

# **THE JOURNEY OF THE SALESIAN MISSIONARIES OF MARY IMMACULATE WITH ST. FRANCIS DE SALES: PATRON AND FATHER (*SMMI*)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

St. Francis de Sales lived more than 400 years ago, but what he taught is still timely and practical for today's world. St. Francis is admired throughout the Church for his great sanctity, learning, missionary zeal, gentleness, and understanding of the human heart. Scholar, writer, pastor, spiritual guide for souls, diplomat, bishop, and Doctor of the Church, he is best described as a Christian Humanist, a potent spiritual force for creating a spirituality admirably suited to those in every walk of life. M. Basil Pennington rightly points out his experience of St. Francis de Sales: "The saints are not dead. They are very much alive in the Lord. When we are open to listen to their words, we do not read a text of someone who died centuries ago. We come to the knees of a father and friend who is as eager now to help an applicant as ever he was in life, and more capable. We listen and his words have life."

Salesian spirituality teaches us that spiritual progress comes slowly and, often, at great cost and one needs to be attentive to one's spiritual formation. At the same time, it also maintains that in turning our hearts to God and in doing God's will we find our greatest happiness and fulfilment. To establish love in hearts and to make it grow, will be the 'alpha' and 'omega' of all Francis de Sales' spiritual teaching. Francis de Sales invited thousands and even today he keeps inviting us to establish this same love in our hearts and to make it grow and flourish that the whole world will be ablaze with genuine love for God and neighbour.

The Spirituality of the *SMMI* is the Salesian Spirituality and it helps one to develop a deeper relationship with God through Jesus. It calls us to respond to our world and the people in a gentle and balanced way. We are challenged to live gently, first, with ourselves. The three persons: Fr. Henri Chaumont(Founder), Madame Carre de Malberg (Co-Foundress) and Mother Marie Gertrude (Pioneer and Foundress of the Missions), imbued with the Salesian Spirit, played important roles as the Founder and collaborators of the Salesian Societies and the *CMMI-SMMI* (Catechist Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate). They were deeply in touch with God, rooted in the Word of God, filled with the missionary zeal and enthusiasm like St. Francis de Sales, their model and patron, who tried to "LIVE JESUS" throughout his life.

All three of them lived approximately about the same time in France, Paris between the years of 1829 to 1905. It is a providential preparation that all the three were in contact with the life and teachings of St. Francis de Sales before they came together as the Founding members of the Salesian Societies. They were imbued by the love of God, holiness and the mission lived by St. Francis de Sales after the example of Jesus. They wanted to imitate Jesus as lived by St. Francis de Sales. The holy and zealous missionary life of St. Francis de Sales and his writings helped them

to be filled with the spirit of St. Francis de Sales. The Daughters of St. Francis de Sales' Association was founded in the 1872.

## **1. CATECHIST MISSIONARIES OF MARY IMMACULATE (*CMMI/SMMI*)**

As a reader of the missionary review of the time Fr. Chaumont was deeply struck by the condition of women in mission countries. He always thought of sending the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales as missionaries to far away countries. The pioneer members also had this great desire. Fr. Chaumont requested the members of the Society to begin to pray for the missions. They began a league of prayer called the Association of Mary Immaculate. In 1884 the Council unanimously voted in favour of founding a group from the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales, named Catechist Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (*CMMI*) and on 8 December 1885 the Foundation took place. The desiring or selected members for the mission were given special formation and training. In the year 1888 the third story of their centre in Paris became known as the "Quartier" or quarters which were reserved for the DSFS who were preparing to leave for the missions. Being more and more convinced that only a woman can easily approach another woman, Fr. Chaumont wanted to send his Catechists as a small legion called to go to the missions. He gave them friendship as an apostolic method, asking them to make themselves the devoted friends of other women whom they were going to serve, in order to reveal to them their own dignity and the salvation brought by Jesus, meek and humble of heart.

In 1889 Fr. Tissot, the superior General of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, also the spiritual director of Fr. Chaumont, speaking in the name of Bishop Ricaz of Nagpur asked for the *CMMI* for Nagpur missions. After having studied the question exhaustively, the General Council on May 3<sup>rd</sup> voted to send Mother Marie Gertrude along with Sr. Marie De Kostka, Sr. Madeline du Saint Sacrament and Sr. Joseph de la Visitation to India, Nagpur and Marie Gertrude was entrusted with the responsibility of the Foundation.

