



*Consider the rock you were hewn from,
the quarry from which you were cut.
Isaiah 51: 1*

1. Consider the rock

This is the story of a certain way of living the Gospel. There is only one Gospel, of course, and that is the Person of Jesus; He is God's 'Good News'. But the life and words of Jesus, recorded in the written Gospels, are for all times and all generations; and each person, each time, and each generation is different. So there will be different ways of living the Gospel according to the personality of individuals, their place of origin, and the times in which they live. When Francis of Assisi took up the Gospels as his source of life, he discovered the poor Jesus "who had nowhere to lay his head". Dominic looked into the Gospels and discovered Jesus as the Word of life to be contemplated and proclaimed in "spirit and in truth". When Ignatius of Loyola opened the Gospels, he discovered Jesus as a Companion, who "went about doing good". John of the Cross discovered Jesus as the Lover, beckoning him to ascend higher and higher to the peaks of the mountain of contemplation. Each of these, and so many others down the centuries, left us with a particular slant on the way the Gospel can be lived. Last century, a group of people in France gathered together, inspired by a question: "What if we discovered the Gospel together, and lived it as Mary lived it?" What they found made a difference to their lives; and yet it was a simple way of life that anyone could live, no matter what their age or state.

In Old Testament times, when the People of God were confused and dispirited, the Prophet Isaiah said to them, "Listen to me, you who seek the Lord. Consider the rock you were hewn from, the quarry from which you were cut." He reminded them of their spiritual father Abraham, and their spiritual mother Sarah, through whom they had come to know the Lord. Isaiah's words may be a good place for us to begin. The first Marists were men and women of rock, and the origins of Marist spirituality were hewn, almost literally, out of rock. But what those pioneers found was fresh for their times. And for ours.

Silent voice

In Lewis Carroll's book, *Alice in Wonderland*, the King advises the White Rabbit who is about to read some verses: "Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop." With our story it's a little different. The beginnings of the Marist story are very complicated. Unlike other movements which have one clear personality spearheading the group, the Marist project seems to have been much more of a corporate experience, with many different personalities entering the stage, some remaining in the forefront, some disappearing temporarily, and some disappearing forever. For this reason, it may be better for us not to follow the advice of the King, and instead to start somewhere after the beginning, meeting a man who was neither a founding personality nor a member of the first group of Marists. He entered the scene early on and moved quietly into the background about twenty years later. But, for a particular reason, he is of great importance in the Marist story.

His name was Gabriel-Claude Mayet, and he was born in Lyon, France, in 1809. Mayet was not particularly drawn to the Church as a way of life, but in 1827 he experienced a deep personal conversion, and began to study for the priesthood. In 1832 he was ordained a sub-deacon, but at that stage he was not sure whether to be a diocesan priest or a Jesuit. He asked the advice of Jean-Marie Vianney, the Curé of Ars, and it was he who suggested that Mayet consider joining the group of Marists which was just then being established. At the time, Mayet did not follow this advice and he was ordained a diocesan priest in 1836.

At that time he began to develop a throat malady which was later to become a serious affliction. While he was convalescing, he decided to follow up the advice he had been given by the Curé of Ars, and he wrote asking for information about the Marists. The reply he received made such a deep impression on him that he decided to join this group. He entered the novitiate of the Marist Fathers in 1837. Mayet was a meticulous person who had made a habit of collecting the advice of his spiritual directors in a journal which he entitled *Notes Personnelles*. One of his directors was Jean-Claude Colin, who by then had been given the leadership of the Marist enterprise. As time passed, Mayet realised that by keeping a record of these sayings of Colin he could make a significant and personal contribution to the history of the Marist project.



Gabriel-Claude Mayet

Man with a mission

Mayet always considered the task he took on as a mission entrusted to him on behalf of the Marist enterprise, a mission which his delicate conscience forced him to accomplish with great exactitude and seriousness. At the same time, he was clear that his mission was limited to collecting material that might be used later on by others. Some of his comments indicate this:

"I am not writing a treatise; and so I am limiting myself to the words of [Father Colin], following my first and specific intention."

"Keeping within the limits of my plan, I have collected only the facts which deal with Father Colin or the history of the Society, as well as the words of Father Colin."

"In the same way I have not wanted to write a history, but only to prepare the bricks and carry the stones for other hands more able than mine to build something for the glory of God and the honour of Mary."

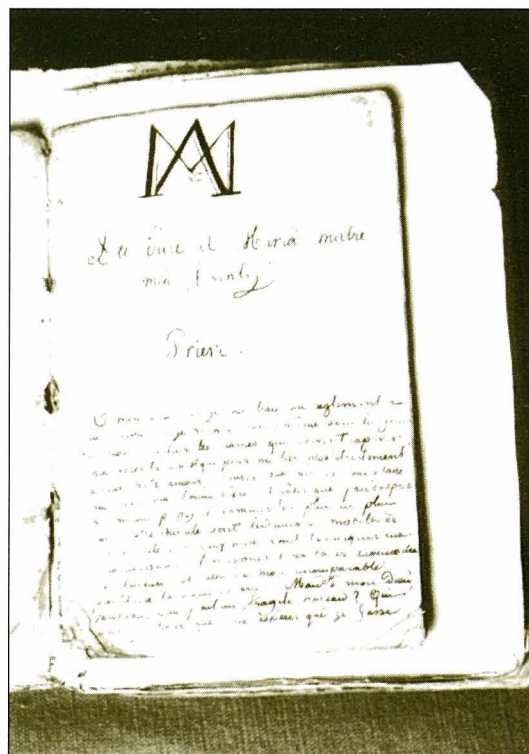
"Father Colin, whose words I must record (that is my first, my primary and almost my only goal in these notes) said...."

"For my part I am limiting myself to what can't be found elsewhere, and especially to the history of the Society before its Approval, and to the words of Father Colin."

"Personal notes"

Mayet's early years were not marked by great religious seriousness. In 1826 he had managed to go to the city of Lyon to do his studies in philosophy in order, as he said, to get away from the watchful eyes of his family. But in the following year he experienced his conversion, and it is from this time that he began to live a serious spiritual life. The very first entry in his *Notes Personnelles* is entitled: "Rule for holidays 1827". Although he writes that *"the spirit of my rule will be a spirit of gentleness and of peace"*, nevertheless there are 14 pages of rule which contain 27 points. His entry opens with a prayer which expresses something of the delicate and sensitive spirit of this man:

O my God, if I write out a rule for myself, if under the eyes of my director I forge chains that should hold my will captive, I do this only to bind myself more closely to your love. The desire I have to please you is also to please my good Mother. The desire I have to expiate my past sins and to advance more and more in your love, is the only motive for my conduct....



"Making known the man"

In 1853 Mayet wrote down how he saw his role in the history of the Marist project:

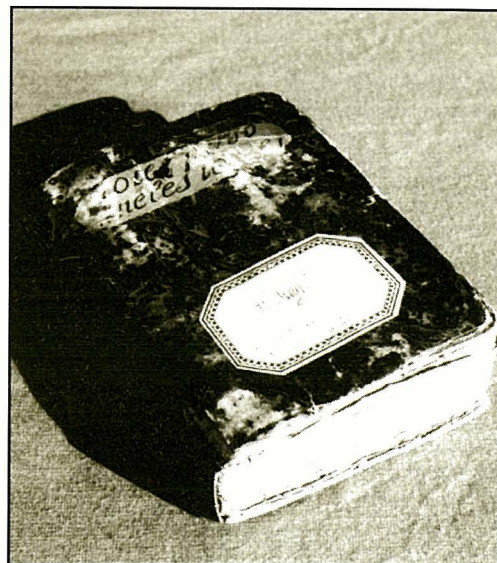
As for me, placed as I was not far from the cradle of the Society of Mary, and having had the good fortune to live with [Father Colin] for several years, and not having been able to be sent to any of the works of our vocation as my hard-working and tireless confrères were, I would have believed myself answerable to you, dear brothers, if I had not found ways of using my inactivity and of profiting from the spare time provided by a long sickness in making myself, with the help of God, the echo of what I have heard.

Given the admiration he had for Jean-Claude Colin, and the significant part Colin played in the whole history of the Marist enterprise, Mayet also felt that his task was to "make known the man" Colin. Another comment he wrote helps us to understand the real nature of the journal he kept:

In the earlier years, I sometimes side-tracked, and noted first impressions instead of confining myself to his considered judgements... Sometimes I wrote down on the spot things which he himself modified shortly afterwards. I have written my notes not just to make known Father Colin's views, but also to make known the man himself; and to do this I had to catch nature at work in him, to take it in the act. I am not writing for children; it remains to be seen whether the course I have followed is without its drawbacks. But if I were to be always taken literally, there would be the same drawbacks as exist when what [Father Colin] says is taken literally.

