



MISSIONARIES OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES

SOUTH-WEST INDIA PROVINCE (SWIP)

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My dear Confreres, in the light of the latest instructions by the Prime Minister of India the lockdown in India due to COVID-19 Pandemic is extended to the 3rd May 2020. Of course, it is a hard decision, but with serious implications for the good of the citizens, although the pros and cons of it need to be still objectively assessed. The universal Church and the MSFS Congregation present us with certain guidelines to follow, especially during this time of quarantine and lockdown. Without losing heart, wherever we are, let us try to work with our human possibilities, relying on God's power and altruistic involvement in the betterment of the millions of poor people around us. **As MSFS there are certain unique and distinct ways through which we need to respond to this arcane situation and plod it with paramount care and concern.** As St FRANCIS DE SALES says: *Let us be at our best promptly, frequently and lovingly.*

With JESUS, the Physician, to Learn the Art Of Healing



Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he smites, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles, in seven there shall no evil touch you (Job 5/17-19).

The 'last temptation' is always connected with the Body. God and Satan are bargaining on account of 'Job', the upright man. Satan takes now the last arrow from his bow: **Shall I touch his body (Job 2/4-5)?** Once the body is affected, what is next? **Sickbed turns out to be the prayer mat!** Kazantzakis in his

book "Francis of Assisi" mentions that *a long time of illness gave a certain route map to the later ministries of Francis*. It was a prolonged stay on the sickbed that raised the spirit of **Ignatius of Loyola** to lay down his sword and shield in order to put on the armour of Jesus Christ. As the book of Revelation says: **What was bitter became sweet in my mouth** (Rev 10/10).

I have observed in the hospital wards a very inspiring scene. During the time of the 'rounds' of the doctors, the sick people and their relatives fold their hands before them as though they are seeing an angel of God. Yes, Archangel Raphael has arrived! The name **Raphael** means **God heals**. It is popularly believed that it was archangel Raphael who troubled the water in the pool of Beth-za'tha (Jn 5/2-9). A doctor, in fact, is only an instrument in the hands of that 'Great Doctor'! Have you not heard at least some of the Doctors saying: **We treat the sickness, but someone else gives healing!** Yes, that's the point!

Many, who have sick and aging people at home, say: *It is since long we went to the Church. How to go leaving the child/husband/wife in this predicament?* Or someone else saying: *After Dad is bedridden, we are almost socially isolated* (read this in the backdrop of our own present experience of quarantine and lockdown). We have still not learned the greatness of those who serve at the sickbed... It's time to salute the Doctors, Nurses and their Assistants and our own Beloved Ones, who day and night care for the sick!

Jesus is the Doctor who treats the Body, Mind and Soul! Gospels have no dearth of instances in unearthing those *psycho-spiritual* utterances of Jesus in His day-to-day interactions with people of every class. Why did Jesus seek three times surety of love from Peter, if not to heal himself from those wounds of Peter's denial? Through his healing touch, he embraced the body, mind and soul of the listener. To the one who asked him painfully: What will you do with this soul, his firm answer was: **Today you will be with me in paradise** (Lk 23/43).

Priests, who dispense the 'Sacrament of Anointing', should learn the art of healing from this great Doctor. **Any medicine has an effect only when we dispense it in the candlelight of hope**. Sickness succumbs human beings to inertia. Even when we have a slight fever we begin to dislike food (Job 6/6-7) and the company of friends. The body and mind are so intensely bound to each other – **Psychosomatic**. *Soma* means 'body'. Jesus strengthened the desire of those who cried to him and brightened their hope by taking them out from the pool of suffering. The man at the pool of Beth-za'tha did not even ask him to heal him; he is already down with desperation; what is pertinent is that he be brought out of his predicament. **Some of the questions that Jesus raises are akin to the skill of a poacher tickling the trout:** *Do you want to be healed? What do you think that I should do for you? Do you believe that I can do it for you?* And the spontaneous response: *Lord, if you will, you can make me clean* (Mt 8/2). There is a need to shed the light of hope in the lives of suffering humanity. "The Last Leaf" of O. Henry will be very apt for a world affected by COVID-19!

