

"Such is the first step"

From the beginning of his life with the Marists, Mayet had been interested in the origins of the enterprise. By following the notes he jotted down between 1838 and 1854, we can trace the way his understanding of those events expanded and clarified. When he gathered together his notes on the origins of the Marist project, this was how he understood the facts. As far as he knew, the first significant event took place in the Chapel of Our Lady of Fourvière in Lyon on July 23, 1816. Twelve seminarians, aged between 20 and 34, climbed the steep steps to the top of the hill of Fourvière, and there, in the small chapel dedicated to Our Lady, they promised to work at beginning a new religious order in the Church: a group called "Mary-ists", whose work in the church would resemble that of the Jesuits, but whose approach or style would be unlike anything that existed in the Church at that time. Eight of these men had been ordained priests the day before this event. One of them celebrated the Mass, and the others received communion.

What had brought these men together and inspired them to embark on this enterprise? When Mayet sorted through his notes, he was left with a picture that was clear and yet vague. What seemed clear was that this enterprise originated in the seminary where these men were studying for the priesthood. But what was mysterious and vague was the way Jean-Claude Colin spoke about the origins of the project. He always seemed to speak in veiled terms, using sentences like: "It was foretold that the Society of Mary was to take as a model none of the congregations that preceded it; no, nothing of all that; but that our model, our only model, was to be, and indeed was, the early church", or "The Society of Mary appeared to someone under the symbol of a three-branched trunk." Mayet's curiosity was aroused. Who was this "someone" to whom the Society of Mary appeared? He had always understood Colin to have been at the centre of it from the start. But Colin himself seemed to side-step the issue by his mysterious way of talking. From 1842, Mayet began to interview some of those who signed the Promise of 1816, in particular Marcellin Champagnat, Étienne Terraillon and Étienne Déclas. From them he began to hear of another person whose name he had not heard mentioned: Jean-Claude Courveille. Colin's mysterious way of speaking had made Mayet determined to find out more. He wrote in his *Memoirs*: "*I shall do all I can to prise this secret out of (Father Colin) before he dies.*"

A certain spirituality

In 1842, Mayet made a synthesis in his *Memoirs* of what he knew of the project's beginnings.

March 1842

A summary of the progress of the Society amidst contradictions until its approval.

It began obscurely, at the major seminary of Lyon, towards 1815. Twelve seminarians (such, I believe, is the figure that was mentioned to me) line up under the name of Mary, sign a short commitment and meet with the permission and under the protection of M. Cholleton, director of the major seminary. Such is the first step.

The Mayet Memoirs

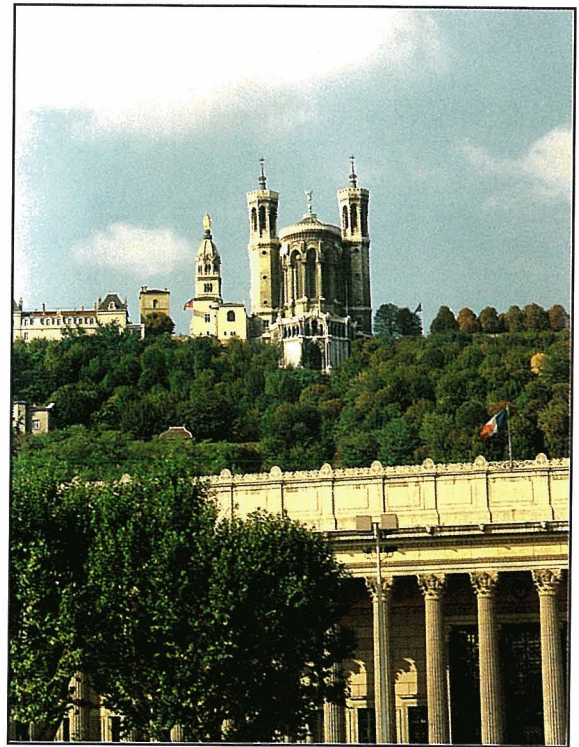
In a sense, Mayet was right, even if he was to discover that the beginnings of the project went back further than 1815. But something really "began" then, although only four of the 12 carried on with the project. The Fourvière event was the beginning from which a whole Marist "family" would develop. Historian Gaston Lessard writes: "When the group of Marist aspirants met at Fourvière on July 23, 1816, the plan they nurtured constituted already a certain spirituality, a certain way of living the life of the Spirit to which they were called by Baptism."



For centuries and to this day, Fourvière has been a popular place of pilgrimage, and several religious Orders trace their origins to moments of grace in the life of their Founders that took place here in the Chapel. Inside the chapel, the walls are lined with plaques placed there in thanksgiving for special graces received.

Lyon and Fourvière

There is evidence of a civilization in Lyon that goes back as far as 2,000 BC. As a city, Lyon (Lugdunum) dates to 43 BC. It was the capital of Gaul, what we know today as France, and in less than two centuries it became a cornerstone of the Roman Empire. Lyon is of great importance in the history of Christianity. It was here that St Irenaeus and the first martyrs of Gaul died in 177 AD. It was the site for two major Councils of the Church, in 1245 and 1274; and from earliest times it has been a fervent centre of Christianity. Fourvière is the hill which overlooks the whole city of Lyon, and on entering the city the first thing that one notices is the Basilica high on the top of the hill, commanding a view over the whole city. The present church was built in 1896. To the left of the Basilica a tall tower can be seen, with a statue on its pinnacle. This is the small chapel built on the site where a shrine has been dedicated to Our Lady since 1170. This chapel, restored in 1751, has not greatly altered since then, and it was here that the seminarians made their promise to begin the Society of Mary.



Pilgrimage

There are 800 stone steps to climb in order to reach the top of the hill. Today, a funicular helps pilgrims, but no such convenience helped the 12 seminarians as they made their pilgrimage up these steps. Here is Étienne Terraillon's account of the event:

"Our ordination took place on the feast of St Mary Magdalene on July 22, 1816. On the following day we went up to Our Lady of Fourvière to place ourselves and our project under Mary's special protection. Father Courville said Mass and I assisted him. The others simply received communion because they were saving their first Mass for their parish. We placed our names on the altar as a symbol of our dedication."