"An echo of what I heard"

From 1838 Mayet began to separate his personal notes from what would become his notes on the Society of Mary. The latter formed the basis of what he called his *Memoirs*. At the end of the academic year of 1838-1839, Mayet's health began to deteriorate, and the sickness which affected his speech worsened. Being unable to speak, Mayet could not involve himself in the normal apostolic work of a priest. He spent a year away from Marist houses in the hope of convalescing, but this was ineffectual, and he remained virtually unable to speak for the rest of his days. Such a personal tragedy for Mayet proved to be a blessing for Marist history. While he was convalescing, Mayet conceived the idea of organizing his personal notes to ensure that what was personal to himself could be kept separate from what concerned the history of the Society of Mary and his personal memoirs of Jean-Claude Colin. Colin's place among the group of founding personalities in the Marist project was clear. He was the one who best articulated the Marist spirit, and gave to his followers an understanding of the essence of the Marist enterprise. By 1840 Mayet's work of collecting information from Colin was becoming more and more extensive. He turned to a priest of the diocese of Lyon, Fr Philippe Dupuy, to help him to organize the work. Mayet handed his notes to Dupuy; Dupuy copied extracts; Mayet then corrected or embellished them. The notebooks now began to show sometimes Mayet's hand, and sometimes Dupuy's hand with comments by Mayet in the margin. By now Mayet had begun to develop a framework within which he would organise the massive amount of material that was coming to him. From the *Memoirs* we catch glimpses of a particular "spirituality" emerging from the Marist enterprise. Having trained himself to note with great accuracy and speed the things that he heard from Jean-Claude Colin, Mayet became a reliable reporter of Colin's remarks, and an astute and accurate observer not only of his strengths, but also of his weaknesses, which he noted down with honesty and integrity, and without bias or sensationalism. Mayet's own sense of mission and his awareness of the importance of his work for the future of the Society of Mary helped him to realise that his silence could provide, in his own words, "an echo of what he had heard" about the origins and spirituality of the Marist way. Mayet was a "ghost writer" par excellence, a silent scribe in the history of the Marist project.

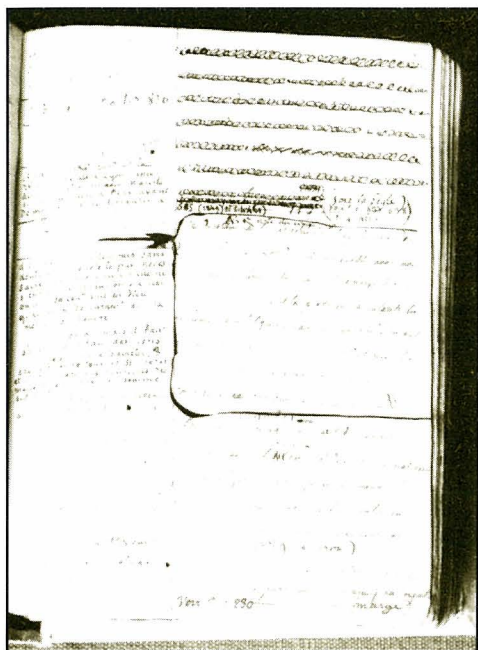


Nine Chapters

Mayet collected all sorts of material into his *Memoirs*. There were transcriptions of letters, reports provided by Marists, words of others taken down by Mayet or by other Marists, details Mayet had picked up about the beginnings of the Marist project, and above all the words of Jean-Claude Colin, which he took down at every opportunity.

The material he collected is divided into nine chapters.

1. History and spirit of the Society;
2. Spirit of the Society:
respect for bishops and modesty;
3. Spirit of the Society:
humility and contempt for self;
4. Spirit of the Society:
spirit of strength and courage;
5. Spirit of the Society:
childlike and easy spirit,
freedom of spirit, plainness, simplicity;
6. Spirit of the Society:
prudence;
7. Spirit of the Society:
spirit of faith, prayer, recourse to Mary;
8. Spirit of the Society:
spirit of chastity and caution;
9. Some notes on education.



The Mayet Memoirs

Philippe Dupuy was to be the first of Mayet's helpers as he put together his Memoirs. In 1840 Dupuy helped Mayet to organise the material which he had collected up till then. Dupuy copied material from Mayet's notebooks, and Mayet subsequently corrected or commented on the work in the margins of his notes. From now on Mayet's *Memoirs* showed signs of several copyists. Mayet constantly revised, verified and corrected his *Memoirs*, as he painstakingly gleaned more and more information. Jean Coste, the Marist historian, comments on the accuracy of these notes: "... it is a safe presumption, based on what thousands of pages tell us of his methods, that he is accurate. Although not trained in shorthand, Father Mayet had several advantages in a permanent excuse for having a notepad in his hand, an excellent memory, and much practice in seizing upon the key words and images of a talk."

Did he know?

Given that Jean-Claude Colin lived longer than the other founding personalities, and that he articulated most clearly the spirituality of the Marist enterprise, his words are important. But did he know that Mayet was surreptitiously recording these words? Mayet himself tells us that Colin was aware of what was happening:

At that moment he [Father Colin] turned to me and gave a significant look which seemed to say, "If you sometimes note down what I say, note that."

However, Colin was not always happy with the thought of his words being recorded and this could easily have led to Mayet's *Memoirs* being destroyed forever. One of the first Marists wrote:

There was a moment when this precious collection was at great risk. Noticing that someone was taking down his words, Father Colin unleashed his anger which came from his humility, and sent the author away for a month a long way from the Mother House. Since this man had reason to fear an even worse outcome, namely that (Father Colin) would want all the notes to be handed over to him to be destroyed, he consulted Father Maîtreperre, a wise man who gave good advice, on what he should do in that case. The reply, given without hesitation, was this: in that extreme case, seeing on the one hand the importance of the notes that had been collected, and on the other what would happen to them if Father Colin were able to get hold of them, Father Mayet should take every means not to expose himself to the risk of receiving such an order. Thankfully things didn't come to that. [Father Colin] calmed down, and even appeared to forget the matter completely.

Six thousand pages

Mayet's work on the history of the beginnings and early years of the Marist enterprise lasted from 1837 to 1854, which was the period during which his former spiritual advisor, Jean-Claude Colin, was Superior General of the Marist Fathers. What Mayet noted down in his notebooks was not just the factual information of the Society's growth; what he collected during this time reflects Colin's concern to stamp the "Marist way" on the Society, and to give its members a Marian approach to action. Mayet was aware of his mission to provide the means for future generations to discover the essence of the Marist way of life. A good portion of what he recorded was taken from the talks that Colin gave to Marist priests at the annual retreat; even more significantly he recorded the off-the-cuff spontaneous comments that Colin made at table or at informal times after a meal. In one of his entries, Mayet would take out his notebook under cover of the table and note down what he could, often with the help of others. On one occasion Mayet wrote of Colin: *"Occasionally he gave some of those lively thrusts that set hearts aflame, or uttered a few of those momentous remarks which, in a single go, express the whole spirit of the Society."* It is thanks to Mayet that many of these spontaneous remarks have been preserved for the future.

When Jean-Claude Colin resigned as Superior General of the Marist Fathers in 1854, Mayet considered that his work was done, and he handed over his *Memoirs* to the new Superior General. By this time his notes filled 11 volumes. Only 9 of these remain, but they contain six thousand pages of close writing, covering all the essential elements of Marist life and spirit in the early years. They give us in fact an excellent idea of what the Marist project was like for those who joined it at that time, and what were the foundations of an enterprise which so many were building with so much zeal. Though it may seem like beginning a story somewhere other than at the beginning, it seems right to begin our story with Gabriel-Claude Mayet. He has recorded so much of the story of the Marist origins; and so, like a chorus in a play, he will appear throughout our story, offering comments and adding details to the picture. Almost every page of our story will refer to Mayet. He was a man of piety and a man of intelligence. But above all, Mayet was a man of curiosity, and it was this curiosity that led him to unearth a good many of the hidden facts of Marist history.

I think they will be grateful

Over the long period of 17 years during which Mayet kept his notes, he employed 17 known and named copyists, as well as 22 others who are unknown, but whose hand-writing is distinguishable in the *Memoirs*. The nine volumes are a goldmine of information and inspiration on the origins, history and spirit of the Marist enterprise. Most of what we can put together of the human stuff of Marist spirituality comes from the *Memoirs* of Mayet. Even though he considered his work done in 1854, nevertheless from then till his death in 1894 he did all he could to ensure that the original events and the primitive spirit of the Marist enterprise were preserved in their integrity. Mayet has a touchingly modest conclusion to one of the entries he wrote in the *Memoirs*:

