

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSIONARIES OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES



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SUPERIOR GENERAL TO ALL THE MISSIONARIES OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

My dear Confreres:

I wish you a Merry Christmas and a grace-filled New Year 2017!

St. Francis de Sales reminds us to stay close to the manger and gaze at the little infant, and allow ourselves to be melted with love for each other.

He writes: *Consider, I beg you, this little new born Infant in the manger at Bethlehem. Listen to what He says to you. Look at the example He gives you. He has chosen the most bitter, the poorest things imaginable for His birth. Oh God! Whoever remains close to this manger during the Christmas Octave will melt with love in seeing this little Infant in so poor a place weeping and trembling from the cold* (Christmas sermon).

1. EMMANUEL: GOD – WITH - US

Love is the theme of Christmas, revealed to us in the very name Emmanuel, 'God with us'. To have love is to have God with us and to give love is to give God who is with us. When we love the other, we reveal to that person that God is with us. When we do not love the other we reveal that God is not with us.

Do you experience sometimes that certain people in your life do not love you? We need to remind ourselves at those moments that our happiness is not dependent on how others treat us and love us. Our happiness depends on how we treat others and love them. Our happiness depends on the truth that God is with us and loves us unconditionally, whether or not we deserve it. We don't know how God looks like. We don't even know where to look for Him. But God planted a little bit of God inside of us, the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14: 16-17). From that place within us, we look for God and from that place within us God seeks and loves God. All what we can do is to allow God inside of

us to well up and flow through us. Yes, He is Emmanuel 'God with us'. Let us love and treat others with the love that God has poured into us in His Son Jesus Christ.

2. SEEKING NEW DIRECTION AND RENEWAL

My visitation to the Provinces and close interactions with many confreres make me ask, sometimes, systemic questions about our religious life and apostolates. All of us agree that we need renewal of our religious life in agreement with our Constitutions given by our Founder and in the spirit of the Gospel. All of us agree that we need to prioritize our apostolates in relation to the disadvantaged and marginalized in the society. All of us agree that we need to wake up and move into the periphery of the society and listen to the cry and pain of the people in order to respond to them. All of us agree that we need to re-capture the foundational charism of our Congregation: to renew the Christian faith of the people using salesian spirituality and parish mission preaching. All of us agree that our consecrated life, in and through communities, should be our source of support and encouragement to live our MSFS vocation. Sometimes, confreres express their frustration about the gap between what we ought to do and what we do. Frustration is a powerful feeling and is also an opportunity for us to seek a new direction and renewal.

3. CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

I believe that no renewal of our religious life and apostolate is possible today without a systemic change. A systemic change is inevitable for us to be relevant to the people and for us to implant our charism at the centre of the Church today.

A systemic change demands that we set right our priorities at all levels. Our priorities should reflect on our community life, formation program, parishes, educational institutions, retreat centres, NGOs, Stewardship, and Social apostolates. Many religious Congregations are painfully aware that they no longer serve the purpose they were founded for.

The question remains:

How to change what has already been institutionalized? When life is institutionalized, institution tends to become our focus. Our own personal agenda, through the institution, distracts us from our commitment to the real mission, apostolate, and charism. The final goal of religious life - following the poor, chaste, and obedient Jesus to be at the service of the People of God - loses its focus.

4. RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

For the past more than a decade, our Congregation opted to talk about: 'I want Missions' (Fr. Peter Mermier). Our General Chapters and Province Congress/Chapters talk about it all the time. Our Constitutions and Province Statutes also clearly talk about prophetic religious missionary life. However, we admit that it is difficult to opt for a prophetic religious missionary life, moving to the geographical and existential peripheries of the Province/Congregation/Society. Prophetic life requires of us to feel the pain of the people, to share their hard and challenging lives, and to challenge those responsible for their misery. Prophetic missionaries are said to be “those who still feel the pain of the people”. Pope Francis periodically reminds us that prophecy is essential to religious life. He writes: “*Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say 'a mess.' But in reality, the charisma of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel.*”

- What is the need for us today? The need today for us is to change our individual and common lives as religious to be more authentic witnesses to God's love, mercy, and compassion in a world with its injustice, pains and sufferings as well as hopes and joys.
- How can we utilize the charism of our Congregation to contribute to the renewal of the Church and to care for the People of God?
- How can our renewal of religious life (as individuals and communities) contribute to the renewal of our apostolates particularly to our suffering brothers and sisters?