In any thickly crowded population, this physician will come to know the presence of a sick person (Mt 9/20-22). Jesus asks: *Who touched me?* Peter's answer is almost bantering: **Who has not touched you** (Lk 8/45). Since twelve years she was suffering from a serious, but mysterious sickness. She spent her whole earning on physicians and medicine, but without success. In fact what the evangelist Luke, who is a doctor by profession, interestingly omitted, the evangelist Mark states: *...she had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better, but grew worse* (Mk 5/26). There is a very short but very touching dialogue between her and Jesus (Mk 5/34). **When Jesus speaks**

with a sick person there is no more crowd or noise: only He and She. Each patient deserves this care. He gives more than what the patient seeks.

Here are a few tips regarding Jesus' approach to sickness and healing:

- A sick person cannot wait long – this is the message of Jesus. He avoided those who wanted to see him out of curiosity (Lk 13/32), but he did not waste a second to reach out to the slave of the Centurion to cure him (Mt 8/13).
- Jesus gives importance to the rehabilitation of the sick: His instruction to the healed person to go and get certified from the priest (Lk 5/14) was a means of rehabilitating him. One must develop a healthy surrounding after the sickness, whether, physical, psychological or spiritual.
- Jesus always gives a message through every incident: **When you give priority to your 'liking' death awaits you at the doorstep.** Therefore, he tells them: *Do not sin again* (Jn 8/11). The warning in the book of Genesis that 'sin lurks at your doorstep, if you are not vigilant it will engulf you' (Gen 4/7) is relevant even today. It doesn't mean that sickness is the punishment of sin. That would be a cruel judgment. The one who suffers should not be still persecuted. The answer of Jesus is relevant here: *It is not due to his sin, nor of his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him* (Jn 9/2-3).

My dear Confreres, at this agonizing time of the history we need to look up to the 'Master Physician' and learn the art of healing. During this lockdown let our disciplined life-style and holistic approach to the betterment of the humanity help us to overcome this pandemic and save God's creation. Let us become **Healed Healers.**

Our Responsibilities as Committed Missionaries

My dear Confreres, the impact of the pandemic COVID-19 has not only thrown the human life in total disarray but also many of the envisioned plans and programs of people all around the Globe are gone topsyturvy. **We, as Missionaries of St Francis de Sales, are also very badly affected by this pandemic.** There is a lot of confusion regarding the implementation of strategic plans. Even when we try to see various advantages and blessings that we have received in this time of the pandemic, we cannot undermine the damages already done and challenges still awaiting in our apostolic activities. We are rather thrown into confusion without much clarity, as the government's decisions are going to have a say on all our ministries too. At the same time, I personally feel that it would be rather very unwise from our part as Missionaries not to have some plans, already reading the signs of the governmental move regarding the handling of this epidemic. Therefore, **there is an immediate need to have 'Plan B' or even 'Plan C' regarding various ministries and apostolates that we have in our province.**

I place before you different streams of our life as Missionaries, especially in our province and request you earnestly to take note of these concerns without fail.

Our Consecrated Life in Communities

My dear Confreres, it may be for the first time in the history of our Congregation, after its foundation, that the Confreres are locked down in communities for such a long time. Doubtless to say it has its own glorious advantages. We who had been rather dispersed due to our ministries to different corners are now bound together in one community 24x7. **I have already taken note of a lot of innovativeness in the communities,** where Confreres pray together, cook together, have meals together, play together and

thus celebrate life together as one community. It surely will enlarge our mutual bonding.

At the same time, my dear Confreres, what we are presented with is an indefinite valuable time. It should not merely be spent carelessly. There is an impending danger behind this time of quarantine: **Many of us can possibly get addicted to the over use of gadgets such as mobiles (WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTalk), TV, Alcohol and even irreligious subtle personal addictions.** I request you to take charge of your personal life and enter into some creative spaces of your own life. Please try to live the following:

- Take some time every day for personal prayer and intimacy with Jesus.
- Conduct half-hour Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament without fail. We need God in our life.
- Develop the habit of reading meaningful books including the Bible.
- Evaluate the life that you led until now and ask yourself whether you are satisfied with your own present status.
- Visualise and strategise plans to make your missionary life more meaningful and service-oriented.
- As a community, under the leadership of the Superior, engage yourself in some common works and programs in the community, especially if we have land and property attached to our community.
- Engage yourself in sports and keep fit.
- Develop a deep and meaningful relationship with Confreres, especially in your community.

