



# MISSIONARIES OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES

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## Celebration of the Holy Week In the Midst of a Global Disaster



**My dear Confreres,**

When Emperor Napoleon was once urged by one of his commanders to attack without loss of time, he retorted: **“The Army marches on its stomach.”** To fight and win wars, men need timely supplies of food and water as much as a supply back up of ammunition and armament, horses and so forth. **In short, good planning and logistics support are vital for victory.** Now, the whole world, and India in particular, is engaged in a different kind of war, one against a raging virus.

I would like to take the scenario in India alone as each country is putting its own effort to bring under control this pandemic virus. In India, the decision to impose a total lockdown was good and was necessary. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended it, and the heads of other countries have followed suit. That is the only way to stop the spread of the virus. But if the lockdown is to succeed, the supply chain of essential goods and services had to be kept open and running 24x7, and provisions of free cash made to the poor, so that people do not defy the order in search of livelihood.

I am very sure that the Central Government got the first part right – the need for a lightning response and firm resolve to fight the war. But the lockdown to be fully effective, there was a corollary that was to be taken into consideration – a well planned and efficient supply chain and logistics should have been in place well before the lockdown announcement, one facilitated by the authorities at every level and

extending to the farthest nook and corner of India, keeping in mind that this is a large, at the same time, chaotic country. Things work in India haphazardly through local, ad hoc ways, enabled by a complex web of millions of service providers, who are on daily wages.

While the middle class can observe faithfully social distancing and 'home quarantine', for the millions of daily wage earners who have to buy their provisions or meal daily and can do so only by going to work each day, it is a cruel joke. For such people, it is physically and economically impossible, when they are crammed cheek by jowl, seven to eight in a tin shed in densely crowded slums. The total number of resident slum dwellers and economic migrants put together in the large metros and cities is a staggering 110 million. No government can feed them without adequate planning and preparation. Strange but true: It may not even be desirable to lock them down in such extreme conditions.

While no effort should be spared to stem the spread of the virus, practical solutions that suit in India should have been explored and put in place. That calls for courageous evaluation, study and preparation. The cure suggested should not be worse than the disease.

## **A Look at JESUS for Guidance**

### **Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday**

My dear Confreres, one of the greatest strategies of Jesus in His public ministry was calculative planning and collective Leadership. **His public ministry started at the shore of the Sea.** He had a clear strategy set forth for his ministry – **he came for the last, least and the lost.** Shore is the fringe of everything: it is the border of power, money, health, education and security. If the Lord began His public ministry from the shore of limitations, His strategic leadership is stupendously clear: **He envisioned leaders who have fringe experience in their personal lives.** Such leaders will lead from the front, they will not stop at the gunpoint, and they have the resilience to resist the vulnerabilities of luxury and power and the will to challenge 'self-inflicted quarantine' under 'five-star' facilities.

Jesus, who fosters leadership and involvement through discussions, dialogues, subtle parables and thought provoking stories, is an epitome of "Servant Leadership". Each of His interactions and discussions with the Disciples, Pharisees, Political Authorities, Sick and Suffering and Public Sinners evoked certain responses from them, which in the course of time became "**The Gospel**". His personal involvement with our lives during this time of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday must become the greatest pointers for us to involve in the story of our world, especially at this time of the Pandemic Corona Virus.

#### **MAUNDY THURSDAY: Return to the First Love**



*I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first (Rev. 2/4-5).*

We live in a world where love has gone cold. Even God has such a complaint against us. Naturally, He has a right to

complain. Every day He renews His love for us. But in our human interactions, everything happens in a routine manner, although in the course of time we realize that there is no love behind many of our actions. **Yes, there is no more heat when one hand holds the other.** The invitation of Jesus on the Maundy Thursday is to get out of this 'town of the dead' (as the book of 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' Chs. 1-3 proposes). But no one dares to do so. **Is the one who came to 'set fire' in the hearts of the humanity disappointed?**

At the table of the "Last Supper" Jesus surely must have been pulled down by the heaviness of heart. Yes, when those who promised to walk along till the end, encounter Him with betrayal and denial, He had to muster extreme courage to face it. Everybody is serving one's own wine – but the one who kept the best wine till the last (Jn 2/10) is being served with the lower quality wine. It is the contradiction of life. **Most of us are living with the false conviction that we love.** Yes, we ask bluntly: why doubt? Is not all that you see around the signs of my love? But if Jesus asks you three times, just like He did with Peter, with intermittent time for 'dhyana', I am sure that your guarantee will give way to panicking bargain and sorrow (Jn 21/17).