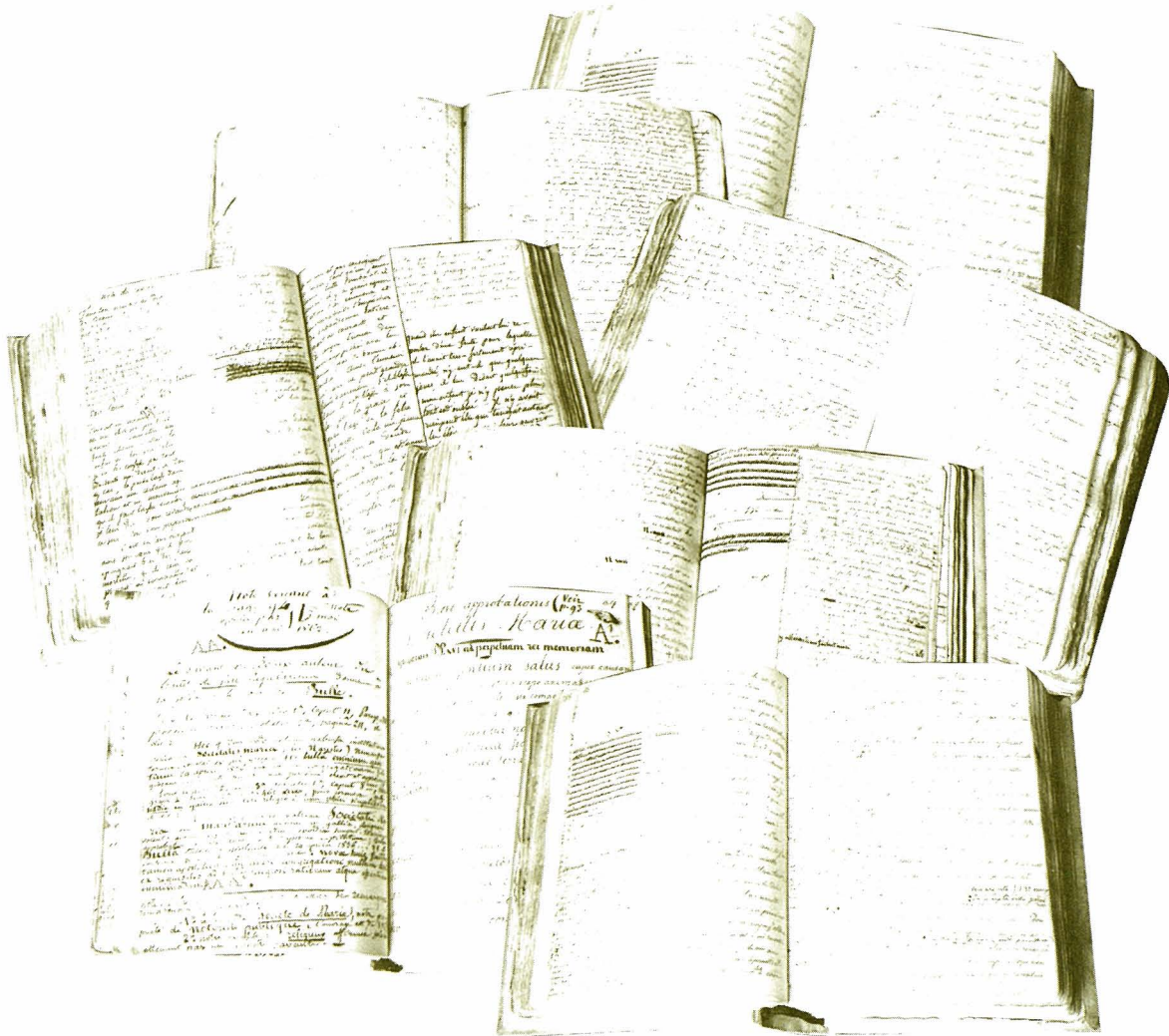
It can be seen clearly from my notes that a host of extremely interesting articles were collected by me on these occasions.... I think that our successors will be grateful to me for it some day.



Worthwhile service

Mayet's hope that his successors would be grateful to him some day was fulfilled even in his own day. One of his contemporaries wrote of his *Memoirs*:

The more I read these notes, the more I am utterly convinced that it is one of the most worthwhile and fortunate services which anyone could render the Society. Far from thinking that I am wasting my time when I read them, I seem to feel the true spirit of the Society penetrating me as I read on.... These notes are the spring to which Marists will come to draw on the true character and spirit of the Society.



Coming more to our own day, the historian for the Society of Mary wrote of Mayet:

Father Mayet is without doubt one of the greatest and noblest figures of the first generation of Marists. What might the future have been for the seminarian who wrote the most delightful letters to his family, and the excellent teacher who was beginning to develop at the College of Notre-Dame-des-Minimes, if illness had not roughly pushed him to one side? No doubt, it is pointless speculating.... More than many another contemporary, he possessed a flair for the facts, for the exact detail, and a respect for history that one can admire on making a close examination of his notes from the period before 1854.... Rarely would you find a sick person exploiting his limitations so generously and effectively and finding therein a fillip towards the perfection of charity.

"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

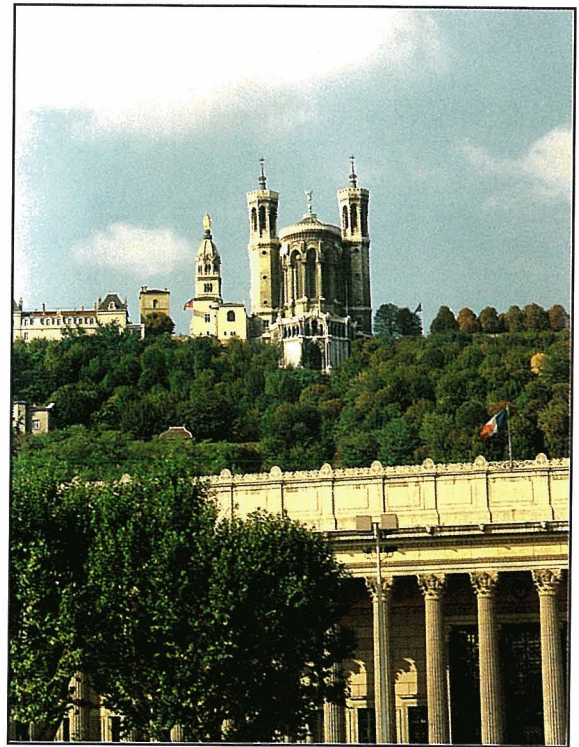
In a sense, Mayet was right, even if he was to discover that the beginnings of the project went back further than 1815. But something really "began" then, although only four of the 12 carried on with the project. The Fourvière event was the beginning from which a whole Marist "family" would develop. 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."

"I heard interiorly..."

From 1842 onwards, Mayet began in earnest to collect information about the beginnings of the Marist project. In this, his sickness worked to his advantage. In an effort to find a cure for his throat malady, he spent the year 1851-1852 outside the houses of the Society of Mary. This gave him the opportunity to write directly to Jean-Claude Courveille, who was now a Benedictine monk. Courveille's account threw more light on the story of Marist origins.

Jean-Claude Courveille was the seventh born of 13 children. He was born on March 15, 1787, the son of Claude and Margaret Courveille. During the Revolution his parents hid in their home the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Chambriac, and Jean-Claude used to pray before it. At the age of 10 he caught smallpox which produced lesions of the cornea, causing blindness. It was this blindness that was miraculously cured at the Cathedral of Le Puy in 1809. Three years later, in the same Cathedral, Courveille had a spiritual experience through which he became convinced that Our Lady was calling him to begin a Society of Mary, just as there was in the Church a Society of Jesus. To complete his studies for the priesthood Courveille transferred to the major seminary of Lyon in 1815, and began to spread his idea of a Society of Mary. He soon gathered round him a small group of followers. In this group were two men who were to play a major part in the development of the Marist plan. Marcellin Champagnat, fired by his devotion to Our Lady and his conviction that something needed to be done about the religious instruction of the children in the country areas, reminded the group: "We must have Brothers!" And Jean-Claude Colin, already attracted to some form of Marian group before coming to the seminary, said, "As soon as M.Courveille manifested the project of the Society of Mary, I told myself: 'That suits you!' and I joined them."

Courveille was a strong and impressive personality, but he was also greatly burdened. Temperamentally he was somewhat unstable, and after some serious sexual scandals in his life, he eventually entered the Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes in 1838, and remained there until his death in 1866. Given the times and the public problems in Courveille's life, it is not surprising that his name was scarcely mentioned among the early Marists. Many in fact believed that he had died or disappeared.

"Left kind of stupefied"

Mayet's style of writing and reporting is so limp that it is possible to extract parts of his notes verbatim and construct them in dialogue form as in a play. Here is how some of his notes look if made into a "conversation on the origins" between three of the early Marists: Étienne Terrailon, Jean-Claude Colin, and Étienne Déclas.

TERRAILLON:

The first idea of the Society of Mary came from Our Lady of Le Puy.

DÉCLAS:

The first one to whom the idea was given was a M.Courveille.

TERRAILLON:

M.Courveille was afflicted with a grave infirmity. What did he do to be cured? Since he had full confidence in Mary, he had recourse to this kind mother. To secure her powerful protection more efficaciously, he devoted himself to Our Lady of Le Puy. Therefore he set out promptly on this famous pilgrimage, fulfilled his vow, and his indisposition disappeared. From then on, his gratitude knew no bounds. He asked himself what he could do to express it to such a benevolent mother. After thinking it over, he told himself: Wherever Jesus has altars, Mary usually has her small altar besides. Jesus has His society, so Mary should have hers, too. Filled with this happy idea, he thought seriously about realising it. That was in 1815. He arrived at the major seminary of Lyon, and immediately busied himself with the carrying out of his plan.

DÉCLAS:

I am the first one to whom he manifested his plan. It was probably at the end of 1814-1815, while I was cutting his hair. The book being read in the refectory was the life of St Francis Régis. He told me he intended, when he became a priest, to be like St Francis, and to go into the countryside to help the poor people, who often have a greater need of outside priests than the people in the cities or large towns. He asked me if I wanted to do what he had in mind. He said we could

give missions in the countryside. We would go on foot, simply, eating the food of the local people. I heartily approved of the idea. He said no more at the time, and through the year he kept me with the same thought, telling me only: "We shall be like St Francis Régis", and nothing more. But the day before we left for the holidays, he took me aside and told me: "You know, what I told you about during the year is something serious. An Order will be set up which will be about the same as that of the Jesuits, except that its members will be called Marists instead of being called Jesuits."

