1. **Introduction**

India is a land of different cultures and religions. The ‘unity in diversity’ marks one of the principal slogans which the Indians are singing for themselves and for the whole world since its origin! Indian secularism means that, every religion is admirable and they can profess and proclaim their faith and live their tradition. Hinduism is supposed to be the oldest living religion in the world and the vast majority of the inhabitants of India, around 80% of the population or about 800 million people, owe allegiance to Hinduism. With its age-old philosophy, culture and spirituality, Hinduism welcomed many other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. As it is witnessed today, India is home of every race, colour, culture, religion and spirituality.

2. **Christianity in India**

It is the strong believe of the Christians of India, especially the Christians of Syro-Malabar that, St. Thomas, the Apostle preached and converted Brahmin Hindus in the year 52 AD. According to the tradition, he converted several thousands to Christ and founded seven Christian communities at the cost of Malabar. Afterwards, the Apostle died as a martyr at Mylapore, near Madras in the present federal state of Tamilnadu, where his tomb is venerated even today. We have started our mission among the ‘St. Thomas’ Christians’, whose majority are present in southern part of India, Kerala. These vital members of the Catholic Church are under the Syro-Malabar rites, which are now present in many other states of India too.

3. **Our Presence in India: “A Dream Fulfilled…”**

Franciscans were already paid their visits in the early centuries of 1291 onwards. In 1321 four Franciscans, Thomas of Tolentino, James of Padua, Demetrius of Tiflis and Peter of Siena were settled at Thane near Bombay where they were martyred by the Mohammedans. By 1516 AD, the first Franciscan Church was established at Cochin which was dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua. The first Conventual who visited India was Fr. Gianbattista Lucarelli, a reformed Conventual in 1578. But it was with dream of St. Maximilian Kolbe that, Conventual Franciscans began to have their presence in India. On his missionary journey to Nagasaki, he arrived on 24th June 1932 in Ernakulam, Kerala. The bishops of both Latin and Syrian rites had offered support to begin his dream, which he called *Amalam*, the ‘City of Immaculate’. He already started his work to publish first local edition of *The Knight of the Immaculate*. But due to certain official delay from Rome and
the successive War and imprisonment of Kolbe in Nazi’s Camp, he could not complete this project. But Maximilian was convinced that one day his dream will come true. He wrote, “Now or after, somewhere in India we must arrive…” (Letter, 1.7.1932).

Though the Order had lost a golden opportunity and precious time for its development and expansion in India during the time of St. Maximilian, God had planned it after fifty years! In fact, in the year 1978, the new Minister General, Fr. Vitale Bommarico included India in his plan. By 15th December 1979, the Bishop of Kanjirappally diocese Mar Joseph Pawathil invited officially the Order to establish itself in his diocese. In 1980, General Curia had conferred to the Maltese friars the Indian Mission and thereby the realization of St. Maximilian’s dream. In January 24, 1981, first house was established at Chotty, in the diocese of Kanjirappally. From that time onwards, the Maltese missionaries prayed, worked and accompanied this mission till it became a Province in the year 2007, June 11.

4. St. Maximilian Kolbe Province of India: Growth in Different Perspectives

Our establishment in India was always linked with the dream of St. Maximilian of having a vineyard of Marian Franciscan apostolate in line with Order’s tradition. His spiritual presence was felt through all these years in everything we have done and went through! From 1981 onwards, the Province owns 11 friaries in India (south India). Our strength is not on the number of its friaries or the economical advantages, (which are comparatively less in respect of other religious institutions in India) but rather on its vitality of ideas that comes from the young and vibrant friars. We have 61 solemnly professed friars and among them there are 49 friar priests. And 41 temporary professed and 5 novices and around 60 aspirants are distributed in various formation houses.

a. Formation of Future Friars: “...Towards the Needs of the Province”

As it is stated in the Provincial Statutes, the purpose of Formation in our Order is Christocentric and aims to prepare the friars to follow the poor and humble Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis.