5. RENEWAL OF OUR CONGREGATION

A religious Congregation begins to disintegrate when the members are driven to develop personal projects and interest without sharing the vision and charism of the Congregation. Our renewal of religious life as MSFS (both individual and communitarian) will definitely impact on our apostolates and on our 'talk about prophetic missionary work'. We are continually invited to go back to our roots in order to re-capture the spirit and vision of the Founder. Renewal of our religious life and renewal of our apostolates together contribute to the renewal of the Church.

General Chapter 2013 provided us with clear vision for renewal of our apostolates and renewal of our religious life through the **FOUR THRUSTS: MISSION, COMMUNITY LIFE, MSFS-ness, and SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY**. These four thrusts are the four priorities that should impact a systemic change in the Congregation. As a congregation, we are already in the process of realizing these priorities through various programs. No change occurs just because a person in authority orders it. We need the right motivation to change what needs to be changed.

I encourage every community and every Province to reflect and act upon on how to realize these four priorities in our formation houses, educational institutions, parishes, mission centres, social apostolates, retreat ministries, and in every aspect of our ministry in the Congregation. What are those areas in our system, that needs renewal and a new direction? When we work on a systemic change, we will take care of most of the everyday issues and problems we need to address in as a Congregation (*ad intra*) and our apostolates in the Congregation (*ad extra*).

6. 'THE GIFT OF THE PRIESTLY VOCATION'

The Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy has issued a document, entitled “The Gift of Priestly Vocation” (*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*), a powerful resource for our renewal. The Catholic Church needs holy, healthy, and humble priests and that requires prayers for vocations and the careful selection and training of candidates. The Church proposes a serious journey of formation.

The document gives a detailed set of guidelines and norms for priestly vocation. Let me highlight some of them:

- **It reaffirms an instruction approved by Benedict in 2005, which said, "the church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture.'"**
- **The document insists that through courses in pastoral theology, the example of priests and practical experience, candidates for the priesthood learn that priestly ministry involves — as Pope Francis says — being "shepherds 'with the smell of the sheep,' who live in their midst to bring the mercy of God to them."**

- **Highlighting lessons learned over the past 30 years from the clerical sexual abuse scandal, the new guidelines state, "The greatest attention must be given to the theme of the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, being vigilant lest those who seek admission to a seminary or to a house of formation, or who are already petitioning to receive holy orders have not been involved in any way with any crime or problematic behavior in this area."**
- **And bishops (major superiors) must be very cautious about accepting candidates for the priesthood who have been dismissed from other seminaries.**
- **In the end, each bishop (major superior) is responsible for determining which candidate for priesthood he will ordain, but the guidelines strongly encourage bishops (major superiors) to accept the judgment of seminary rectors and staff who determine a certain candidate is unsuitable.**
- **"Experience has shown that when ordinaries (bishops) and major superiors have not accepted the negative judgment of the community of formators, it has been the cause of great suffering in many cases, both for the candidates themselves and for the local churches," the document says.**
- **Reaffirming the requirement that seminarians study Catholic social teaching, the document says the education must include a study of climate change and other environmental threats.**
- **Seminarians should be encouraged to use social media to build relationships and for evangelization, the guidelines say, but seminary personnel will need to help the students use the media wisely and in a way that is healthy.**
- **Psychologists, whether or not on the staff of the seminary, can provide valuable help to the seminary rector and diocesan bishop "in the assessment of personality, expressing an opinion as to the psychological health of the candidate and in therapeutic accompaniment, in order to shed light on any problems that may emerge and to assist in growth in human maturity," the document says.**

