

The Pioneers

Bishop Bataillon returned to France from the island of Wallis in 1856. By then Françoise Perroton had been 10 years alone in Oceania. Bataillon's presence in Lyon made an enormous impact, and as he visited different parishes in the city, drumming up support for the missions, he took the place by storm. Marist priest François Yardin, a great supporter of the Oceania Mission, wrote to the missionaries that Bishop Bataillon "made a great impression wherever he went, moved the hearts of many, gained many sympathetic ears, and in a very few months Lyon and its neighbourhood had as many as 6,000 new members for the work of the Propagation of the Faith." Bataillon did more than gain support in France. Very likely inspired by his preaching and presence, a number of young women volunteered for work in Oceania as lay missionaries. From these, three were chosen to set out with Bataillon. François Yardin wrote to Victor Poupinel about these women: "In addition to the four Fathers and three Brothers, there will be some women.... There are three of them: one destined to join Mlle Perroton, while the two others are to go to another station.... All of these women are outstanding. I received them yesterday as novices in the Third Order." These three set sail in 1857. In 1858 and 1860 seven more young women followed them. These women, along with Françoise Perroton, make up the 11 "Pioneers" of what was to become another branch of the Marist Project: the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM). The letters sent to, by, and about these Pioneers have been collected and published in four volumes. They amount to over 800 pages. Written with that freshness found in letters never intended for publication, they tell the story of the raw reality of mission life, stripped of all its romantic illusions. These women were all rugged and generous individualists, some insensitive and others hypersensitive. Their letters reveal their conflicts with each other, the difficulties they had with some of the missionary priests, the warmth and tenderness of men like Poupinel and Yardin, the isolation - sometimes painful, and sometimes eagerly sought as an escape from the difficulties of living together. And yet, these women stuck at it, in some cases for over 38 years without ever returning to France. From the start, and through all their complicated history, the Pioneers and those who followed them clung to three burning desires: to be missionary, to be religious, and to be Marist.

On August 26, 1847 Father Colin gave a closing address at the Retreat. He told us, "You who are soon to depart with the new contingent, go to Oceania. Mary will be with you.... You are going to leave your homeland, your relatives, your friends, everything, to save souls and to suffer martyrdom. Oh yes, if it is not a martyrdom of blood, it will be a martyrdom of hunger, a martyrdom of thirst, a martyrdom of heat, of pain, of anguish, of tears. We shall pray for you here."

The Mayet Memoirs

Foundation stones

These women – the 11 who came from France and the Oceanians who very quickly joined them – are for us "the Foundation Stones of our Congregation". They gave the initial impetus. During the Congregation's long years of gestation, evolution and organisation, they were its motivating element, the main nucleus.... Each of them of course, had her own personality, which comes through in their letters and those of the priests. But there are some fundamental traits which are more or less pronounced depending on each one's temperament. To undertake such an adventure in that day and age, they had to be women with extraordinary *strength of character*. Their capacity for *adaptation* and their *enterprising spirit* are evident; like Françoise, they had great *daring*, which was coloured by *humility*. Their endurance aroused great admiration.... We find in their lives the three elements which constitute our proper vocation in the Church: missionary, Marist, Religious.... They all belonged to the Third Order of Mary. They were not only influenced by Marist spirituality, but imbued with it. One could say that they also enriched and developed that spirituality, since they lived the Marist missionary spirit on a daily basis.... They therefore gave Marist spirit that world-wide missionary coloration, since they gave birth to it in the far-off islands of Oceania.

Claudine Nakamura, smsm

Missionary, Marist, Religious

At the end of her extensive study of the history of the Missionary Sisters, Marie Cécile de Mijolla smsm outlines the "essential characteristics" of the Missionary Sisters' vocation. She describes them as:

"Missionaries: the first sisters sacrificed everything to answer the call of mission. They left without waiting for the organisation they hoped for. They renounced the latter, at least temporarily, rather than leave their missionary work or be separated from the Society of Mary; they did not hesitate to be dispersed, since that was the condition of apostolic life in the islands.

Marist: since they first asked to go to Oceania, the Pioneers were Marist by desire. Their bonds with the Society of Mary were constantly strengthened in the course of the years. Moreover, they looked upon the Superior General of the Society as their spiritual father, and had recourse to him or his delegate in all their difficulties.

Religious, in desire: from the time of the first departures, the Marist tertiaries lived their consecration to God and to the mission in full.

Thus, the name that the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary bear truly expresses what they are, for it includes the three elements of their vocation, elements which are rooted in their history, and which can be considered as essential today as they were throughout the period of the origins."



Our specific vocation in the Church is to be at one and the same time Missionary, Marist, Religious. The effort to respond faithfully, with God's help, every day of our lives is for each of us the path to holiness and the way of sharing in the mission entrusted to the Congregation.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions n.4