**I wonder why people's eyes are filled with tears when they speak about love?** Perhaps it may be due to the absence of love! Just like the prodigal son, I also have wandered through the mirage of love and reach now the spheres of total wryness and aridity. Since I am starving for love, it is enough even if I get only an external layer of it without depth. Yes, I am like fish that comes to the hook knowing well the danger lying there. Only when even the husk is denied, we begin to remember the table of a sumptuous meal. **Think of those innumerable times we left the table of this meal and went after those feasts prepared by our five senses!** It exemplifies to us a man who went after many worldly pleasures, finally telling his wife at his deathbed **"I failed to recognize you, the pearl of my life"**.

**Return** is the maxim: Return to the table of your First Love: like in the olden times kiss the wrinkled cheeks of your mother; look at the tear-filled eyes of the one who gave you the true meaning of love; hold firm your hands around your Dad, who now like a little child cries meaninglessly on the dirty, stinking deathbed. **Yes, today through the institution of that Meal, the Eucharist, the Lord teaches you the lesson of first love.** How can you stop washing the feet of the other? **Remember, Repent and Begin Again! The Meal is ready!**

## **GOOD FRIDAY: Time to Tear Away the Curtains**



*And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised (Mt 27/51-52).*

The death of Christ was marked with innumerable signs. One among those signs was that *the curtain of the temple was torn* and that too from top to down. It means that

the incident happened through supernatural intervention. It is a clear sign that there is no more chance to doubt that God's plan is accomplished.

**We all live our lives with more than enough secret, trying to conceal them with some curtains.** Sometimes some of those secrets are clothed with divine mantles too. The saying of Jesus *what I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops* (Mt 10/27) is being realistically felt here. **What is being understood as a secret is what one repeatedly tells oneself!** It is due to the realization that the more you know me, the more you may hate me. The 'torn curtain' can be evaluated from two perspectives: **from personal experience and from interior awareness.**

**a) From Personal Experience:** It starts with the Centurion (Lk 23/47). He might have witnessed the crucifixion of many. Yet as he witnessed the death of Jesus, he might have told this secret to himself: **He is different from all others!** There isn't anyone who has accepted death with such equanimity. (In the sidelines just remind yourself about the recent death penalty handed over to the four young men in the ignominious 'Nirbhaya case' and their reactions to it). Jesus did not even seek sympathy as the women of Jerusalem were crying for him: *Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children* (Lk 23/28). The secrets that the Centurion told to himself all through the passion journey of Jesus, he decides now to proclaim from the top of the mountain: Truly, this was the Son of God (Mt 27/54). This is truly a dangerous proclamation. **If he is the Son of God, if he is righteous, then why did you kill him?** It is a challenge for us to realize that even when we expose the mistake of someone else, that doesn't make us righteous nor make us justified of our own mistakes. You have to own up responsibility, you have to pay the price when you dare to reveal your secrets from the top of the mountain.

**b) From Interior Awareness:** Two others who dared to tear off the curtains and come to the fore-front were Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the rich man (Mt 27/57; Lk 23/50). They both were from the upper layer of the society. They could only stand afar and show their sympathy to Jesus. Of course, Nicodemus has visited him certain times, but he made sure that those visits were during the nights (Jn 3/1-2). It was when he understood that those who went with Jesus were not faithful to him that he decided to unveil his secret (Jn 7/50-51). **The stronger the discipleship, the lesser the degree of secrecy!** When your secrets increase, you endanger your discipleship. There comes a time and you have to proclaim from the housetop. Although ended up in a tragedy, Judas showed the guts to show himself naked: *I have sinned in betraying innocent blood* (Mt 27/4). Those women, who dared to remain at the foot of the cross (John 19/25) and those who went to the tomb even after his death (Mt 28/1) decided to tear away the social and household curtains and to proclaim the truth from the housetop. All these people decided to come out of the tragedy of 'living lies' till the end.

**Through the death of Jesus, even God's own will is revealed.** God has become so transparent for us. **There are no more secrets; it's all accomplished in Jesus!** In fact, some of us still try to stitch together the torn curtain. *Why do you seek the living among the dead*(Lk 24/5)? The empty tomb should help us to realize that there is something beyond our grasp that cannot be destroyed by moth and rust (Mt 6/19). Death is not a closed door, but an open door beyond the curtains of the world!