- **The Congregation for Clergy recommends that women be on the staff of seminaries or teach at the universities where the candidates study and that seminarians' ability to relate to and work with women be considered in the candidate's evaluation, since the majority of parishioners with whom the future priest will work are women.**
- **The guidelines also acknowledge that many of the skills needed to be a good priest cannot be learned in a classroom. They are the result of prayer, self-discipline and seeking to model one's behavior on that of Christ, the document says.**
- **"The call to be pastors of the people of God requires a formation that makes future priests experts in the art of pastoral discernment, that is to say, able to listen deeply to real situations and capable of good judgment in making choices and decisions," it says.**

7. DECISIONS, NEWS, AND EVENTS

1). Fr. K. IGNACIMUTHU: SOUTHEAST INDIA PROVINCIAL

After having consulted the confreres of Southeast India Province and with the consent of the General Council, I am glad to appoint Fr. Ignacimuthu as the Provincial Superior of Southeast India Province for a term of three years with effect from January 24, 2017.

2). Fr. GEORGE PANTHANMACKEL: NORTHEAST PROVINCIAL

In consultation with members of the Northeast India Province and with the consent of the General Council, I am glad to appoint Fr. George Panthanmackel as the Provincial of Northeast India Province for a second term of three years with effect from January 24, 2017.

3). Fr. A. DHARMARAJ:

On behalf of the General Administration, I sincerely thank Fr. Dharmaraj for his able leadership to the Southeast India Province as Major Superior. We appreciate his

commitment to the growth of the Province amidst challenging situations.

4). **POSTULATOR AND VICE POSTULATOR**

We have the good news that the Prefect of the Congregation for the Cause of Saints has given *nihil obstat* to re-open the Cause of Father Peter Mermier. Mgr. Yves Boivineau, the Bishop of Annecy, will officially announce this news in the Diocese of Annecy on January 24, 2017. With the consent of the Council, I am glad to appoint **Fr. Yves Carron as the Postulator and Fr. K. Thomas as the Vice Postulator of the Cause of Father Mermier** with effect from January 24, 2017. **Fr. Thumma Mariadas, the Assistant General, will continue to serve as the Chief Promoter of the Cause** with vice-promoters in every Province.

5). **PROVINCIAL CURIA OF FRANCO SWISS PROVINCE**

- **Fr. John HEPUNI: Councilor**
- **Fr. Yves CORNU: Councilor, and**
- **Fr. Jean Yves LE TUE: Admonitor and Treasurer**

I thank you confreres for accepting this responsibility on behalf of the Congregation.

6). **SUVIDYA COLLEGE, BANGALORE**

Fr. Benny KOOTTANAL is appointed as the Governing Body Chairperson, Superior Delegate to the Superior General, and Major Superior to Suvidya College for a term of three years with effect from January 24, 2017.

Fr. Joy MAMPALLY is re-appointed as the Rector and President of the Suvidya College: Fransalian Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences for another term of three years with effect from January 16, 2017

7) **NEW STATUS OF THE PROVINCE OF ENGLAND**

In the light of the evaluation of the state of the Province and in response to the proposals and recommendations given by the Confreres and the Administrator of the Province of England, and after prayerful discernment, the Superior General, with the unanimous consent of his Council, has decided as per Number 201 (xi) of the MSFS Constitutions to intervene in the administration of the Province for its effective functioning and

administration till the next General Chapter to be held in 2019.

For the effect of this purpose, the Superior General with the consent of his Council has decided for *pro tem* Administrative Re-organization of the Province of England with effect from November 01, 2016.