Four years plan of the Province has given priority to the prayer life of the friars as the basic foundation and which the religious life of a friar could be constructed. Motto of the Province, “Forming men of Prayer in Fraternity” itself shows this priority and the way to succeed the basic formation of its friars. The formation programs are focused on three different spheres;

- **Spiritual Formation:** it starts with the vocation discernment which consists the recruitment of formees and accompanies them till the Solemn Profession/Ordination during the different formation stages like three year minor seminary, one year Pre-novitiate, one year Novitiate and one year Regency, and seven years of philosophy and theology; the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist is the centre of the entire life of our seminaries. Together with official prayers of the Church, students are practicing also Franciscan prayers. From the Major seminary itself, a group of students are giving retreat to different schools and colleges, so that they propagate our Franciscan spirituality among the new generations.

- **Fraternity Formation:** this is also an important dimension of our formation which focuses the formation of community life among the students by assimilating Franciscan simplicity of living together. All our formation programs, like sharing, ‘community days’, visits of the houses of students, batch gatherings, Outings etc., are directed towards this basic
element of our Order. This sphere also includes human formation of our friars. Special classes are conducted on human behaviors, motivation, leaderships, and personality development during the formation years itself.

- **Mission Formation:** our formation plan also focuses that the friars should be adapted to the culture and needs of their times. The students get mission orientation already from the minor seminary through social exposure programs, visit of the mission centers, sharing of the missionaries etc.

**b. Mission of the Province: “…Responding to the Needs of the Church”**

Our Franciscan Charism is missionary oriented and has a universal outlook and approach. From the time of the foundation of our Order in India, we were called as ‘Mission of Order in India’, and we were trying to respond to the needs of the Church, in its work of evangelization. The Maltese friars were considered as the real missionaries in India, whose hard and painful works, their prayer and dedication and Franciscan spirit and simplicity helped to form our Province as it is seen today. Though we started to work in Kerala, a state where Christians are well settled, we began send our friars as missionaries by the establishment of Custody in 1995.

- **Mission in Andhrapredesh:** Indian friars took a bold decision to go and work among the poorest of the poor in the land of Andhra, where equality, justice and brotherhood are frequently violated. It is a land of many controversies like natural calamities, unjust cast systems, disparity between rich and poor etc. Our service is like a drop in the ocean but it made a meaningful contribution to many people. We are present in two places in Andhra, Dondapudy and Christianpet. We are focusing on the formation of faith through pastoral works and formation of young generation through education. In fact, we have started a Greyfriars Junior College and small hostel for the poor children.

- **Mission in Tamilnadu:** St. Francis embraced the leper who was untouchable in his time. In the same way, our Province embraced the most downtrodden people of our time, the AIDS patients in the year 2006. The goal of this non profitable charity trust is to be a positive force in addressing the comprehensive needs of the people living with HIV/AIDS, ensuring their dignity and overall quality of life, by motivating, caring, supporting and restoring them through income generation skills, with a priority for the palliative care for all and of those who are in the end stage of these disease. Four of our friars are working in this centre with the patients and many friars are involved directly or indirectly in conducting programs of study and awareness.

- **Mission in Srilanka:** As the request of Minister General to undertake a mission outside the territorial boundaries of India to assist the Order in its growth, Indian Province assists the Curia in its work of evangelization in Srilanka. Three of our friars are occupied in the pastoral field and in touch with the people of the locality. This mission is in its gradual growth and our aim is to respond to the needs of the Church in Srilanka.