## **EASTER SUNDAY: The Day that Makes the Weak Strong**

*And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb? And looking up they saw that the stone was rolled*



**back; for it was very large** (Mk 16/1-4).

Women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb as well as the resurrection of Jesus. perhaps men might have considered that as a setback against their pride; therefore, they depicted the statement of the women as a false story (Lk 24/11). Perhaps the psyche of men is such that they base the acceptability of a fact on its provability through intelligence and senses. Whereas women give a deeper dimension to life and death and all that comes their way in order to define them. **Women can stand firm under the cross from where men have run away!**

Matthean Gospel names these women as those who *went to see the sepulcher* (Mt 28/1). **The Greek word used here is *Thiyorin*, which means to meditate.** It is a sepulcher that is sealed and watched over by the Soldiers. These women are standing before this sepulcher and are meditating on the giver of life. It looks as though women are more capable of encountering death than men. The insight they show here, in front of the sepulcher to encounter death, is the source from which they get the light to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. **Their faith is based on life. They have fallen in love with a life that goes beyond death.**

The disciples who encountered the risen Lord on their way to the city fell at His feet and worshiped Him (Mt 28/9). Their responses were now very spontaneous and natural. **Those who got the courage and the privilege to touch the tomb will be happy also to touch the giver of life.**

According to the Lukan and Markan version of the Gospel the women are depicted as those who came to anoint His dead body with ointment (Mk 16/1; Lk 24/1). In line with the the eastern climate, it is already time for the dead body to be decayed. This is what the Sisters of Lazarus also tell Jesus (Jn 11/39). **But, now on it will not be so! The almighty nature of God can overcome the powers of the earth. LOVE ALWAYS BELIEVES IN SOME MIRACLES.** Love is more powerful than death. What awaits them is no more the dead body, but the resurrected Christ. **Love becomes ceaseless in the nearness of the one who always lives and loves.**

On the Easter day, we also can begin to do something special. Give importance to the voice of women! **In our familial contexts, personal relationships and collaborative, apostolic activities we need to give women their space and importance.** It is also important to begin to listen to the 'woman in us'. Psychology names it *anima*. It is an area that is connected with the 'heart'. It is there the seeds of the resurrection of humanity await the light. This is the only way to narrate to a self-defeating, broken humanity that they have still chance to LIVE. **Resurrection is not resuscitation after one's death, but a hope-filled life-process that has to be experienced every moment of one's life.**

## **Our Role As Easter People**

**My dear Confreres, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday invite us to return to our First Love, to tear away our subjective curtains and to respect life that complements us.** The Risen Lord invites us to look at the humanity through His life-giving eyes and to give the message of Peace and Hope in this deplorable situation that the people all over the world are facing. **It is perhaps for the first time since centuries that Easter is celebrated within empty Churches behind the closed doors.** **The scene of the Holy Father standing alone and addressing an empty St Peter's Square on the 27<sup>th</sup> March**

2020 (of course embracing the whole humanity) was a heart-throbbing sight. Yes, like the resurrected Lord, we need to torch up the emptiness of the Human heart not merely by spiritual accompaniment, but through practical involvement through our human possibilities.

**The Pertinent Question is: WHAT SHALL WE DO AS MEMBERS OF THE SOUTH-WEST INDIA PROVINCE OF THE MSFS TO ALLEVIATE THE SUFFERING OF THE HUMANITY THAT IS AFFECTED BY THE CORONA VIRUS?**

My dear Confreres, we are facing one of the greatest threats to the existence of humanity. Each of us, our elderly parents, relatives, and well-wishers are all potential victims of this epidemic. **When someone in our society suffers let us consider him/her as our sibling! Let us alleviate his/her pain.** It is a clarion call on us to participate in fighting the epidemic. Surely, some of our communities are involving themselves to support the struggling poor people around us. **The NEST Community through FIDES India under the animation of Fr Joy Vazhappilly and the Shiralakoppa Community under the animation of Fr Sudeep Paul have involved in feeding the poor through the supply of food articles.** They deserve our appreciation.

Therefore, My dear Confreres, **I invite each member of the South-West India Province, in India and abroad, as well as each community to contribute something of our might to alleviate the suffering of the poor people in our country caused through the Corona virus and the Shutdown in the country. I REQUEST EACH COMMUNITY TO GIVE UP SOME FOOD DURING THESE THREE "HOLY DAYS" AND CONTRIBUTE THAT AMOUNT FOR THE SUPPORT OF THE POOR. THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE IN KERALA SEND THE AMOUNT TO THE 'KFES ACCOUNT' AND THOSE IN KARNATAKA TO THE 'KFS ACCOUNT'.** Those of you who are abroad, please help the people of your own locality to alleviate their pain and suffering.

My dear Confreres,

The stone was rolled away from the door,

Not to permit Christ to come out

But to enable us to go in to experience RESURRECTION.

Wish you all a Blessed TRIDUUM – Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday!

**VOICE OF SFS**

**"A Heart without trust in God dooms itself to death."**

Fraternally,



**Fr Benny Kootanal MSFS  
Provincial**