

THE HISTORY OF FIHM

*"I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation;
Behold, I will not restrain my lips, O Lord, you know."
— Psalm 40:9-10*

The Almighty God predestined **Rev. Fr. Louis Savinien Dupuis, MEP**, a zealous missionary from Sens, France, to become an instrument of transformation for women in India—liberating them from the chains of ignorance and societal slavery through the gift of education.

In the mid-19th century, the socio-political climate of Tamil Nadu mirrored that of a developing nation. Women were marginalized, often treated as subordinates, and denied basic rights, especially education. Recognizing this deep-rooted inequality, **Rev. Fr. Dupuis** arrived in Pondicherry, India, on **February 9, 1832**, to join his fellow missionaries of the **Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP)** in their evangelical and social outreach.

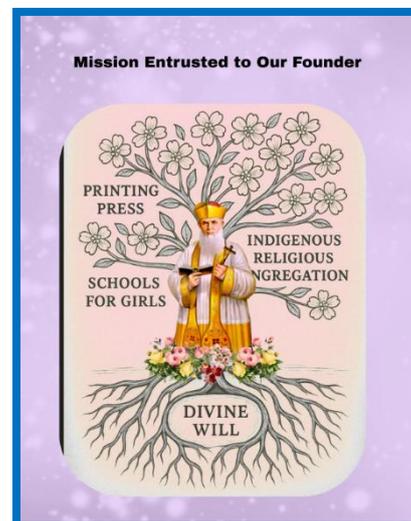
Deeply moved by the plight of women, the missionaries of the Pondicherry Mission discerned that **educating woman was essential** to restoring their dignity, strengthening family structures, and ultimately, fostering a more just and enlightened society. It was also seen as a foundation for nurturing vocations and preparing indigenous clergy.

A pivotal moment in this vision came during the **Synod of Pondicherry**, held from **January 18 to February 13, 1844**, under the leadership of **Mgr. Clément Bonnard**, then Bishop of the Pondicherry Mission. Among several pressing issues discussed, **the education of girls** emerged as a central concern.

During the synod, **Fr. Dupuis** was entrusted with three significant responsibilities:

1. **To develop the Printing Press** – for evangelization purpose
2. **To establish an Indigenous Religious Congregation** – specifically dedicated to the education and upliftment of girl children.
3. **To found schools for girls** – to provide them access to formal education and empower their future.

Thus began the noble journey that would later blossom into the **Foundation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (FIHM)**—a congregation rooted in compassion, courage, and commitment to the mission of Christ through the empowerment of women.



FOUNDATION OF THE FIRST INDIGENOUS WOMEN CONGREGATION

At a time when women's education was scarcely considered in India, **Rev. Fr. Louis Savinien Dupuis** encountered immense resistance in his effort to establish a religious congregation for indigenous women. Yet, being a man of vision, unwavering faith, and deep commitment to his mission, he faced these challenges with courage and wisdom.

Through his persistent and tireless efforts, **the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for Indigenous Women** was founded on **October 16, 1844**, in Pondicherry. The congregation began with **Sr. Theresammal** from Carmel Convent as its first **Mother Superior**, along with **three novices: Savariammal** and **Annammal** from Cuddalore, and **Theresa** from Pondicherry.

The very next day, on **October 17, 1844**, Fr. Dupuis established a **school exclusively for girls**—one of the first of its kind in Southern India during the mid-19th century. Today, that humble beginning has evolved into a **flourishing Higher Secondary School**, located on **Mission Street, Pondicherry**, with an enrolment of over **6,000 female students**.

Despite holding several key responsibilities—including **Manager of the Mission Press** and **Pro-Vicar of Pondicherry**—Fr. Dupuis remained deeply committed to the **spiritual formation of the sisters** and the **quality of their service** to God's people. He instilled in them a **thirst for divine love**, a **spirit of simplicity**, a **passion for women's education**, **compassion for the poor**, **hospitality**, and a strong sense of **accountability**.

In **1864**, during the tenure of **Msgr. Joseph Isidore Godelle**, the congregation received **canonical approval** from **Pope Pius IX** as a **Diocesan Congregation**, marking a significant milestone in its ecclesial recognition and growth.

Fr. Dupuis personally formed the sisters in the **virtues of religious life** and in dedicated **service to God**. Though frail in health, his **unshakable will power** and **missionary zeal** enabled him to work relentlessly for the congregation's growth until his peaceful death on **June 4, 1874**.