During *pro tem* Administrative Reorganisation of the Province, **the Assistant Superior General, who by his office is a Major Superior, will be also the Major Superior of the members of the Province of England.**

(Excerpts from the Decree)

8). YEAR 2017 AS YEAR OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL APOSTOLATE: Social Empowerment through Education and Innovative Ministries

With the consent of the General Council, I am glad to announce that Year 2017 will be celebrated as the **Year of Education and Social Apostolate** with the theme “**Social Empowerment through Education and Innovative Ministries**”. The General Secretaries of Education and Social Apostolate will prepare the respective forums through the PCICs for a meaningful celebration of Year 2017 with various programs.

9). BLESSING OF GENERAL SECRETARIAT HOUSE IN HYDERABAD

On October 10, 2016 MSFS House, Hyderabad was blessed by Rt. Rev. Dr. Thumma Bala, Archibishop of Hyderabad. Two of our General Secretaries, Fr. Noel Rebello and Fr. George Parampukattil reside at the House. The House is also used for small group meetings and Inter- Provincial Forum meetings.

10). DE SALES AND MERMIER RESOURCE/RESEARCH CENTER (DSM – RRC)

The third floor of the Secretariat House will function as the DSM – Resource/Research Centre. I am grateful to **Fr. Emile Mayoraz and Fr. James Manjackal** for their generous support to find fund for the DSM Centre, which will serve as a Resource Centre to disseminate Salesian Spirituality.

11). 450th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

To mark the 450th birth anniversary of St. Francis de Sales in the year 2017, we plan to:

- Inaugurate the DSM – Resource/Research Centre.
- Inaugurate the Salesian Formative Spirituality Program in Annecy, France.
- Re-open the Cause of Father Peter Mermier on January 24, 2017.
- Release the MSFS Personal Spiritual Directory (Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales modified for today's context).
- Release the Guidelines for Associates of Fransalians and formally organize Associates of Fransalians in every Province.
- Initiate Parish Mission Preaching by our trained confreres with the module prepared by the PMP core team.

12). Fr. LOUIS BRUGGER (1920 – 2016)

We pay our homage to one of our senior most confreres in the Congregation who was an extra ordinary MSFS loved by all. As a young man, he grew up with his three sisters and two brothers. One of his sisters became a religious in the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod, and his eldest brother, Fr. Jules, was a Missionary of St. Francis de Sales.

After his ordination in 1947 he served as an educator in our Institut Florimont in Petit – Lancy, and then spent 66 years of his life ministering in the Diocese of Paris and Creteil as Pastor, part time chaplain at Fresnes Prison, and Chaplain of Retirement House for the Inter Religious Congregations. Two years after his arrival to our community in Annecy, he returned home to be with his Master on November 30, 2016.

Fr. Louis was an extraordinary MSFS with his smiling face, (even in the midst of pain), a wonderful listener, simple to his core, living a poor and simple life, radiating compassion and comfort to those whom he encountered. (I was blessed to be in the esteemed presence of this holy man at the retirement facility of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod last year during my visitation. I must say that those moments in his presence made me feel close to God and to St. Francis de Sales).

(Excerpts from the write up by Fr. Claude Morel)

13). PRAYERFUL TRIBUTE TO OUR GREAT MISSIONARIES

- Fr. Luke Cheruvil (74 years) of Visakhapatnam Province died on October 5, 2016
- Fr. John De Vore MSFS of the USA Vice Province (9 years) on November 23, 2016.
- Bro. Job Poovathumootil MSFS of Vizag. Province (86 years) on November 26, 2016.
- Fr. Louis Brugger MSFS of Franco-Swiss Province, (96 years) on November 30, 2016.

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord! Let perpetual light shine upon our beloved brothers!

“I fear the men who consider themselves important” (Fr. Mermier)

**Merry Christmas
&
a blessed New Year!**



Live Jesus!

Fraternally in Christ,

Father Abraham Vettuvellil, MSFS

Superior General