TERRAILLON:

Déclas was singularly struck and deeply impressed by the idea of Courveille, and he became enthusiastic about the project.... He spoke first to Colin or to myself: he doesn't remember which of the two he spoke to first. With both of us he started out with the words Courveille had used with him: "Wherever Jesus has altars, Mary also has her small altar at the side. Jesus has His society, so Mary should also have hers." This message struck us both to a supreme degree, and left us kind of stupefied.

COLIN:

The idea of forming a Society of Mary was very useful to me. People had often tried to get me to join this or that work. With what I had in mind, none of them suited me. But as soon as M. Courveille manifested the project of the Society of Mary, I told myself: "That suits you!" and I joined them.

DÉCLAS:

We explained the matter to Father Cholleton, the professor of Moral. He began by saying a Mass for that intention....

TERRAILLON:

....and we asked his advice whenever necessary. Sometimes we used one of the rooms of the house, but the place where we met most frequently was the woods in the garden of the country house. We used those meetings to inflame our enthusiasm, at times with the thought that we had the happiness of being the first children of Mary, and at times with the thought of the great needs of the people. From time to time, M. Courveille would give us short talks....

On the day following our ordination, we went up to Our Lady of Fourvière to place ourselves and our project under Mary's special protection.

COLIN:

Yes, 12 of us signed a brief form. Only four persevered....

The Mayet Memoirs

Courveille's story

In 1852, 40 years after the event, Courveille sent to Mayet his account of what had happened to him in the Cathedral of Le Puy. Mayet wrote up the account in his Memoirs.

At the age of 10 he caught smallpox which damaged his eyes. He could hardly see. His mother consulted doctors who told her it was incurable.... In 1809 he was very strongly inspired to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Le Puy, which was only five leagues away, to take oil from the lamp which burns before the statue of Our Lady and to rub his eyes with it. This he did. He no sooner had done this than he perceived distinctly even the smallest objects in the cathedral, and he has enjoyed excellent eyesight ever since.

In 1810, in the same church, before the same miraculous statue, he promised the Blessed Virgin to devote himself entirely to her, and to do whatever she wanted for the glory of Our Lord, for her own honour, and for the salvation of souls.

In 1812, while renewing his promise to Mary... he heard, not with his bodily ears, but with those of the heart, interiorly but very distinctly: "Here... is what I want. I have always imitated my Divine Son in everything. I followed Him to Calvary itself, standing at the foot of the Cross when He gave His life for man's salvation. Now, in heaven, sharing His glory, I follow His path still, in the work He does for His Church on earth. Of this Church, I am the Protectress. I am like a powerful army, defending and saving souls. When a fearful heresy threatened to convulse the whole of Europe, my Son raised up His servant, Ignatius, to form a Society under His name, calling itself the Society of Jesus, with members called Jesuits, to fight against the hell unleashed against His Church. In the same way, in this last age of impiety and unbelief, it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be another Society to battle against hell, one consecrated to me, one which will have my name, which will call itself the Society of Mary, whose members will call themselves Marists."



The dispersal

The consecration of Fourvière was followed by a dispersal. Of the 12 seminarians, seven abandoned the project, two waited for the others to do something, and the three who acted were appointed to the extremities of the diocese.

JEAN-CLAUDE COURVEILLE was appointed as curate at Verrières in the western extreme. From the start he made efforts to put the Marist project in motion. He attempted to set up an association of lay women there. Then, when he was moved to Epercieux, he tried to establish a community of brothers. During this time he kept in touch with both Marcellin Champagnat and Jean-Claude Colin. He was considered the central figure until 1826, when the first of his difficulties began. From then, he began to disappear from the story.

MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT was sent to La Valla in the south of the diocese. Called to the bedside of a dying boy who had no knowledge of the faith or of God, Marcellin's conviction that he had been given the commission to set up a branch of brothers was even more confirmed. Less than five months after his arrival at La Valla, he had invited two young men, aged 22 and 14, to begin the branch of brothers. Soon eight more arrived, the oldest 24, and the youngest 10.

JEAN-CLAUDE COLIN was appointed to Cerdon, a northern outpost, where his brother Pierre was the Parish Priest. After a short time there, he spoke to his brother of the plan to form a Society of many branches: priests, religious brothers and sisters, and lay people. Pierre became enthusiastic, and suggested that two young women whom he knew in the parish where he had previously worked be invited to join them at Cerdon. In 1817, Jeanne-Marie Chavoin and Marie Jotillon joined the Colin brothers in the parish of Cerdon. Jeanne-Marie Chavoin was to become the foundress of the Marist sisters.

And so, at the end of 1817, eighteen months after the Fourvière promise, the group numbered four priests separated by a great distance, two young brothers at La Valla, and two young women at Cerdon. Already three principal characters have emerged: Champagnat, Colin and Chavoin. It is time to meet each one.

"A kind of obscurity..."

DÉCLAS:

On leaving the seminary, we said that each one would go wherever Providence would send him until the time when we would come together and go to Le Puy, where the first idea of the Society had been given.

MAYET:

The thing that struck you about Father Courveille's words was the comparison with the Jesuits?

TERRAILLON:

Yes. When we gave shape to the project, we used to say: "There is a Society of Jesus, there will be a Society of Mary. There is a body which bears the name of Jesus, another must bear the name of Mary. That was our dominant thought. What the Jesuits do under their appellation indicated to us what we must do under ours.

COLIN:

To people who are not in the know, the beginnings of the Society present, at first sight, a kind of obscurity and follow an exceptional course. This comes from the fact that several people conceived almost simultaneously the same project of the Society and worked separately for its implementation. Father Courveille had the merit, in 1815 and 1816, of manifesting it exteriorly, and 11 or 12 seminarians from the major seminary joined him to work together for the project. Then Father Courveille and his young associates became priests at the end of the school year of 1816, were appointed to the parish ministry in various places, and gradually forgot about their plans, except for two of them, namely Father Champagnat, who was appointed curate at La Valla and who immediately set out to establish the branch of the teaching brothers....

MAYET:

And yourself, Jean-Claude Colin....

COLIN:

... who became curate in a parish in the

department of Ain, and who used the free time left by the ministry to jot down on paper the first thoughts which were to serve as a basis for the constitutions. He was filled interiorly with a strong confidence equivalent to a kind of certainty that the project came from God and that it would take shape in the long run.

MAYET:

Where does Jean-Claude Courveille fit into the story of the origins of the Marist work?

COLIN:

But before coming to the seminary I had the idea of forming a society which, it's true, would be dedicated to Our Lady, but I didn't have the name "Society of Mary". That name came from Father Courveille.

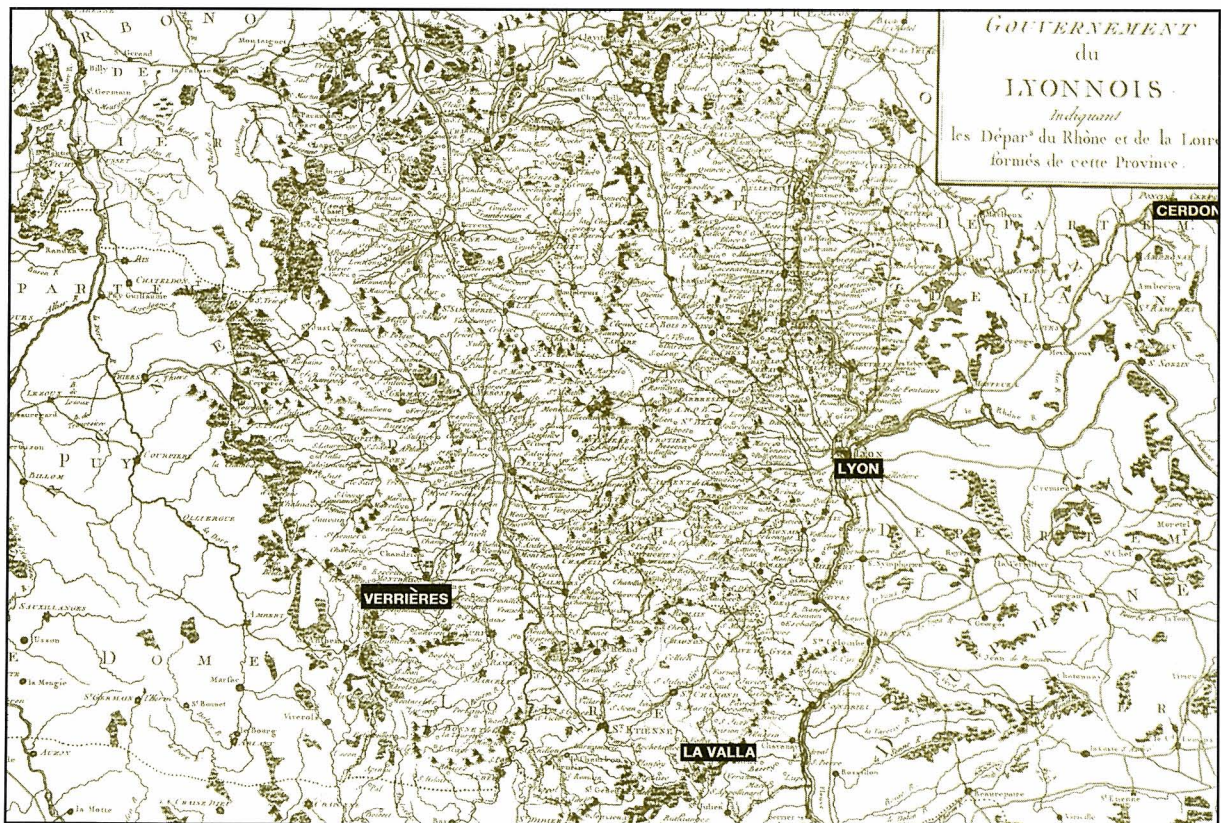
MAYET:

So you had this idea before coming to the major seminary of Lyon?