In the face of ongoing challenges, Fr. Dupuis **founded 10 convents and 12 schools for girls with 84 sisters** between **1844 and 1874**. As a final act of spiritual legacy, he authored a book titled "*Thuravara Uthyanam II*", which he presented to the sisters as his **spiritual testament** or '**Death Will**'.

For **30 years**, Fr. Dupuis served as the **Leader and Director of the Congregation**, embodying the ideals of a **holy man** and a **faithful servant of God par excellence**. He left behind a rich legacy of **faith in divine providence**, **simplicity**, **obedience**, **humility**, **sacrifice**, **hard work**, **sincerity**, **loyalty**, and **spiritual accountability**—values that continue to inspire generations of sisters within the congregation.

EARLY GROWTH OF FIHM UNDER THE DIRECTION OF M.E.P. PRIESTS

The early growth and consolidation of the **Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (FIHM)** were deeply influenced by the dedicated service of the **Missions Étrangères de Paris (M.E.P.) priests**, who served as spiritual directors and guides during its formative years.

Leadership of Rev. Fr. Francis J. Berges (1874–1891)

Appointed as the **2nd Director of the Congregation**, **Rev. Fr. Francis J. Berges** played a pivotal role in the development of the Congregation from **1874 to 1891**:

- He **officially inaugurated the Novitiate** at the **Mother House in Pondicherry** in **1874**, ensuring a strong foundation for formation.
- In **1875**, he **convened the first General Chapter**, during which **Rev. Mother Maria Natchathiram** was elected as the **1st Superior General** of the Congregation.
- The **Superior General**, while leading the Congregation, continued to receive **guidance and directions from the appointed directors**, ensuring both spiritual and administrative growth.

Fr. Berges was known for his **wisdom, piety, intelligence**, and **deep dedication** to the mission. His contributions included:

- **Affiliation of the Congregation** to the **Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi** on **18th July 1886**, shaping its Franciscan spiritual identity.
- Introduction of the **official dress code**:
 - Black saree with red border
 - Dark blue veil and mantle
 - Franciscan cord and Rosary
- **Publication of the guidebook**, "*Thaimargalin Pokkisham*", meant for the Superiors of FIHM.
- **Revision and printing of the Constitutions**, solidifying the foundational principles.
- Initiation of **new convents and schools outside the Pondicherry Vicariate**, expanding the Congregation's mission outreach.

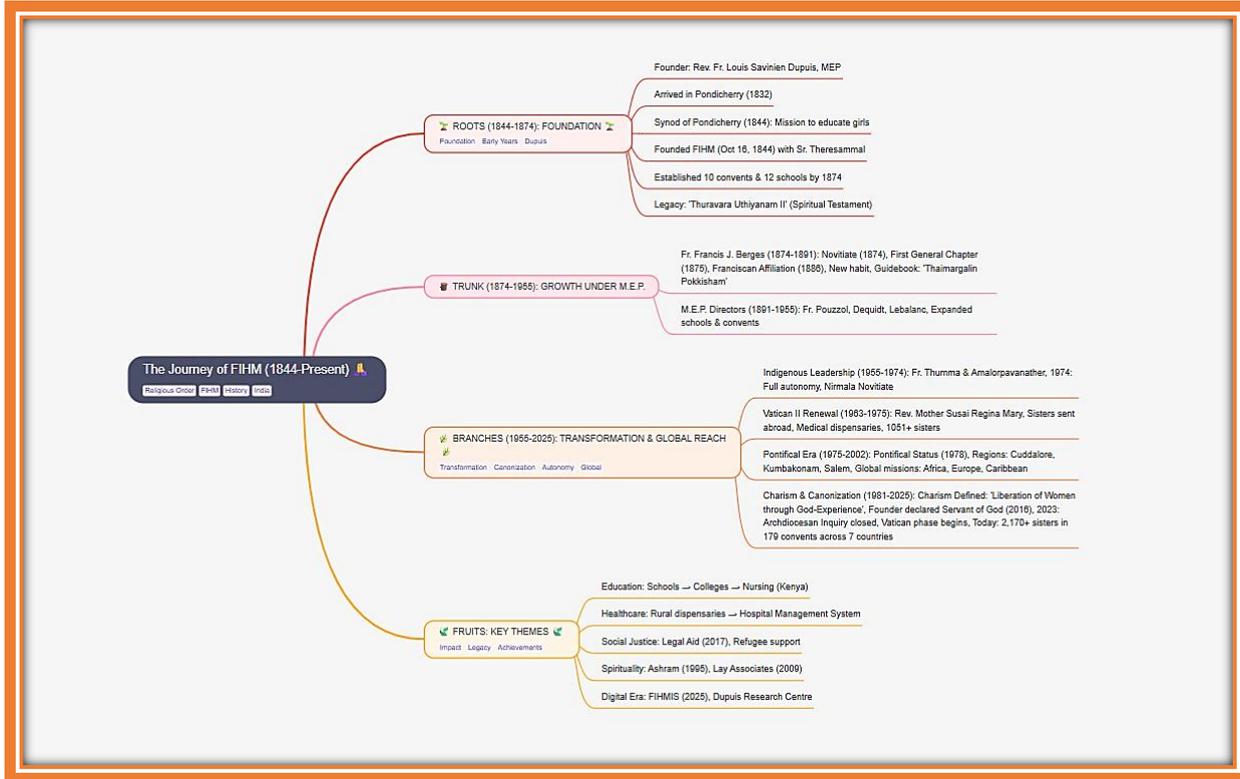
Continued Growth under Successive M.E.P. Directors (1891–1955)