- **Mission in Kerala:** The Conventuals in Kerala by their dedicated service to the society are flourishing each day. As Franciscans we offer our hand of friendship to all, irrespective of colour, caste or religion. Since the coming of the friars from Malta for the establishment of the Order, the greatest concern was to form the Friars so that they may integrate the principles of Franciscan Charism in Indian culture and to witness to the society the Franciscan spirit of brotherhood. In Kerala, our friars are engaged in the formation of the friars, pastoral works and other apostolate like SFO, MI, Retreats etc.
c. **Social Apostolate: “Towards Elevating the Indian Culture…”**

The social apostolate that sprouts from our Franciscan Charism and tradition are given their due importance since we believe that it is through them that our Order in India can contribute its spirituality to the local church. Our social service is modest because till now we opted not to have big social institutions. The following list will give you an understanding of what our Province is engaged in:

- **SFO**: Since many years, Capuchin friars were known as the spiritual assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order. But, since from 1993 onwards we have given much attention to the SFO fraternities and to help them to lead Christian life to the full and to assist them to live the Franciscan spirit in the society. We are taking care of almost 40 fraternities which are attached to our own friaries. Since few years a great movement of youth is growing up and they form themselves with the spiritual assistance of our friars as Youfra (Youth Franciscans). These two groups are giving vital influence to the society.

- **MI**: As a fulfillment of the desire of St. Maximilian, the Province is engaged in the work of Marian Apostolate through MI which was established on August 25, 1984. The members are assisted by our Friars in different field of social works. Among the students in formation, there is also an active group of MI members who are working in honour of Immaculate. Through the publication and other periodicals, we are trying to familiarize Franciscan and Marian spiritualities to the people of India. In fact, student friars in formation are publishing a bi-semester magazine, *Marian Times* for the seminarians and as a part of our publication; the Province is publishing also a monthly magazine, *Amalolbhava* (The Immaculate).

- **Franciscan Centre of Peace and Dialogue (FCPD)**: This is a particular apostolate of the Province which started on 3rd March, 1994. The Center was founded to promote the Spirit of Assisi that entered the world after the meeting of the representatives of the world religion at Assisi in 1986. As a response to the General Chapter of 1992 which was held in Mexico with the theme, “Peace and Dialogue in the Church”, our Province also engaged seriously to collaborate with all religions to bring around a new code of truly human and respectful relation and be partners with those who are inclined at promoting peace, safeguarding of creation and respect for life. ‘The Spirit of National Award’, ‘Annual Assisi Lecture’, ‘All Religions Peace Festival’, Housing Projects are the major works of FCPD in the society. The Centre also aims at a) by giving support through a public Award to the person who works and contribute in the filed of peace, Justice, safeguarding creation, ecumenism and dialogue; b) promoting and expressing solidarity with those who request help in situation of injustice; promote ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue in collaboration with CEFID Assisi; and raising awareness and deepening the understanding of the current social issues and injustice through the seminars or courses.

- **Greyfriars Publication**: St. Maximilian who once wrote: “we need to encircle the globe by words of life in printed form, so that the world may once again experience the joy of living”. Therefore the Province has organized from 1993 onwards a trust of publication with the name, *Greyfriars Publication*. Our friars are engaged in writing, editing like Franciscan Documentation and publishing many books, periodicals, magazines. We are dreaming like St. Maximilian a Printing press of our own in the future!

- **Franciscan Reconciliation Retreat (FRR)**: The preaching ministry is the essential part of our Charism. The ministry of the Franciscan Reconciliation Retreats (FRR) was born as a result of the invitation of the ‘the Conference of the Franciscan Family’, that in its letter,
‘Reconciled in Jesus Christ’ in 1997 suggested to have popular missions. Our friars had taken this effort in a new form by promoting Franciscan Spirit of Reconciliation and conducting many retreats in different parishes in Kerala state.

- **Social works:** as a part of social concern of the Order, our Province spends major part of its time with the poor people, and most downtrodden of our society. Through our benefactors from abroad and inside, especially through *Caritas Antoniana*, we have distributed their care and help in different parts of India like homes for the poor, education fund for the students, clinics, tailoring schools etc.