Fr. Chaumont aware of the missionary demands on the Sisters gave them firm formation which imprinted on them indelible Salesian Characteristics which Mother Marie Gertrude and her companions would later on develop and impart to those coming to help them thus setting the basis of the Salesian and Apostolic action. While preparing them he told: "Your formation is twofold: interior and exterior. The interior formation is that of a Daughter of St. Francis de Sales carried to a higher degree. Perfection must be the hallmark of your life. Recollection, Punctuality and energy should become very features of your life and traditions. Have a life of union with the Holy Spirit. Study the method of spiritual life of St. Francis de Sales. There is always something new to learn in his writings. The exterior formation consists of the study of the Christian doctrine and Catechesis. This is for you a grave duty: In the missions, the priests must be able to rely on you, and you may even do great harm to some souls through your ignorance! Then ordinary study of catechism as mentioned in the Rule is not sufficient for you; you must regard your Theology classes as extremely important and not easily dispense from them. The same zeal should be spent on the study of languages, not for your personal satisfaction, but because it is the will of God. Your spiritual life should not be self-centred, but all directed towards the souls."

The ultimate exercise of this re-noviciate was a retreat leading to a complete dispossession and renunciation – DEATH RETREAT - preached by Fr. Chaumont. The members were to be stripped of everything to realise the unique value of God alone. While preparing the first missionaries sending to India, Nagpur - Fr. Chaumont had a vision for them: “The CMMI will be able to approach the women, and through them, they will have influence on the families. The family is the basic unit in a nation; those who win families may in the long run also win nations.” It is with good intention and anxiety that the Founder sent the first missionaries to India in 1889, with these words: “Go then, my dear daughters, and spread afar, as far as the end of the world, the modest but salutary influence of the method of St. Francis de Sales, just as the first Christian women, your elder sisters in the Faith, came to Gaul. Go and reveal to them the salvation brought to all men and women by meek and mild Jesus. Go in your turn and teach them what you have learned, the infinite mercies of the Heart of Jesus. Go and tell them that there is a right to human dignity, to the respect of all, to the practise of the finest virtues of all and the finest self-devotion.”

The four Sisters boarded the ship for Nagpur on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1889. After a long adventurous and faith-filled journey of 18 days they arrived in Bombay on 1<sup>st</sup> of November. Fr. Pelvat, the Vicar General of Nagpur was sent to Bombay to receive the Sisters. November 2<sup>nd</sup> at night they arrived at Nagpur railway station. There the parish priest, 5 Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery and some people were waiting to welcome the Sisters. They welcomed them and led to the palace of Raja where they stayed with the Sisters of St. Joseph for some time. They were sent to live among the people and to win them for Christ at the cost of any sacrifices. The Sisters were asked to live a witnessing Salesian life as having been trained in the school of St. Francis de Sales.

As the years went by, they began to receive local vocations wherever they were. In order to abide by the expressed desire of the Founder who wanted the *DSFS* and *CMMI* to remain in a unique society, the *CMMI* could not be recognized as religious until 1968, though they lived a religious life by taking the semi-public vows in 1934. Then, thanks to the opening given by Vatican II, the Society could remain ONE with TWO branches. The Missionary Branch (*CMMI*) of the society became a Religious Congregation by name Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (*SMMI*). The Constitutions states: “The Institute of *SMMI* is born from the Society of the *DSFS* of which it is a missionary branch.” Through their formation and conversion, they want to respond to the universal call to holiness, wherever they are, taking part in the mission of the Church, each one according to her possibilities; through life witness, organized apostolate, commitments in the Church and in society. All fields are open to the baptized, men and women. The *SMMI* live this consecration and mission in a religious life, with a preference for the evangelization of women and the poor.

Yes, destined by the Founder to all countries, all races, all social classes, the congregation has never ceased to grow. The pioneer Catechist Missionaries of Mary Immaculate in 1965 have written down about their special vocation: “Our guide in our quest for perfection is none other than St. Francis de Sales. It is interesting to note the providential guidance which led to this patronage.