The leadership legacy was continued by:

- **Rev. Fr. Clement Pouzzol**
- **Rev. Fr. Julien Dequidt**
- **Rev. Fr. Alexander Lebalanc**

These M.E.P. priests directed the Congregation between **1891 and 1955**, bringing **significant reforms and improvements** in structure, formation, and mission work. Their guidance

strengthened the spiritual discipline and administrative efficiency of the Congregation.



Transition To Indigenous Leadership

In **1955**, a new chapter began in the history of FIHM, as the **Directorship** was entrusted to indigenous priests.

- **Rev. Fr. Joseph Thumma**
- **Rev. Fr. Amalorpavanather**

served as directors from **1955 to 1973**, guiding the Congregation with insight and cultural rootedness.

From **1974 onwards**, the Congregation began to function **independently**, without external directors, symbolizing a significant step toward **self-governance and maturity**.

Centenary Celebration

The **Centenary of the Foundation** of the Congregation was joyfully celebrated in **1944** in Pondicherry, during the tenure of **Rev. Mother Theophile Mary**. By then, the **unfailing love and providence of God** had abundantly blessed the Congregation, with the **number of sisters surpassing 400**—a powerful testament to its spiritual vitality and mission outreach.

LANDMARKS IN THE GROWTH OF THE CONGREGATION

Bifurcation Of FIHM

As the years passed, the **Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (FIHM)** continued to grow despite numerous challenges. Through perseverance and faith, the sisters established more **schools and homes for girls**, aiming to educate and uplift them spiritually and socially.

In **1947**, due to **language barriers**, the sisters who had joined from **Kerala** were given the opportunity to function as a separate entity. As a result, the Congregation was **peacefully bifurcated** on **April 7, 1947**, into:

- **FIHM Pondicherry**
- **FIH Quilon**

This marked a new phase in the regional growth of the mission while preserving the original charism.

Renewal Of FIHM In The Light Of The Second Vatican Council

Rev. Mother Susai Regina Mary was elected as the **11th Superior General**, serving from **1963 to 1975**. Her visionary leadership brought about a time of spiritual and ministerial renewal, strongly influenced by the directives of the **Second Vatican Council**.

Key milestones under her governance included:

- **Higher Education:**

For the first time, sisters were **sent abroad for higher studies**. Some were also **sent for medical training**, leading to the **establishment of rural dispensaries** in **Tamil Nadu** and **Andhra Pradesh**, serving poor and illiterate communities where no medical facilities existed.

- **Implementation of Vatican II Reforms:**

Rev. Mother Susai Regina Mary guided the Congregation through the **renewal of the Rules**, aligning them with the **spirit of the Second Vatican Council**. She prepared the sisters spiritually and intellectually for this transformation.

- **Expansion of Ministries:**

Numerous **convents, schools, and orphanages** for girls were opened across **South India**. The sisters began working in various **Catholic institutions** such as the **Lumen Institute**, contributing meaningfully to the local Church.

