

Jeanne-Marie Chavoin

Théodore Chavoin was 20 when he married 19-year-old Jeanne Verchères on May 31, 1786. Barely three months later, their first child, Jeanne-Marie, was born. Two more children were born into the family: Marie, who lived only a year, and Claudine-Marie, who married Jacques Millot, a local weaver. A country girl, Jeanne-Marie grew up with little formal education (her spelling was never quite accurate), but with a great deal of common sense and good judgement. The Chavoin family was closely-knit, and Jeanne-Marie's childhood was secure and tranquil, even though these were the times of the French Revolution. By temperament she was an extrovert, for whom action was second nature. Being the daughter of the respected village tailor, and used to meeting people in her father's shop, she developed an open, friendly and outgoing attitude to people. At the same time, Jeanne-Marie was instinctively drawn to the hidden life of prayer. In her adolescent years she was influenced by a seminarian, Jean-Philibert Lefranc, who used to come to Coutouvre in his holidays. He initiated her into the life of prayer, and she became a member of the Association of Divine Love, a group founded in 1806 by Lefranc "to foster a life of prayer and charitable works in a hidden way." Jeanne-Marie was drawn to the religious life, and had been invited four times to enter existing religious congregations, but each time she refused: she was looking for something less monastic. Jean-Philibert Lefranc said to her: "God does not want you to join an existing congregation, but one which has yet to come into existence." She was invited to Cerdon to talk with Jean-Claude and Pierre Colin about the Marist project. We have no record of what happened there, but evidently she knew immediately that this was where she was to belong, and before the end of 1817 she and her friend Marie Jotillon had arrived in Cerdon to begin their part of the Marist enterprise. At 31 years of age Jeanne-Marie was already spiritually mature, and she would quickly grasp the insight of Jean-Claude Colin. Her own temperament and background, so different from his, would lead her to draw other conclusions from this fundamental insight. Jean-Claude Colin saw the sisters as living an enclosed or semi-enclosed life. Jeanne-Marie envisaged them living a hidden life in the world, and in the midst of apostolic activity of all kinds. This difference would eventually lead to painful conflict and misunderstanding between the two founders.

Father Colin, speaking of her one day, said:

"In all the three branches of the Society, she is the person with the greatest spirit of faith and prayer."

"...She has been favoured by grace from childhood; The Lord has imparted to her many lights concerning the Society and the virtues of Mary."



Coutouvre

Jeanne-Marie Chavoin was brought to the church of Coutouvre to be baptized on the day she was born, as was the custom. In 1786 the village of Coutouvre had a population of about 1500. Sister Winifred Rose, historian for the Marist Sisters, writes: "*Coutouvre* means 'a hill open on all sides.' From the highest point there is a magnificent view across the plain of Roanne to the distant Forez mountains. It was here that our Foundress lived with her family for thirty years. She was a strong, healthy country girl, a good walker, with many natural gifts and no complexes. She had an inborn appreciation of the value of work and a great sensitivity to the needs of others." At the same time, she had a great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and she would go to the church to pray for long periods of time, and even into the night, especially when she was deciding her vocation. In the present church, a stained glass window erected in 1930 represents Jeanne-Marie, along with other religious who had been born in the parish of Coutouvre.

Contemporary witnesses

Among the people who knew Jeanne-Marie personally or through others, here are comments from a former mayor of Jarnosse, a Marist priest, a Marist sister, and a priest from Jarnosse.

"... A fine woman, ready to come to the help of everyone." "...intelligent, lively, very kind and large-hearted, ready to render service." "...She was kind, affable with everyone, and gained the affection of all who knew her. She was large-hearted, and when she helped anyone she did so generously." "...a woman of good sense and judgement, straightforward and large-hearted. She resembled the women of her countryside, simple, wanting in certain forms of etiquette, who used the speech of the countryside, even sometimes local dialect. But there were treasures of goodness and kindness in this woman."

Dormant charism

It is only in comparatively recent years that Jeanne-Marie Chavoin has come into her own as Foundress of the Marist Sisters. Even at the time of her death few seemed to remember that they owed to her the very existence of a feminine branch of the Society of Mary as well as the strong, virile formation of the first generation of Marist sisters. Jeanne-Marie's personal founding charism, as distinct from that of Jean-Claude Colin, lay dormant for years. It came to life only when, in 1954, research was started on Jeanne-Marie Chavoin's life, insights and specific role in the Society of Mary.... She was convinced that her specific mission was to found a feminine branch of the Society of Mary, a supernatural insight dating from that first meeting at Cerdon when the Marist project was explained to her.

Jessica Leonard, sm

If she could speak today...

Each of the three founding personalities lived their childhood during the French Revolution. But each one's experience of those events was different, and this experience made a difference to the way they would act towards, and in, "the world". If Jeanne-Marie Chavoin could speak to us today, we could imagine her saying something like this:

"You know, in a village in France, many people pass by the tailor's shop. You imagine what that meant for a little girl standing by her father, drinking in all the talk, getting to know all the people of the village. And during the Revolution, the people would gather each day to talk in frightened whispers about the news they had heard from the cities of Paris or Lyon. But in our village the Revolution did not have quite the same effect as in some others. There was no violence, no bloodshed.... So, you ask what "the world" was like for me? The world, to me, was a friendly place, a place where you *did* things, where you *acted* for the Lord in a simple and matter-of-fact way. Hard work and no fuss. For me, imitating the family of Nazareth didn't mean staying in the house with Jesus and Mary and Joseph. Nazareth was the whole town, where Mary simply lived the life of the people – nothing extraordinary – and went about doing good... One thing you should know.... After the Revolution in France many parishes kept big memorial books with the names of families who had hidden or helped the priests in the troubles. Our family name is not there. But after the Revolution, a poor broken priest who had signed the Oath and had become a schismatic priest wanted to come back and make his peace. He had nowhere to live; no one wanted him. Our family took him in, and he stayed for 17 years. I always remember that: doing works of charity when it's not fashionable or glamorous. That's the charity that counts. That's the way to live a hidden life in the world."