5. **Living the Conventual Charism: New Perspectives in the Changing Context of India**

   **a) Changing Society and its impact in the Spirituality**

   Today, we are living in a constantly changing society. We experience alterations in basic structures, behaviors, values and style of life of the people around. When behavior patterns change in large numbers, and this change is visible and sustained: once there is deviance from culturally-inherited values, rebellion against the established system may result, resulting in a change in the social order. We have to admit that this ‘rebellious mind’ of the modern era has changed or removed many good traditions of the past and now slowly want to remove the religion and God from its atmosphere. When the society is ‘Godless’, the main source of moral value will become vacuum, because the religion and faith play an important role in the behavioral code of the people. The absence of the morality and values may hinder seriously the life of the individual and successively the destruction of the society.

   **b) Presence of Conventual Charism in the Changing World**

   “*If God can change you, then God can use you to change some part of this world*”. When our newspapers and films glamorize immorality, undermine traditional family values and encourage selfishness, greed and lust; when criminals escape justice by legal technicalities; when half of the world suffers under totalitarian dictatorships, persecution and poverty; when pornography, perversion, abortions, terrorism and the occult are increasing - then we know that this world needs to be changed. We must be aware that there are many anti-Christian forces seeking to undermine and destroy the Christian Faith, including: persecution by major religious fanatics and communist governments; secular humanist domination of educational institutions, the entertainment industry and news media etc.

   Christianity calls us to action. In every Divine Call in Christian perspective, there is an invitation of ‘rebuilding His Church’. As the sons of St. Francis, we are called to rebuild ourselves and others. Every day is unique, every opportunity must be used. Time is limited in the Christian worldview. St. Francis said at the end of his life, “I have done everything what God told me to do, let He show you what you wanted to do...”. This is a personal invitation that the Seraphic Father is giving to each one of us, to change ourselves before we change the world.

   Today, both the *Magisterium* and theological reflection have admitted that Charism of the Order at its origin is a dynamic reality, a reality in movement, open even to considerable
development, homogeneous with the founding inspiration. Our Order has gone through serious talks and documents on this matter in the past. For example, the Extra Ordinary General Chapter of 1992 in Mexico states that: “The return of creativity, of not being static, the return to our origins, or beginnings, to the primitive inspiration, the living, dynamic, existential scientific knowledge of our roots, our cultural patrimony, Franciscan thought, which conferred coherence and cohesion upon the Franciscan school, is today indispensable, as never before, to continue being faithful to our Charism and, consequently to initiate a serious and healthy renewal and re-launching of the Order”.

In short, this document suggests that we must approach the ‘Conventual’ configuration of our Franciscan option with a greater degree of precision. The Chapter states again that, “this world is the place, which God calls on us to confess, announce, celebrate His Kingdom, it is ‘our convent’, ‘our land’, ‘our Church’”. This is not more a ‘fuga mundi’ but, rather living in the world by not belonging to the world. We need a meaningful quality and presence in the world among all other Institutions and Orders.

c) Living Conventual Identity in India

We Conventual Friars in India witness a time of great changes, challenges and hopes that happens day by day in our country. India is always admired by the whole world about its spirituality and diversity of culture. But this country is also highlighted for the presence of poverty, cast discrimination, injustice, corruption, political immoralities and economic imbalances. The modern terms of globalization, modernization brought obviously prosperity and development in some part of this large country, but it had taken away good values and principles. We, as Franciscans, are aware of this ‘diversities’ that exists in our country and around the world. We believe that Franciscans can restore and transform at least a small part of this country by restoring and transforming ourselves. In fact the main concern of our Province is: “Forming Men of Prayer in Fraternity”.