- **Focus on Rural Mission:**

In keeping with the mission to serve the **oppressed and marginalized**, most institutions were founded in **rural areas**, recognizing villages as the **backbone of India**.

- **Spiritual and Academic Formation:**

Emphasis was placed on both **spiritual growth** and **academic excellence**. Sisters actively taught **Catechism** and other subjects, nurturing the **faith, spirituality, and social awareness** of young women, thereby strengthening families and communities.

- **Growth in Vocations:**

By the end of her tenure, the Congregation had grown to **over 1051 sisters**, a sign of God's abundant blessing and the fruitfulness of the mission.

- **Autonomous Governance & Formation House:**

In **1974**, the Congregation began operating **independently**, without external directors. A **new formation house**, “**Nirmala Novitiate**,” was constructed and inaugurated on **May 11, 1974**, commemorating the **100th death anniversary** of the Founder, Rev. Fr. Louis Savinien Dupuis.

Transition to Indigenous Leadership & Vatican II Influence

In **1955**, the Congregation marked a significant transition as **indigenous priests** took over the role of Directors:

- **Rev. Fr. Joseph Thumma** and **Rev. Fr. Amalorpavanather** served as Directors from **1955 to 1973**.
- This change fostered a greater sense of **local autonomy and cultural relevance**, leading the Congregation into a new era of self-governance.
- By **1974**, the Congregation began functioning **independently without external directors**, marking the beginning of a fully self-led institution.

Centenary Celebration – 1944

The **Centenary of the Congregation’s foundation** was joyfully celebrated in **1944** in **Pondicherry**, under the leadership of **Rev. Mother Theophile Mary**.

- The event was a testimony to **God’s providence and unconditional love** that had guided the Congregation through a century.
- By the end of 1944, the **number of sisters** in the Congregation had grown to **more than 400**, reflecting the **fruitfulness and dedication** of the mission.

This early phase laid the **spiritual, structural, and educational foundations** that would support FIHM’s dynamic growth in the decades to come, especially as it entered the era of renewal inspired by the **Second Vatican Council**.

Pontifical Status and Delegation of Leadership

Rev. Mother Faustina Mary was elected as Superior General in 1975.

- She continued the tradition of sending sisters for higher studies both in India and abroad.

- The Congregation expanded its ministry to include evangelization and social outreach.
- In 1976, in response to the Indian Government's appeal, medical sisters were sent to North India to assist Pakistani refugees.
- On **May 21, 1978**, the Congregation was administratively divided into three regions: **Cuddalore, Kumbakonam, and Salem.**
- A landmark achievement came on **September 25, 1978**, when the Congregation was elevated to the **Pontifical Right**, thanks to the tireless efforts of Mother Faustina Mary and her council.
- She actively promoted the **Devotion to Divine Mercy.**
- In 1980, following its new Pontifical status, the **Constitutions of FIHM were revised and finalized.**

In-depth Study of the Charism and Overseas Expansion

In 1981, **Rev. Mother Emilia Mary** was elected as Superior General.

- To support the ongoing formation of junior sisters, a **Juniorate Home** was built in Pakkamudayanpet, Pondicherry.
- In 1982, **Pope John Paul II** approved the revised Constitutions.
- Mother Emilia Mary led a thorough exploration of the Congregation's Charism with scholarly assistance, culminating in the definition:
"In the Experience of God towards the Liberation of Women."
- Extensive sessions were conducted to help sisters understand and embody this Charism in religious life and service.
- In **April 1989**, the **mortal remains of the Founder** were transferred from the Cathedral Cemetery, Pondicherry, to the Novitiate at Pakkamudayanpet.
- **FIHM's mission expanded internationally to North India, East Africa, Germany, and Jamaica**, focusing on healthcare and education.
- On **May 23, 1990**, due to rapid growth, the Congregation was reorganized into three Provinces: **Pondy-Cuddalore, Trichy, and Madurai.**
- By the end of 1992, the Congregation had **over 800 members in 133 convents.**

Higher Education and Rapid Growth in the New Millennium

In 1993, leadership passed to **Rev. Mother S. Regina Mary**, who was elected Superior General.

- As the Congregation approached its 150th year, it celebrated its **Sesquicentennial Jubilee in 1994**, having made a profound impact on Indian society, particularly women.