Mme Carre had been educated by Visitation nuns; Fr. Chaumont had been struck by the reading of St. Francis de Sales and had started a detailed study of his writings. Hence the patronage of St. Francis de Sales was not chosen at random. Our Society was born from the Founder's contact with the Salesian Spirit. This is the food specially prepared for us. We shall not forget it."

By the grace of God today we are spread out in the five continents, in 22 Countries, 10 nationalities: Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, France, Ghana, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius Islands, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Reunion, United States of America and Vietnam. The Generalate is in France, Gentilly and the Superior General is Sr. Martina Francis, SMMI. There are 1412 Sisters, living in 205 communities totally involved in the mission of the Church.

## **2. SPIRIT, SPIRITUALITY AND MISSION OF SMMI TODAY**

Mother Marie Gertrude who was chosen as the pioneer and foundress of the missions found it very important for the *CMMI* who is consecrated to God, that love should become a thirst which increases day by day. For this they should always approach the very Centre of love where they can find love, joy, light, energy, and happiness that is Jesus Himself. The words of the Founder echoed in her years: "Each Institute has its laws and if some are not faithful to them the whole Institute declines. If you follow them you will be excellent missionaries and excellent *DSFS*. So study the method of spiritual life of St. Francis de Sales. There is always something new to learn in his writings. Till their last days here on earth all three of them tried in various ways to enhance the formation of the *CMMI* in all possible ways. The formation of the members for the mission continued where many members from diverse social background, animated by the same spirit came together united by love and the pursuit of the same goal.

### **2.1 The CMMI from the time of the Founders till today concentrate especially on**

- The Missionary perspective of the love of God,
- Missionary force of the Meekness and Humility of Jesus,
- Living the Spirit of Jesus "*Live Jesus*",
- The Missionary force of the Marian spirituality – *Be Mary*,
- The Missionary openness of the First Christian Community – *The Acts of the Apostles*.

### **2.2 This spirituality is sustained by:**

- A life of prayer, nourished by the Holy Eucharist and the Word of God.
- Through studies in Salesian Spirituality and doctrinal studies.
- Faithful living of the Evangelical Councils and
- Authentic community living become basis for the Spirit and mission to grow and flourish.

### **2.3 Some of the ways and means and forms of apostolate the CMMI follow are:**

Direct Evangelization, long apostolic expeditions to the far away villages and family visits, through Catechesis, through Health care Services and Educational Institutions. Sisters run welfare homes, social and developmental works for women. Formation and animation of Salesian groups, lay leadership and in some dioceses the *CMMI* are invited to form local sisters for the diocese. The *CMMI* also help to form youth groups and these groups are formed to help the young to organize themselves in order to live with right values and enable them to take up the responsibilities in the future. Using the method of friendship as advised by St. Francis de Sales and as lived by the Founders, in many of the mission stations, the *SMMI* try to spread the spirituality of Francis de Sales among the laity and help them to form Salesian associations of women, men and married couples. The Salesian Society has 3 Branches. Daughters of St Francis de Sales (DSFS) comprising of Association of St Francis de Sales and Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (*SMMI/CMMI*), Priests of St. Francis de Sales (PSFS) and Sons of St. Francis de Sales (SSFS). All these groups continue the missionary journey in collaboration.

### CONCLUSION

St. Francis de Sales' vision of this world is founded on a deep appreciation of the love that God has showered upon us through the gifts of creation and human life, particularly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. Francis believed that beauty and goodness are the hallmarks of our world, as gifts born from God's deep and abiding love for each one of us. We are capable of living a true life of devotion in this world and of giving birth to a new world. It is this Salesian Tradition that has given birth to thousands of its followers who try to *Live Jesus* today facing all the challenges and difficulties in faith.

Yes, Mother Marie Gertrude, Servant of God, the Pioneer and Foundress of the missions, having made the cross her weapon althrough her life, convincingly tells her missionaries: “Zeal and passion for God and Souls throw the Missionary into God’s hands and in turn God throws him/her to sacrifice, immolation, torture, work or death according to Divine Wisdom.” Accepting life with great optimism and joy proved to be very rewarding. Salesian religious life invites us to live an integrated life by living the vows meaningfully in authentic and loving communities. We are invited to live a life of friendship helping one another to establish sincere relationship with God and our neighbour. It has been the heritage and gift of the *SMMI* in the past, present, and future.

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