Just to make a catalogue of what I need to say about our Conventual identity in India, here are some points of reflection:

- **Experiencing and Witnessing to India as a Fraternity of Minority**: we believe that we are a group of humble people who are gathered in the name of the Lord, are led by the Divine power, animated by the Spirit of the Lord for living as ‘minors’ among these people of India. Fraternity and minority are the qualifying elements of our Conventual Franciscan Order. Today, the modern world goes after the individualism or ‘sectorism’, the witnessing of Fraternity is so important in India. As Francis’ sons, we are called to live whatever context we are happened to be. In difference to the other Congregations or Religious Institutions in India, our Order is well reputed and accepted for this quality of behaviour. The mutual help, support and respect between the Friars should bring to the people an attraction to this way of life.

- **Living with the Culture of India as Indian Friars**: Like a beautiful lotus in the river, though its roots are beneath the mud, on the brink of the river it gives fragrance and serenity to the people! As every country, the usages, traditions and cultures of the India should be purified. As Christians, through our works and services, we are doing this tough job since twenty five years of the foundation of our Province. What we must do is not to be alienated from the people but rather, accompanying these like Jesus accompanied the tired and hopeless disciples on the way to Emmaus.

- **Franciscan Witness to God- humble- Love**: India, (Hindu religion) since thousand of years, believes in powerful Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, the gods of creation, sustaining and
destruction. As Friars of St. Francis, we must witness our lives for a God who was humble, poor, and minor who was born in a manger, an incarnated Son of God. This is also the mission of our Province. I believe that, the poor and downtrodden and the humble will come across this God who was poor, humble and defeated!

d) Kaleidoscope of Dreams that yet to be Fulfilled…

We are aware of the task of our Order in India that, how can re-express in the present time, the values contained within our Order while holding as always valid the essential Conventual configuration which it had from the beginning while expressing its original Charism. In other words, it is a task of creative thinking and living of the Conventual Charism in India. Some of them are cataloging here:

- Recognize, encourage and support all Christian communities and other groups engaged in the evangelization or proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the land of India and other parts of the world.
- Reaching out to the each corners of this vast land of India as being humble ambassadors of God’s Kingdom.
- Giving particular attention in forming Friars of prayer, humility and minority throughout their formation stages.
- Providing challenging experiences of Indian realities to the Formees during the formation stages.
- Adaptation of genuine traditions, usages and culture of India and its spirituality as a way of enculturation of our Conventual Charism in India.
- Utilize every opportunity to share our Christ experience with people of other faith who are in the offices, factories, schools, hospitals and neighborhoods.
- In view of promoting Franciscan spirit in India, we are planning to organize a ‘Village of Communication’ in the near future which will provide challenging and creative missions to the friars.
- Raising awareness and deepening the understanding of the current issues of justice, peace and Ecology among the people through our Franciscan Centre of Peace and Dialogue. The FCPD also plans to give special guidelines and information to the Indian clergy on the vision and views of the Church with regards to various issues and matters that comes under its special Charism. For example, the faithful are in need of more clarification in Pastoral Letters of Local Bishops and Encyclicals of the Church which are frequently misinterpreted by the different political groups. So classes or seminars that are conducted on these topics by eminent scholars or experts on these matters with cooperation of neighboring parish priests will do a great help to the Church. Besides these, different classes on important issues that come across in our society, will spread the message of FCPD to the people. This Centre is working among the religions since fifteen years of its foundation. It plans also in future to have more contact and dialogue with other religions of India and seeks support to promote the “Spirit of Assisi”. For this, the Centre should promote Inter-religious prayer meetings at local, regional, national level. The members of the FCPD must also have experience with CEFID and its work at Assisi.
- To form efficient Friars for the future of the FCPD in different fields of Franciscanism, Spirituality, World Religion, Social Work etc.
- Facilitate cooperation with other Franciscan families in India.
- To facilitate the awareness among the faithful and people of other religion, we should focus also on providing Christian Enquiry Centers, Bible Correspondence courses, libraries and Book stalls which may exhibit the wholesome literature, experiences on Jesus and Christian faith.

- To begin social Institutions to help and supporting most abandoned people of India. For this, our Province already started, AIDS Centers, Hostels for the poor children, small dispensaries etc. We are planning to widen these projects in the remote village and states of India.

