries were influenced by the theology of the time and therefore themes they chose were the themes which most preachers chose for mission preaching in those days.

2: It is important for those of us who wish to adapt the method and programme of Fr Mermier to be able to revisit the themes in the light of the theology that has developed after Vatican II. It is important to focus on themes that sum up the biblical understanding of love of God, love of neighbour, sin, conversion, all the sacraments especially the Sacrament of Baptism, reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist; devotion to the Mother of God; the salesian themes culled from the Introduction to Devout Life and the Love of God, and prepare a new set of themes and develop them to present them to the modern generation. This is a community-based task that is awaiting the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales so that the Congregation can have a module of a parish mission preaching according to the methodology of Fr Mermier and as adapted to our times.

For your ready reference, the following themes and activities as recorded in the notes of our missionaries are given below :

Morning Services

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| (i) Salvation and man’s end | (ii) Sin , a crime against God |
| (ii) Sin a crime against man | (iv) Punishment for sin |
| (v) Conference to the men | (iv) Death |

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| (vii) Particular judgement | (viii) Hell |
| (ix) The General Judgement | (x) Our Lady of Seven Sorrows |
| (xi) The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ | (xi) Mercy |
| (xii) Avoiding occasions of sin | |
| (xiii) The Blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ. General Communion | |
| (xiv) Imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ | |
| (xv) The two Standards | (xvi) Heaven |
| (xvii) Feast of Thanksgiving to our Lady | |
| (xviii) Blessing and erection of the Cross | |
| (xix) Souls in purgatory | (xx) Conference to youth. |

Evening Services

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| (i) Conversion and its nature | (ii) Conversion and its means |
| (iii) Conversion, its present opportunity | (iv) Prayer as means of conversion |
| (v) Examination of Conscience | (vi) Confession, divine institution |
| (vii) Conference for women | (viii) Sincere Confession |
| (ix) Advantages of Confession | (x) Contrition |
| (xi) Purpose of Amendment | (xii) Mary's powerful protection |
| (xiii) satisfaction | (xiv) Love of neighbour |
| (xv) Temptations | (xvi) Scandal |
| (xvii) Communion, dispositions for communion | |
| (xviii) The Kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ (Celebrations and Consecration) | |
| (xix) The Christian Dignity, Baptismal Dignity | (xx) Love of our Lord Jesus Christ |
| (xxi) Sufferings made holy | |
| (xxii) Rule of Life and sanctification of ordinary actions | |
| (xxiii) Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Consecration, Scapular. Perseverance | |
| (xxiv) On a suitable day – conference for youth. | |

(The above points and reflections are based on the material available in the book Monsieur Mermier by Adrien Duval, MSFS)

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