My dear Confreres, these are very important areas of concern that we need to address. **Joy in life is different from happiness.** Joy gives us a sense of realisation of the meaning of our life, whereas happiness ends with immediate satisfaction. **Make right choices in life and the time is at hand.**

Our Apostolates

It is high time that we also have certain clear planning set forth for the success of the ministries that we are already engaged in. We know very well that already a bit of desperation is creeping in as we do not have clarity as to how long the present situation of quarantine and lockdown will continue. **I think that it is high time that we throw visions ahead before it is too late.** The most necessary thing is not to fall into lethargy, saying, that we can't do anything. That would be suicidal. **Reading the signs of the time we can do a lot of things, perhaps much more creatively.** For this, we need to put our heads together as Provincial Administration and as Confreres entrusted with different responsibilities. Hereby I place before you each apostolate with its various possibilities.

Mission Apostolate

This, in fact, is the Apostolate that is the heart of our Missionary life. It is so sad that we are bound to close our Churches, Retreat Centers and Preaching Ministries. Many people say with tears in their eyes and pain in their hearts how desperate they are because they are not able to participate in the Holy Mass. Therefore, my dear Confreres, **the most impoverishing area of our missionary life would be that we remain lethargic with the excuse that we can't do anything.** I feel that it is time that we as steer heads of the Mission enthuse in the people some sense of innovativeness in keeping their hopes

alive.

I am very happy that a good number of our Confreres are vigorously engaging themselves in spreading the Word of God and thus keeping the people's faith alive through various innovative methods. Here are a few instances:

- **Fr James Manjackal** is vigorously engaged in online preaching and live-streaming of Holy Mass and other liturgical programs for the global Catholics.
- **Fr Mathew Kozhuppakalam** is engaged in enthusing the faithful entrusted to him through live streaming of the mass and daily reflections on the gospel passages and commentaries on feasts and solemnities.
- **Charis Bhavan Team** under the Leadership of **Frs Jose Parappillil, Kurian Karickal, Bijil Chakkiath and Anish Mundiyan** are enthusiastically engaged in live streaming of mass, talks and reflections and Online retreats.
- **Fr Jijo Manjackal** is regularly engaged in giving daily reflections, talks and messages on different Biblical and Catholic topics and live streaming of Holy Mass.
- **Frs Rony Fernandis, Philip Valakodiyil and Binoy Kuzhuppil** are actively engaged in live streaming of Holy Mass and daily reflections, Salesian Quotes and paraliturgical celebrations in the Philippines.

I am very sure that there are many others who are doing these ministries in India and Abroad in their own way. **Our Scholars like Frs Jacob Parappally, Thomas Kalariparambil, Henry Kodikuthiyil and others** are engaged in various writings and teachings. Therefore, I would request all of us who are engaged in Mission Apostolate to participate a bit more actively into the lives of the people entrusted to you through different and dynamic ways. **Very specially I request the Parish Priests to be more active in conveying Jesus to the people of your parish who are locked down in their homes.**

- Communicate to the people through your WhatsApp Groups in the parish that you are praying for them and inspire them through one or the other Biblical quotes.
- Send to them daily the quotes of St Francis de Sales and encourage them to remain hopeful.
- Prepare a short reflection on the daily Gospel passages and live stream it or send it as messages. This is a specific Salesian Method.
- Every Sunday (at least) send live stream mass online to the people and ask them to participate in it.
- If there is any possibility, do live stream Christian and specially Catholic music programs.
- Plan out strategies with the parish council as to how to make the life of the parish more alive in the given situation.
- Specially contact over the phone, people who are old, sick and who need your assistance.
- It is also a special time for the PMP (Parish Mission Preaching) Team to strategise their program.

In short, my dear Confreres, we have a lot to do by keeping our parish alive by being ourselves alive. **Fr Joe Cherolickal, the Councilor in charge of Mission will be in touch with you and the Core Committee** to choke out further plans for the Mission Forum.