- An **Ashram** was established on **January 20, 1995**, to integrate indigenous spirituality into community life.
- To meet growing demands, many sisters earned qualifications in diverse fields — becoming evangelists, educators, doctors, nurses, and social workers.
- The Congregation entered **higher education**, founding **colleges across Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, and Andhra Pradesh**, offering empowerment and employment opportunities for young women.

Key Developments:

- In **1998**, Andhra Pradesh was declared a **Province** due to an increase in convents.
- Missionary sisters were sent to **Papua New Guinea, the USA, and Italy**.
- Inspired by the sisters' service, young women from **East Africa** joined the Congregation. A **formation house** was established in **Kenya on December 19, 1999**.
- New convents were opened across India and in **Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania**.
- In **2002**, East Africa was declared as **Region**.

Governance under the Dicastery

- From **December 6, 2003 to September 15, 2008**, the Congregation was guided by two **Pontifical Commissaries**:
Most Rev. Dr. Madalaimuthu Ambrose and **Rev. Fr. A. Louis**.
- Under Fr. A. Louis, the Charism was newly articulated as:
“The sanctification of sisters for the sanctification of women.”
- In **2007**, the **first Evangelization Centre** was opened in **Karaikal, India**, to continue spreading the Gospel and serving the people.

Revitalizing in the Path of Franciscan Spirituality and Lay Associates Integration

In **2008**, the governance of the Congregation was entrusted to **Rev. Mother John Britto Mary**, who was elected as **Superior General** along with her **five Councillors**.

- Their leadership was guided by **Rev. Fr. Amaladass Manickam, O.F.M**, appointed by the **Dicastery**.
- Each Province was administered by a **Provincial and her Councillors**, appointed by **Rev. Fr. A. Louis** with the guidance of the Dicastery.
- In **February 2012**, four new Provincials with five Councillors were appointed under the same guidance, serving until **May 2014**.
- The **Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi** was incorporated into the Congregation's **Book of Constitution**.

- To strengthen ministry at the peripheries, a branch of **lay associates**, titled *Immaculate Associates*, was established in **2009**.
- The **medical ministry** expanded through the establishment of a **School of Nursing in Nairobi, Kenya**, catering to societal health needs.
- A visionary plan emerged to establish an **Institute of Health Sciences in India**, aimed at empowering young girls from economically weaker backgrounds through education and employment.
- In **April 2014**, the **mortal remains of the Founder** were transferred from **Pakkamudayanpet** to the **Immaculate Heart of Mary Generalate**, where a dignified **Dupuis Memorial** was erected.

Initiation of the Cause of Canonization

- In **2010**, a new convent was founded in the **birth Diocese of our Founder in Sens–Auxerre, France**, with four sisters assisting in the Diocese’s pastoral work.
- During this period, the **official process of the Cause of Canonization** for the Founder was initiated, thanks to the earnest efforts of **Rev. Mother John Britto Mary**.

Intensive Focus on the Canonization of Our Founder

In **May 2014**, **Rev. Mother Brunolf Mary Fatima Paula** was elected as **Superior General**, along with five Councillors. The new administration emphasized religious renewal and academic formation:

- Sisters were trained in various **secular disciplines** to meet ministry needs.
- Responding to legal challenges faced by the marginalized, a **Legal Service Centre** was established in **2017**, staffed by sisters trained as **lawyers**.
- The mission in **East Africa** was strengthened and an **English Medium School** was launched in **Tanzania**. Additionally, the **convent in Germany** was re-established.

175th Founding Anniversary (2019)

The Congregation celebrated its **175th anniversary**, marking nearly two centuries of unwavering service:

- Charitable works and commemorative services were organized globally.
- The **Dupuis Archival Research Centre and Museum** was inaugurated in **Pakkamudayanpet, Pondicherry**.
- Gratitude was expressed for the **Founder, Directors, former Superiors General**, and well-wishers.
- By this time, the Congregation had grown to **over 2,000 sisters** across **183 convents worldwide**.

Founder Declared 'Servant of God'

- Continued commitment to the **Cause of Canonization** was evident through deeper historical studies and promotion of the Founder's legacy.
- The Founder's virtues were promoted within the Congregation's apostolate and community life.
- On **April 4, 2016**, the **Dicastery for the Cause of Canonization**, Vatican, Rome, officially declared **Rev. Fr. Louis Savinien Dupuis** as '**Servant of God**', the first step toward sainthood.
- Archival materials related to the Founder's life were collected, preserved, and shared through **Superior General's circulars**, deepening communal spiritual revival.