COLIN:

Yes, yes, definitely. Yes, before coming to the major seminary of Lyon. In fact, I had even written up a small project. When I was still very young, before I began my classical studies, I had a burning desire to withdraw alone into a forest, to live far away from the world: and since this didn't seem possible, I went to the minor seminary of St Jodard. So, I can only admire the ways of Providence which led Father Courveille to reveal the project of the Society of Mary. I would never have had the courage to make this idea known. And so, later, when the thing was known, I was able to work at it without appearing to be its creator.

The Mayet Memoirs



The map of the Lyon region shows how widely spread the Marist aspirants were: Courveille in Verrières, Champagnat at La Valla, and Colin at Cerdon.

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

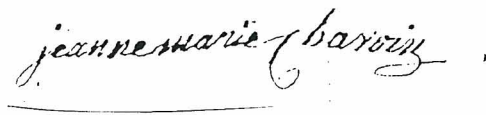
It is only in comparatively recent years that Jeanne-Marie Chavoin has come into her own as Foundress of the Marist Sisters. Even at the time of her death few seemed to remember that they owed to her the very existence of a feminine branch of the Society of Mary as well as the strong, virile formation 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."



Marcellin Champagnat

Marcellin Champagnat was the first of the founding people to succeed in forming a Marist group, and his company of Marist Brothers became the fastest growing and the most numerous of the branches of the Marist project. This in itself explains a great deal about this most loveable of characters who did so much for the enterprise in his short life. From beginning to end, Marcellin was a practical person, and everything about him reflects this: the way he understood the ideas exchanged at the seminary, the way he responded to needs, the way he formed his Brothers. Much of this can be traced to his background. His mother was a woman of strong and robust faith, who more than once accompanied Marcellin on foot to the shrine of St Francis Régis at La Louvesc, when difficulties threatened his seminary studies. Marcellin's father was a farmer, who could turn his hand to many other trades as well. Marcellin was a child of the Revolution in more than one sense. He was born in the year of the Revolution, May 20, 1789. As well as that, his father welcomed the Revolution and from the start accepted its principles as a way to help the people. "Our rights were unknown, we have discovered them," he said as Colonel of the National Guard. "The new Constitution is written, now we must support it." As an official under Revolutionary governments, he was required to preside at the secular rituals prescribed by the Revolution. But at the same time, Marcellin's mother attended clandestine Catholic worship. Through his position in the town, Marcellin's father was able to save the Church in his area from some of the worst effects of the Revolution. Marcellin was the ninth of 10 children, and as he grew up, three events dramatically changed his life and formed him as a Marist, an educator, and then as the founder of the Marist Brothers. On one occasion, as a young boy, he witnessed the cruel scene of a teacher giving to a pupil a name which stuck and which caused the child to suffer ridicule from the others in the class. On another occasion he was present when a teacher dealt out harsh physical punishment to a pupil. And as a priest he was called to the bedside of a dying boy who had no knowledge of God or the faith. From these experiences came two great convictions in Marcellin's life: "We must have Brothers!" and "I can never see a child without telling him how much God loves him." The loving relationship which Marcellin inspired in his young Brothers has continued to this day.



Many portraits and statues have been made of Marcellin Champagnat. But three statues are of particular significance, not only because they are in places of historical importance for the Brothers – Marlies, La Valla, and the Hermitage – but also because they are carved from rock. If any man deserved to be called a man of rock it was Marcellin Champagnat. The greatest monument to his life and spirit is possibly the Hermitage, the large five-story building which Marcellin built with his own hands and the labour of his Brothers in 1824. The building was the Mother House of the Brothers, and was Marcellin's home from 1825 till his death. To construct the building, Marcellin had literally to carve into the rock face of the hill. Marist Brother historian Frederick McMahon writes: "The rock face which retreated before the onslaught of the crude tools used by Marcellin and his men tells us of the resolute determination of this man, his toughness, his perseverance, his endurance – his strong mind." The statue at La Valla (above) shows Champagnat with Gabriel Rivat, who as Br François became the first Superior General of the Brothers. Champagnat looks back to the house at La Valla which has always been looked on as "the cradle of the Institute." His hand is on the shoulder of Gabriel who looks down the valley to the world beyond and to the future.

Family environment

Thus it seems that Marcellin Champagnat spent his youth in a remarkable family milieu that could be of immense formative value to him. By no means destitute, the hard-working Champagnat family was obviously very prominent in the district of Marlies where Jean-Baptiste Champagnat had been for so many years the foremost revolutionary leader. Then, particularly after his father's retirement from political life in 1800, Marcellin would follow him to the fields, the mill and the workbench. Marcellin learned to bake bread, to work with wood, to build in stone and to roof a shed – in short, all the work required in the mill and on the farm, and all this was to prove most valuable to him in his future years. Furthermore, the father gave to each of his sons a sum of money and from it they had to produce more by trade so that each would have a fund with which to go out into life.

Stephen Farrell, fms

What did they think?

The opinions of a former mayor of La Valla, some contemporaries, and his biographer, are worth recording:

"...Father Champagnat was very well liked.... Even when he left us to go to the Hermitage.... many of his parishioners used to go to him in their needs; almost all of them contributed something to help him build the house there." "...His confrères roundly criticised him when he began to work. People wanted to stop him on the grounds that to lead such a harsh and excessively poor life was not befitting the character of a priest. He himself did all the masonry when he built the Hermitage" "...My father was a frequent visitor of the Brothers at the Hermitage, and whenever he went there, he spent a few days working for them as a labourer. When he returned, we would always hear from him: 'What a heavenly place that Hermitage is, where men work, pray, live and love, where there is peace.... Father Champagnat is always the first at whatever there is to be done; he is the most impressive of all the men there; he carries the others along with him because they all love him and venerate him so much'." "...As soon as he heard that anyone was ill, he went to visit them. Inclemency of weather, wind, rain, snow - nothing could stop him."

If he could speak today...

Marcellin Champagnat's experience of the world of the Revolution was different from Jeanne-Marie Chavoin's and from Jean-Claude Colin's. If he could speak to us today, we might imagine him saying something like this:

"It's a painful experience being a late starter at learning. When I entered the minor seminary at the age of 16, I was well ahead of my classmates in age and well behind them in learning. But I'm glad now for that experience, because it made me determined to help others to get the advantages that I was deprived of myself. It's a wonderful thing to be able to free people from the things that hold them back: ignorance of God, sin, and lack of education. My experience made me convinced of the need for teachers who lived in a christian way like Mary. That's what drew me to the plan of a Society of Mary, and there was nothing I wasn't ready to sacrifice for that plan. My father taught me a lot of things, and I'm a practical man like he was. I'm used to working with tools, you see, and used to finding the right tool for the right job. You need that; and you need to be able to make do with the material you have at hand. And when I'm looking for people for a job, it's the same thing. You have to try and find the right person for the right job; but you also have to use what you have at hand. If you can't find someone with two eyes, put in someone with one eye.... But you know, it's all the work of Our Lady, and in the end, she will see that it works out.... This world is the place where you can create things for God, carve new things for God, get great things done in modest ways. For me, humility is admitting the truth about ourselves, and using the gifts we have. Whether we have one eye or two eyes, it doesn't really matter. But it does matter to use the gifts we have and not hide them away."



Jean-Claude Colin

When Jean-Claude Colin's parents married in 1771, his father Jacques was 24 years old, and his mother Marie Gonnet was not yet 14. Jean-Claude, born on August 7, 1790, was their eighth child. All told, nine children were born into the family. Claudine, Jean, Mariette, Sebastien, Jeanne-Marie, Pierre, Anne-Marie (who died at birth), Jean-Claude, and Joseph. Jean-Claude's oldest sister Claudine was his godmother, and his brother Jean was his godfather, hence the baby's name Jean-Claude. His parents owned and cultivated a piece of land, and during the winter turned to weaving. The home in which Jean-Claude was born was as secure and loving as any of the ordinary homes of Les Barbery where they lived, considering these were the cataclysmic times of the French Revolution. The Revolution and the subsequent Civil Constitution of the Clergy brought a split into the Church, separating priests who supported the Constitution from those who remained faithful to Rome. Jean-Claude's parents supported the clergy loyal to Rome. An order of arrest was issued against Jacques Colin who had openly supported the parish priest, Father Cabuchet. Jacques had to hide for a year; his house was boarded up and all his goods were sold. Both he and his wife suffered through this, and in 1795 Marie Colin died, aged 37. Jacques Colin died not quite three weeks later, leaving the children orphaned. Jean-Claude was put under the care of a paternal uncle, Sebastian, who lived at St. Bonnet-le-Troncy. Sebastian was a bachelor who employed a housekeeper, Marie Echallier, to look after the children of the Colin household. This lady was a deeply religious woman, but one of those for whom religion and guilt seemed to go hand in hand. In these years Jean-Claude developed a scrupulosity which gave him much trouble, but which was in later life to make him sensitive and merciful to burdened people. His early experiences left him with an intense longing for a life of solitude and a desire to serve God alone. Since he could see no way of doing this while being caught up in the world, he decided to satisfy his desire for solitude by studying for the priesthood. It was in the major seminary of St. Irénée in Lyon that he came into contact with Courveille and the Marist project. Jean-Claude's life is the story of a man touched by God in a remarkable way; a man whose temperament and personality, transformed by grace, enabled him to find a particularly effective response to the deep spiritual needs of his time.