Formation Apostolate

My dear Confreres we are going to have similar or more serious struggles in matters concerning the Formation of our Seminarians. **Although we had made good leap in vocation promotion this year**, especially through the involvement of veteran Vocation Promoters like **Fr Johny Kanjirampambil**, the present scenario gives us reason to worry. In addition to that a lot of organisational problems regarding the pre-novitiate programs, first profession, final profession, ordinations of the deacons etc. are in a bit of confusion because we are not able to decide any of these things. These concerns take a deeper plunge when strategies are not choked out by the Staff of each Formation House.

I do appreciate the hard work of the Formators in our Province. They give a lot of time for moulding the future Missionaries down through the lanes of our Formation Program. In this context, **I would like to specially thank and place on record the generosity of the Sannidhi Minor Seminary under the leadership of Fr Christopher Crasta to accommodate the Brothers from SFS Seminary Ettumanoor and to conduct the Pre-novitiate program during this time of lockdown.**

My dear Formators, I request each one of you to take note of the following suggestions and recommendations and act on it without fail.

- Rectors of Each Seminary and Novitiate shall call a special community meeting at the earliest and evaluate the present scenario and its consequences on the Formation programs in your particular seminary.
- Continue intensively the daily Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and pray for our Seminarians and for more vocations.
- Personally evaluate the effectiveness of our ministry as Formators.
- In both the Minor Seminaries, the community, together with the Vocation Promoter, choke out a 'Plan B' to promote vocations. Vocation Promotion has to be done by all the Staff of the Minor Seminaries.
- Do contact the candidates and their parents through telephone calls and keep their motivation high.
- Deans of the Seminaries, in consultation with the Rector and the rest of the Staff plan out the academic programs for the coming year (taking into consideration also the unstable situation).
- Maintain the Seminary building and the property entrusted to you through common manual labour and team work.
- The Local Management of Indian Institute of Spirituality (IIS) should envisage plans and ways to address the matters concerning its Formation and functioning as an Institute of International repute.
- Please keep in regular touch with the Councilor in charge of Formation and update him about the existing situations.

My dear Confreres, It is very important that we take note of these matters and handle them with urgency. The councilor in charge of Formation, Fr Binu Edathumpambil, will be in regular contact with you. He shall also get in contact with the Core-committee and evaluate the present scenario.

Apostolate of Social & Innovative Ministries

My dear Confreres, the concerns of Social & Innovative Ministries need to be addressed very seriously too. Most of our Social Work programs in the province at the moment are institutionalised programs, with the exception of the activities of the FIDES India program which has a number of SHG programs involved in it. **Other programs like the Prateeksha Boys' Homes, Note Book Industry, ITI, Cloth Mill, Music Academy, DATA, ITSSCAT, Charis Niketan, DeCare, SFS Publications, forthcoming Language Academy** etc. will have to face abounding problems due to the present scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic. **How are we to address these matters? We have invested crores of rupees on these institutions and we need to study these matters carefully with the local animators and think further to address the emerging concerns.**

I would like to place on record my heartfelt congratulations to all our Confreres who are engaged very creatively in the Social Work Apostolates. **All the Social Apostolates that we have engaged in are very innovative and suiting to the life-situation of the people in the surrounding.** I specially place on record the wonderful services done by our centers and communities in eradicating the suffering of the people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Sannidhi Community at Mysore in association with the De Sales Bhavan Community** has distributed food materials to the needy people in the surrounding.
- **Malur Community together with the ITI Community Kolar** has been engaging vigorously in eradicating the suffering of the people.
- **In Kadisanahalli, Fr C. Joseph, together with his parishioners** has organised supply of food materials to the needy poor.
- **Fides India through its wing NEST** has engaged in distributing food items and other necessities to the people in different villages.
- **The Mermier Bhavan community under the banner of the SFS Institutions** have done yeomen service to the people of different walks of life who are in need of help and support.
- **Ulickal parish community under the leadership of Fr Shino Puthussery** has distributed food items to the poor parishioners and others in need.
- **Our Missionaries in Sedem, Gulbarga diocese,** are engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the poor.
- **Shiralkoppa Community in Shimogah** has done wonderful services to the poor in the surrounding villages through the distribution of food items.

I am sure that many others have engaged themselves in various support activities. I place on record my heartfelt gratitude to all of you for your generous engagements at this time of struggles and pain of the poor people. **Please continue to support the poor.**

At the same time, my dear Confreres, our Centers and institutions need to be taken care of through right planning and implementation of those plans. **It is high time that the local management sit together and evaluate, study and strategise certain plans to address the present situation.**

- Please call a community meeting and evaluate the present situation.