- Focusing on the people who are victims of the natural calamities and those who are marginalized morally by the society.

- Organizing youth and forming them in faith, morality and human values. *Youfra* should bring to the front of the services of the Church.

- Our parishes also should focus on the formation of families, respect of the old and women of our society.

- Efficient retreats should be conducted by the FRR (Franciscan Reconciliation Retreat) of the Province. Through this popular mission, the Friars will be engaged in the formation of faith and family life of the faithful Christians of India. FRR should also be promulgated to the other States other than Kerala.

- Conscientious the student friars about our preferential option for the poor and needy during the different formation stage itself. In order to facilitate this, we organize various social exposure programs, mission experiences like ‘Mission20’ (twenty days of mission experiences) in existing mission of the Province and other mission lands of India.

- Provincial level the existing group of the student Friars, *KPM (Kolbe Prison Mission)* of our Major Seminary at Kolbe Ashram. It is an initiative of our student Friars with the support of the Formators which started in the year 2008. This groups aims to work among the prisoners by visiting the prisons and their rehabilitation centers. This is hopeful and most needed mission of this time, which is more near to Kolbean spirituality. Many of our student friars are engaged in the mission of KPM in their weekly visit and conducting prayer services and entertaining programs for the prisoners of our locality. Obviously we are most welcomed by both prisoners and officials of the prisons.

- Our Province should be self-sufficient in providing or canalizing funds for our projects. The Province is organizing a Development Office for the advancement of funds and managing the social projects of our Province. The Province is forming the friars who will be expert in the field of economy and management to run successfully our existing services and the future plans.

- The Province is giving primary importance in the field of recruitment of vocation and formation, in forming highly motivated future Friars for continuing our mission in India. Throughout the formation years, talented students in different fields should be given particular training in their interests, which are according to the spirit of our Conventual Charism.

- Forming student friars in different fields like; music, literature, instruments, carpentry, painting, computer, sports, technology etc.

- The Province is conducting every year official gathering of its sons for promoting the spirit of fraternity and genuine belongingness. There should be also unofficial gathering among the students, friars and priests of the Province in order to avoid ‘group-ism’ or ‘batch-ism’.
6. Conclusion

We admit that Indian mission is a good example of hard work, prayer and organization of our past Maltese missionaries. But behind all these success what we see today after 25 years of its foundation in India, we have to acknowledge also the vital part that played by each of our Indian friars. Our readiness, responsibility, joviality, courage and youthfulness brought to the Province colorful achievements in different fields.

In this vast ‘continent’ of India, we are present only in three states. Our desire is to be flourished all over India bringing to each of it the taste of Conventual Charism. Our aim is ‘to be’ in India and ‘to be Indian friars’ rather than ‘to do’ something or to be estranged from these people.

As we are aware of the success and achievements of our Province in its short time of expansion, we are also conscious about the problems and troubles that happen normally to any other Provinces. We are thankful to the Lord for having purified us through suffering and cross during these years, the years where we had to face and overcome troubles and stresses with regards to the life of our Province.

We are still young in our beginning, in our thoughts and in our ages. It is true that the vibrant thoughts of the young must pass through the genuine experiences. We have to be more committed, responsible and feel one with the Province and the Order. Indian Province is a divine fusion of St. Kolbe and Seraphic Father! Like the creativity of St. Kolbe blend with the humbleness of St. Francis, our vitality as a young Province should be purified with experiences and directed towards the original simplicity of our Founder. Day by day, we are passing through moments of crisis and difficulties of different forms and colors, but we consider all these are the moments of opportunity to re-think and re-elaborate rather than mere danger!

I thank once again the Lord for bringing us good number of youngsters into our Province and Order and dedicative persons who are working hard to transform them to the Lord. God may bless our Province and our Holy Order!

Fraternally

Fr. Louis Panthiruvelil OFMConv.