Nothing remains of the house where Jean-Claude Colin was born, but a cross erected in 1936 marks the site. What is perhaps more interesting than imagining what the house may have been like is to stand at the site of the house and look outwards to the countryside that is much the same as in Colin's time. Rolling hills and carefully tended paddocks, where the hamlet's population of 600 made their living, still breathe an atmosphere of tranquillity and peace. To the left of this picture one can see the edge of the forest which played an important part in Colin's spirituality. He told Mayet on one occasion: *"My one thought was to be a hermit; to go out and live in a forest, to be alone with God alone."*

Six years after his parents' death, Jean-Claude went to live with his uncle Sebastian at St Bonnet-le-Troncy, little more than 2km away. The large house where his uncle lived still stands. Today it is a museum of early Marist history.



What did they think?

Three different people with three different perspectives give their view of Jean-Claude Colin. The first is Mayet, a contemporary of Colin, the second is a modern novelist, and the third is a present-day Marist.

At first sight, he appeared to be one of those good, little old country priests, very simple, very withdrawn, not knowing where to curl himself up to occupy less space, and at the same time, so abounding in goodness. I must add, however, that you felt he was a saint, and as soon as I had spoken to him for the first time, I had this strong feeling in my heart: "That is the man you are looking for".

The Mayet Memoirs

He was a visionary man. I myself have seen the accomplishment of his vision in a tiny mission in Japan, in the South Pacific, in the lives of the dedicated men and women who still follow the rule of life which he laid down for them, and the merciful enterprises to which he pointed the way.

He was not in any sense of the word a liberal man, but he had a fund of compassion which still enriches the lives of his followers and of those whom they continue to serve.

They are in the best sense of the word liberal Christians. In them the paradox of the life of Jean-Claude Colin is resolved. They are the good fruit of a strange tree that reared itself gnarled and strong in the stormy landscape of the nineteenth century.

Morris West

Colin was the anonymous apostle, unnoticed because he was so like everybody else, easily approachable because there was no gulf between his mind and the mind of his age. For him, to go among people quietly without offending sensibilities or arousing opposition was a first principle of preaching, pastoral work, education, writing, and the whole range of priest-people encounters. In the last analysis, Colin's true greatness was his ability to adjust himself to his own time and to build an organization imbued with the same quality.

Stan Hosie, sm

If he could speak today ...

Of all the founding figures, Jean-Claude Colin was the one whose life was most marked by the French Revolution. If he could speak to us today, we might imagine him saying something like this:

"They were searing times, especially for someone of a sensitive and timid temperament. Yes, I attended Masses said secretly in barns at night, or in houses where the priest without vestments said Mass into a cupboard, while the people were ready to act as if they were playing cards if the police came. I remember the priest disguised as a shoemaker hearing confessions in the cellar of a house. You know, of all the areas in the Lyon district our area was probably the one most torn apart by the split between those who supported the schismatic priest and those who supported the priest loyal to Rome. That's how I lost my parents; that's how our family was divided. It's no wonder that for me, 'the world' was not a friendly place at all. The world after all had killed our gentle King; it had killed my father and mother; and it would have liked to kill my God. You can see why I wanted to be unknown, to be hidden from the world.... To be alone with God alone was more important to me than anything else. But there was another idea that kept coming back to me like a constant master-thought. What did Mary do in the Church after the Ascension? And what if we copied her way of life in the Church? Gradually, I came to realise that my call was not to be hidden *from* the world, but *in* the world. There were worlds to conquer, souls to save, and the best way to do it was by not imposing myself, by being unobtrusive, by putting myself in the shoes of others. How I came to this understanding, I'll never know. Only the grace of God, on which I depended all my life, could ever explain it."



"The project came from God"

After their ordination to the priesthood, Jean-Claude Colin, Jean-Claude Courveille and Marcellin Champagnat were scattered to the edges of the diocese. To add to the precariousness of their situation, the huge diocese of Lyon was divided in 1822. Colin was now in the new diocese of Belley, and the others, Champagnat and Courveille, were in the diocese of Lyon. The group was not only separated by distance, but was now divided into two separate dioceses, and it was not easy for priests to travel from one diocese to the other. In Lyon, Champagnat continued to work for the development of the Brothers and acted as the rallying point for the priests of Lyons who wished to be Marists. At Cerdon, Jean-Claude Colin began to let the master idea mature. What he had heard and understood Mary to have said to Courveille at Le Puy was simply this: *"I was the support of the early Church at its beginning. I shall be also at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me."* During these years, which Colin says were years of great consolation, this idea and its consequences began to develop into a living human organism: a body of men and women – and children, too, even the unborn – who would have a special work to do in the church. A sign, perhaps, of the extraordinary graces he experienced during these years was the transformation that took place in him: from a shy, wooden, and deadly dull preacher into someone able to fire up even the hard-bitten men of an area referred to by the clergy as a distinct backwater of the diocese. Marie Jotillon and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn had arrived at Cerdon in 1817 at the invitation of the Colin brothers. In 1819 Marie Jotillon was sent to help Courveille whose Sisters of Mary were experiencing difficulties. Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn became housekeeper of the priests, moving into the presbytery with her two nephews aged 10 and 3. She lived here from 1818 to 1823, in daily contact with the two Colin brothers, sharing their preoccupation with the Marist project and helping them where she could. This explains how she understood so deeply the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin. Colin, meanwhile, working at night and sometimes into the early morning, in a little closet five feet square, began to jot down ideas for a rule for the congregation of Marists. He was later to declare that the only guide he had in this work was the life of the family at Nazareth and the first mission of the Apostles. The Society of Mary was to be like no other religious congregation the Church had seen.

The transformation

COLIN:

When I began as a curate, for two months I never said one word louder than the other... On all sides, people complained that I was cold, that I was dead... I've certainly changed. One day I began talking forcefully in the pulpit, and from then on....

MAYET:

Father Colin preached the word of God with vigour and the men liked him. When he went up to preach, the men said, "It's the curate; it's the curate." And they were quite pleased.

CHAVOIN:

When the Fathers Colin were at Cerdon, they were revered by all the inhabitants. Had they remained there, the whole parish would soon have been like a religious community; already a fervent group of 30 men used to meet in the presbytery.

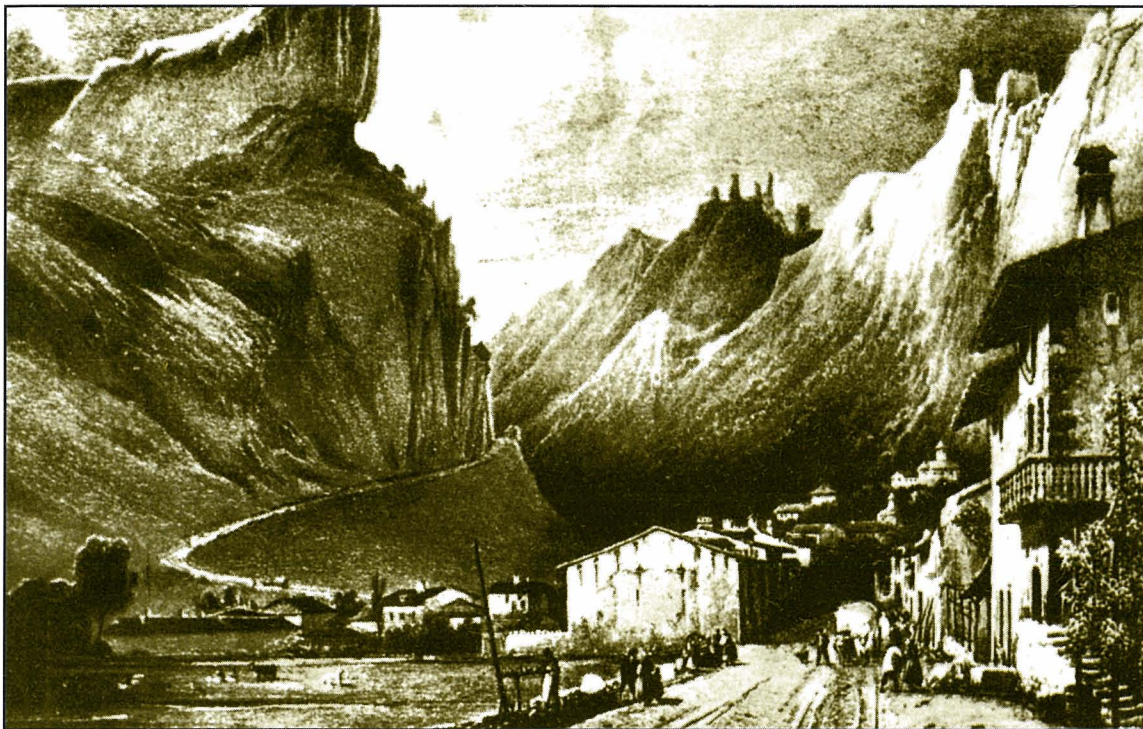
The graces of Cerdon

COLIN:

Over a period of six years, I experienced extraordinary serenity when thinking of the Society, with a clear feeling that it was the work of God... I experienced tangible comfort just at the thought of it; when I heard a piece of news, I glowed all over, my face became radiant. But nature was too much at work.... I bless God.... He really cured me.... There were trials....