Research and Publications

- In **2017**, **national and international seminars** were held on the **life and ministry of the Servant of God**.
- A **new convent** was also established in **Sens, France**, his birthplace.
- Several books were published by the **Louis Savinien Dupuis Research Centre**, including:
 - *Twinkle Stars in Heaven*
 - *The Early 30 Years History of the Congregation (1844–1874)*
 - *Louis Savinien Dupuis: Biography*
 - *Dupuis' Circulars to FIHM*
 - *The Heartbeat of Missionaries*
 - 4 books of Dupuis in current Tamil:
 - *Illara Uthiyanam*
 - *Nandrai Ninai*
 - *Thuravara Uthiyanam Vol. I*
 - *Thuravara Uthiyanam Vol. II*

God's Intervention Through the Rough Ride

- In **March 2020**, as preparations for the General Chapter were underway, the **COVID-19 pandemic** disrupted the world and Congregation.
- Due to the pandemic and internal conflicts, the **General Chapter was postponed for two years**.
- In **May 2022**, the **Dicastery for Consecrated Life** appointed **Most Rev. Dr. George Antonysamy** as **Pontifical Commissary**.

- Along with **Rev. Bro. Victor Dass, SHC**, he led the sisters into the **26th General Chapter**, held in **July 2022**, where essential amendments were made to the guidelines for religious life and ministry.
- At that time, the Congregation comprised **over 2100 sisters in 181 convents** worldwide.

Journeying with God's Surpassing Love

In **August 2022**, the Dicastery appointed **Rev. Mother L. Jeya Mary** as the **17th Superior General**, along with her five Councillors and new Provincial and Regional Superiors (for Dupuis Region and East Africa).

- All leaders took their oath at the **Generalate on 11th August 2022**.
- **Most Rev. Dr. George Antonysamy** was also appointed as **Pontifical Assistant** for this term.
- Rev. Mother L. Jeya Mary emphasizes Gospel values and encourages living the charism of the Founder.

Progress in the Cause of Canonization

- Through concerted efforts, the **Archdiocesan Inquiry** for the Canonization of **Servant of God Louis Savinien Dupuis** was **officially closed and celebrated** at the **Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Pondicherry & Cuddalore** on **7th June 2023**.
- The **Roman phase of the Cause** began with an opening ceremony in **October 2023 at the Vatican**.

Other Recent Developments

- The **150th Death Anniversary** of the Founder was **meaningfully commemorated** in all FIHM institutions. A **legacy video** was created and shared on the **FIHM YouTube channel**.
- **Digitalization** of Congregational records began with the **launch of FIHMIS** and a **revamped FIHM website** in **January 2025**.
- A **Hospital Management System** was established across all health centers.
- The **Dupuis Archives** at Pakkamudayanpet were **upgraded to a full-fledged Research Centre**.

MARCHING FORWARD WITH DIVINE PROVIDENCE

“He saved us not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.” – Titus 3:5

Our Founder, Servant of God Louis Savinien Dupuis, entrusted the Congregation wholeheartedly to Divine Providence. His holy life, tireless labor, and profound sacrifices laid the strong and enduring foundation of the Congregation. His spirit and unquenchable thirst for mission continue to echo through the corridors of our convents and institutions.

Under the **patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary** and through the **intercession of our Founder**, the mission of the Congregation extends across **four continents**—**Asia, Africa, Europe, and America**—reaching **seven countries**: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, France, Germany, Italy, and the USA, in addition to our motherland, India.

By the **unceasing providential care and love of God**, the Congregation has grown to include **over 2,170 members**, serving in **179 convents** around the world. The sisters are actively involved in:

- **Pastoral Ministry** – nurturing the spiritual lives of communities,
- **Education** – enlightening minds and shaping hearts,
- **Social Work** – uplifting the marginalized and empowering the vulnerable,
- **Healthcare** – tending to the sick with compassion,
- **Geriatric Care** – offering dignity and comfort to the elderly.

These ministries are the sacred portals through which our sisters proclaim the Gospel, empower women, and reach out to the unreached.

The **Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Pondicherry**, continue their sacred journey with unwavering faith in Divine Providence. Guided by the protection and intercessory power of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Founder, may the FIHM sisters **march ever forward in holiness**, becoming **greater witnesses of Christ** through their **selfless service to women and the needy**.