- Choke out certain looming issues and strategise plans to contain them.
- In accordance with the nature of the institution/s plan out the range of production, sale, or admissions of students, fee structure, salaries etc.
- Evaluate thoroughly the present scenario and visualise a 'Plan B' or even 'Plan C'.
- Take up a special study about the running of the Boys' Homes and Senior Citizens' Home.

The councilor in charge of SAIM, Fr Riju Vazheparambil, will be in contact with the different institutions and the management. He shall also contact the Core-committee and strategise plans accordingly.

Apostolate of Education

One of the main areas of concern that we need to address is the management of the educational institutions. We have a massive number of institutions, both in India and Africa. It looks a bleak possibility that the normal academic year would take shape, which equally means a lot of financial liabilities, such as reduction in fee, problems of salary payment, maintenance problems and so on in addition to the organisational struggles and other such important matters. **In Karnataka, where we have the maximum number of Education Institutions, the Government has announced a delayed opening of the education institutions.** It is high time that we evaluate the present situation immediately and choke out ways and means to address the emerging negative situation. It is very necessary that each problem has to be addressed locally as the situation differs from place to place.

- With immediate effect, each school community under the leadership of the Superior of the Community, Manager, Principal and the Procurator convoke a community meeting to evaluate the present situation of our educational institutions.
- Assess the important concerns that need to be addressed immediately
- Clarify and suggest ways and means to address the difficulties concerning the organisation of academic planning.
- Address issues concerning the admissions of the new teachers and non-teaching staff.
- Discuss matters concerning the admissions of the students, fee structures.
- Give a special thought about the salary payment of the teachers (evaluating the government policies) and evaluate how it shall be accomplished.
- Suggest different ways and means to maintain the building, the school buses and other properties that are belonging to the school

In this given situation, the local administration under the guidance of the Manager and the Principal has to be at its best. My dear Confreres, more than anything else, **we are engaged in a ministry that concerns about 30,000 children entrusted to our care.** It needs real planning and vision by those entrusted with the responsibilities. It is high time that each of you in the ministry together with the Councilor in charge of Education Rev. Fr A. Jabamalai and the Core-Committee have clear plan for the local institution and work on it.

Stewardship Apostolate

Of course, the stewardship Apostolate is yet another serious matter of concern that we need to address. Without finance and sources to generate it we can't manage any of the above-mentioned apostolates.

We are encountering serious financial crunch as the income fetching institutions are closed down. Our schools and other centers may not bring profit, as they used to, in the coming financial year. **Even on a strict level, we may have to begin to act on the need to reduce the payment to different communities at certain scale including the formation houses and other dependent communities.** Therefore, the following steps are necessary to be handled strictly:

- Each community, especially the dependent communities, has to realistically understand the shortage of money and begin to strategise spending on important and non-important things.
- Every education institution should present to the provincial bursar the present status of the financial situation.
- There is a very important need to curb some of our spending that leads to extravagance, especially on food, vehicles, clothing, gadgets etc.
- Please take extra care in the economic use of electricity, water and other natural resources.
- Cultivate the land and sustain the community through their production.
- Prepare the budget for next year with all these concerns in mind. The budget shall not be a mere artificial fulfilling of a routine activity, but it should be realistic and fitting to the struggling time that we are encountering.

The Provincial Bursar, Fr Vinod Kanat, shall be in touch with the Local Bursars and the Finance Core-Committee and discuss the matter with the Provincial Administration.

My dear Confreres, it is high time that we who are entrusted with different responsibilities in the province begin to raise the level of our functioning as members of the Province. We are not mere care takers or trouble shooters. We are responsible people. We are responsible to God so that we can serve His people in the most effective way. We need to strategise plans at moments like this to address effectively certain common and particular concerns for the growth of our province. Let us put our heads together to address the present scenario and come out with our own clarity regarding some of these matters.

Assuring you my constant accompaniment and love.

VOICE OF SFS

“One Requires to listen to the Word of God with right intentions, due attention and true obedience.”

Fraternally,



Fr Benny Koottanal MSFS
Provincial