CHAVOIN:

When the Fathers were almost overwhelmed by these annoying difficulties, I felt full of courage and cheered them up. At other times, when they were untroubled, my turn came. Ah! Those were our finest hours. One day they received a letter which upset them very much, and the same post brought an important answer. The Fathers were discouraged. I said to them, "Let's go to the church." We all three went. We prayed for an hour, or an hour and a half, and we came out feeling peaceful and contented.



This stylized sketch of Cerdon made in 1824 gives some idea of the feel of the place: a town at the edge of the diocese, on the meeting point of three valleys, on the main Lyon-Geneva road. In the time of the Colin brothers there were about 1500 residents at Cerdon. The presbytery built by the Colins in 1822 still stands. It was in this presbytery that Jean-Claude sketched the first ideas of a Rule. He later said, If I were to return to Cerdon, I would go to see the little closet five feet square which I had at the foot of my bed. It's there that I passed nights and where I wrote the first ideas of the Society.

COLIN:

In one of the trips I made for the Society, and I made many, I felt that all the devils were after me to stop me from making it. Yes, so I believed.... I felt an overpowering repugnance.. After twenty minutes of walking, I threw myself on my knees, in the moonlight, in the middle of the road, and I said, "My God.... if you want me to do this, give me back my strength, and in that way show me whether it is your will." All of a sudden, I felt relieved, happy, lighthearted. I ran like a hare.

MAYET:

That's what a senior priest told me that Father Colin had said to him: when he prayed, the Blessed Virgin appeared to him, and he felt filled with a heavenly joy and a superhuman courage... and this was a confirmation of the will of God for the Society.... At the spot where Jesus Christ appeared to St Ignatius (in Rome) a chapel has been built. It would be good if a chapel were built on the site where Mary appeared.

Certainty about the project

MAYET:

Father Colin told me one day, at the end of 1845, that he had always had the thought, the trust, the assurance, amid the opposition we met in the beginning, that the Society would succeed. He said that he felt interiorly that the work to which he was devoting himself came from God and was not a figment of the imagination or one of those not uncommon youthful ideas.

COLIN:

Yes, young men often have ideas of this sort. I felt a great difference between this work and what we call young men's ideas, which I never did like.... On the other hand, I felt impelled to this work, not by the ardour of youth, such as you often see, but by an impulse that I felt came from above.

The Mayet Memoirs

"Unheard of ... a monster"

Jean-Claude Colin's work on the early rules of the congregation was especially intense for three years while he was at Cerdon. The idea was simple and clear: Mary had been present in the early Church like a mother supporting a child. And today she still continues to do this. Like a mother, she cannot bear anyone to be left out or abandoned: her work in these days is to gather all those who are on the edge of life or on the edge of the Church, and lead them to an experience of the love of God, so that what was evident in the early Church – "a group of believers united in mind and heart" (Acts 4: 32) – may be seen again in our days. This "work of Mary" needs a group of people – a multi-branched organization of priests, religious and lay people all working together for this one goal: to gather all into the body of Christ, and to make happen again what happened in the early Church. Colin had found scope for this right at his back-door. In the mountain area of the Bugey, he discovered many people who had abandoned the Church, or felt they had been abandoned by the Church, as a result of the Revolution. In 1824 he and his brother and Father Déclas formed a team to preach missions in the area. The significance of the day they began was not lost on Jean-Claude's brother. He wrote to the Bishop on October 29, 1824: "Today the little Society of Mary begins..." This ministry to the abandoned, though it lasted only four years for him, was to be profoundly significant in shaping Colin's Marist spirituality. He had already been touched by special insights at Cerdon. In the Bugey he experienced a second element: the mercy and compassion of God who will go to any lengths to gather those on the edge. In 1825, the three priests at Cerdon moved to Belley, where later on Colin was asked to take over the administration of the college/seminary. This was a third significant experience. Colin could see how realistic the Marist "way" was for the broken world he lived in. It was now time to take the plan further – to Rome. Colin had already written to the Pope in 1822, and before then he had made a vow to visit the Pope. Now it was time to present the Marist project. It was already a working reality: Marcellin Champagnat's Brothers were increasing rapidly; Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn's Sisters had been approved by the bishop in 1823; priests were gathering together around Colin in Belley and Champagnat in Lyon; and lay groups already existed. But the vast plan he presented was something Rome had never heard of..... it was quite untenable "a monster."

Father Colin in Rome - 1833

In all, Father Colin made five journeys to Rome. His first one was in 1833, when he presented the case for the Marist plan. Mayet gathered reports on Colin's journeys to Rome from Colin himself, and from Father Victor Poupinel, who was later to play an important role in the life of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary.

MAYET:

Father Colin, feeling urged to work for the setting up of the Society, had also vowed to dedicate himself completely to it until he could go and place his project at the feet of the Holy Father in Rome and know what the Holy See thought.

POUPINEL:

In the presentation he made in Rome, he showed the Society as divided into its three distinct branches gathered under the superior, and also a third order.

COLIN:

I wanted to know what Rome would think. I presented my whole plan; people had never seen anything like it.... I laugh when I think how informally, how simply I acted. I just put down in my request for approval of our confraternity of the third order that people would see at the end of time what they had seen at the beginning: one heart and one soul. Cardinal Castracane started laughing and said to me: "What do you mean? Will the whole world be Marist?" "Yes Eminence," I told him. "The Pope too; he is the one we want for our leader."

POUPINEL:

Cardinal Castracane was the relator; he found the plan gigantesque, monstrous, and was convinced that such a society constituted in this way could never function, so he made out his report to this effect.

COLIN:

I told those Cardinals who told me it was a gigantic plan: "I have come here simply to find out whether God wishes it or not, that is all. Give me a straight yes or no; that is all I came to Rome in search of." They didn't know what to say when they saw this poor priest standing in front of them, talking to them in this way.

The Mayet Memoirs

What did they say?

What Colin presented in his plan, and what Cardinal Castracane proposed to the Cardinals, may be gathered from this extract from the long report he presented on January 31, 1834.

"Father Colin from the diocese of Belley has presented a request to the Holy Father in which he outlines that from 1816, in the city of Lyon, 12 priests laid the foundations for a Society called the Society of Mary, with the idea of making it in time into a Religious Order. This Society embraces three different Congregations: of priests dedicated to missions at home and abroad, and to the education of youth in seminaries and colleges; of brothers called Marists, who resemble the Brothers of the Christian schools and who are involved in the education of poor children in the villages; and finally a branch of sisters who from their convent are involved in the education of girls, and of penitent women in separate houses. Each of these so called Congregations has its own rules, its own houses, its own Superior. The Congregation of Brothers is governed by a priest with the title of Provincial; that of the Sisters has a Superior whose jurisdiction extends over all the houses of the congregation; but both the Provincial of the brothers and the Superior of the Sisters are dependent on the Superior General of the Fathers. Over and above these three Congregations, it is planned to set up a Confraternity in which people of both sexes everywhere in the world can be enrolled; these would be regarded as Tertiaries of the above Congregations, and could participate in their spiritual benefits, in dependence on the Superior General of the above named Congregations.... Father Colin has been persuaded that the plan is monstrous... and that he could not at the moment hope for any act of approval from the Holy See."

The minutes of the meeting stated, "by unanimous vote they judged the proposed plan of the Marian Society did not fall into the category of an Institute of the Church and could not be approved under any aspect."

On his visit to Rome in 1833, Jean-Claude Colin wrote to one of his confrères: *My stay in Rome is becoming more and more delightful. Here, the atmosphere is, in a way, pure and sanctified. Here you really do enjoy the liberty of the children of God. Religious principles are not harsh; whether in their decisions or practices, the way of heaven is comfortable and easy. They are much less rigid and punctilious than we are in France.... It's impossible to describe the devotion that the Romans have for the Blessed Virgin. You have to be here to get some idea of it. During the whole of Advent, public novenas are made before the street shrines of the Madonna, and these prayers are accompanied by folk music, which I don't find beautiful, and which makes a deafening noise all day.*

The Mayet Memoirs



"The finger of God"

Colin's main objective in going to Rome in 1833 was simply to present the plan of the Marist project "in order to know what Rome would think". The authorities in Rome made it pretty clear what they thought. But despite that, the whole project continued to grow and to attract more people! The "Marists" were still in two dioceses, Lyons and Belley, with Champagnat looking after his Brothers and acting as the centre point for the priests of the Lyons diocese, and Colin overseeing the total project and taking care especially of the Belley group. Colin had agreed to act as a rallying point, but there was no real superior, and Jeanne-Marie Chavoin and Marcellin Champagnat were truly equal partners. But on January 31, 1834, Rome had said a firm NO to the plan of the Society of Mary with many branches, and that would seem to have put an end to it all. However, events changed in a way that the Bishop of Belley described as an indication of the "finger of God." A great revival in missions to foreign lands took place in the 19th century, and the impetus goes back to the pontificate of Pope Gregory XVI, the greatest missionary Pope of that century. The vast area of Western Oceania needed evangelizing, and the work of evangelizing needed missionaries. A former missionary in Réunion was asked to take the mission. Ill health prevented him, but he suggested a group of men he had heard of as willing "to go to any part of the world" for the Gospel – the group of Marists in France. Officials met in Rome to discuss the question of Oceania. Their report contained two questions: "Is it necessary to create a new Vicariate of Western Polynesia?" Answer: Yes. "To whom shall this mission be entrusted?" Answer: "To the priests of the Marian Congregation of Lyons and Belley." Rome was prepared to approve one branch of the Marist project - the congregation of priests – and at this stage only one branch. What had seemed an essential feature of the project was not allowable. Jeanne-Marie Chavoin was disappointed; from the very beginning she had foreseen that her congregation would be a branch of the Society. And till his death in 1840, Marcellin Champagnat had struggled to keep a unity in the whole growing enterprise. But perhaps for that moment in history Rome was right: a project as vast as the one laid out by Colin would be impossible to govern. For the moment, one branch was approved by Gregory XVI on April 29, 1836. The group of aspiring Marist priests had now to select a leader, and begin their service as missionaries in the Church.

Tombstone

The photograph shows the tombstone of Bishop Devie in the Cathedral of Belley. Bishop Alexandre-Raymond Devie played an important part in the founding events of the Society of Mary. He was a man of great vision and keen to promote the Society, but his plans were different from Colin's. Colin's view of the Society was of an international body of people "going from place to place" for the Gospel. Bishop Devie, understandably reluctant to lose good men from his diocese, wanted the Society to remain a congregation within his diocese.



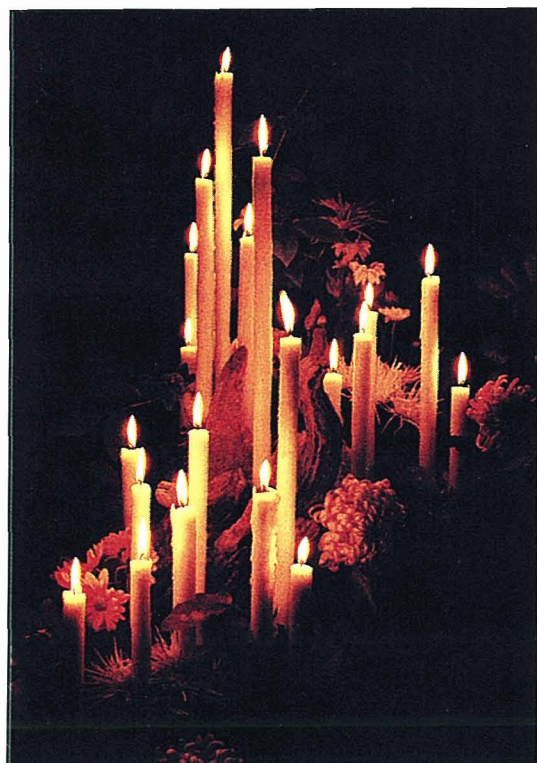
Colin respected and admired Devie. On one occasion he said, "Monsignor Devie is one of the finest examples of a bishop that I know....When he was appointed, this region was abandoned. He has totally renewed it." But given the differences of viewpoint, it is understandable that relationships between the two men were sometimes strained. Colin said, "What made me suffer most was the opposition of the Bishop of Belley, because he was my Bishop. I wished I could have the same opinions, and when I realised that I could not think like him without dropping everything, that tore me apart." Devie's last words to Colin were: "If God is merciful to me, I will certainly not forget the Society of Mary in heaven."

Foundation stones

Denis Maîtrepierre was one of the 20 priests who took their vows on September 24, 1836. This is his account of the event:

"At last the 24th of September arrived; the day we had been waiting for for so long; and a day we would never forget. It was a Saturday; it was the feast of Our Lady of Mercy for the Ransom of Captives. At 5.30 in the morning we made our way from the Seminary to the House of the Marists. We said morning prayers... heard Mass said by Bishop Pompallier... said several prayers out loud together, then stayed for a short time in recollection in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Then we went upstairs into one of the big rooms of the house. Here we spent more than a quarter of an hour in strict silence, recollecting ourselves, praying to Our Lord, asking him to indicate to us who it was he wanted to be in charge of the Society which was about to be born.... The voting was unanimous – everyone's vote was for Father Colin.... Father Champagnat came up to him and began an address, speaking very distinctly and with a kind of harsh emphasis. 'Reverend Superior, this is certainly a nasty present we have just given you; there is such a lot of unhappiness ahead of you while you are in charge. You have been lifted up to a position of importance, but only to have to face winds and storms... and on the last day you will have to answer for each of us.' Speaking for himself and for his confrères, he made a promise to do everything possible to lighten the burden.

The thought of the work under way, this alone filled the minds of those present with solemn thoughts: they were going to lay the foundation stone, set the cornerstone of a building which was destined to rise to a great height. The world unfolded before their gaze.... The Society of Mary was in being: it no longer belonged just to the diocese of Lyon, or just to the diocese of Belley; it was catholic. The members began to leave, after a brotherly embrace and with the Superior's blessing; off they went, filled with the ardent and sincere desire to work for the glory of God, for the honour of Mary and for the sanctification of souls."



Cornerstone

COLIN:

What imperceptibly put me at the head of the Society is that some of my confrères wanted to fight the bishops. Then I separated from them. The greatest grace I have received is that I have always kept united to the bishops. I was persuaded that nothing would succeed except through the bishops.

There was one who suggested that we go ahead despite the authorities. My brother and I had the same thought: Let the Society perish rather than go against authority. If the Society is God's work, God will maintain it.

MAYET:

If everybody had left you, what would you have done?

COLIN:

I would have said a "Te Deum" and I would have started over again by myself. Even if it had perished then, even if it were to fail today, I would still say it has been very useful to me. It has detached me from everything....

The Mayet Memoirs

"Consider the rock . . .

When Isaiah preached to the People of God to give them hope, he encouraged them to remember their origins: "Consider the rock you were hewn from, the quarry from which you were cut."... Remember Abraham and Sarah, a most unlikely couple; remember what was done in them, by them, and through them. And remember that you are their heirs....

If there's anything we can be sure of, it is that the pioneers of the Marist project were men and women of rock. Champagnat, gifted by nature and grace to turn even the harshest realities to his own use; Colin, limited by nature but transformed through the graces of Cerdon to be a man of toughness; Chavoin, willing to struggle even with Colin to ensure that the original idea was lived to its fullest possibility. They were a curious blend of ruggedness and gentleness, of idealism and practicality; people drawn by an idea, who were at the same time able to catch the changing winds of the Spirit. Their energy didn't come just from dreams and ideas, nor was it channelled simply into restless activity. They were people of concrete action because of a certain idea....

...and the quarry."

The "certain idea" came from a person; the quarry from which the idea was cut was the person of Mary in the early Church. What fired the first group was the conviction that they had been chosen personally by Mary, that they were being instructed by her, and that they were being formed and transformed by her to discover the Gospel and to live it as she did.

If the decision of Rome made it impossible for the original plan to take shape, and if the course of history has meant that each of the congregations has developed its own particular style, personality, characteristics and spirit, it is nonetheless true that their common origins lie here in this quarry, and among these "unpolished stones scattered at the bottom of the foundation."



Some... are bent on finding something miraculous in the beginning and the origin of the Society. The miracle is that God was willing to use such instruments for His work... We who are at the beginning are like rough stones that you throw to the bottom of the foundation. You don't use polished stones for that.

Marcellin Champagnat



I especially want there to be in the Society some record of our beginnings, not just so that we shall be talked about... but so that in the future people will conform to our way of acting and imitate the simplicity that God blessed.... Never were we so joyous. Never did we laugh with such good heart. I've always been nostalgic for that period.

Jean-Claude Colin



We were hard up in our early days. But how happy we were! At that time we were light-hearted and simple as children, and no sullen faces were ever seen about the house.... Such happy times do not recur; they are blessings attached to the poverty of beginnings.

Jeanne-Marie Chavoin

Hidden life

In their haste to reach
Michelangelo's statue of David,
tourists in Florence are often inclined to overlook
the unfinished sculptures in the hallways
leading to the room where "David" stands.

These pieces of sculpture
have been called "The Prisoners",
and they reveal what can happen
to an ordinary piece of stone
when the craftsmanship of a genius
draws from inside it
a perfection and form that others
would never have thought possible.

If a human genius can look at a piece of stone
and see possibilities that others cannot see,
what possibilities might God see
in human beings?

What "prisoner" inside each of us unlikely people is waiting
to be released?

And what might happen if people allowed Mary
– often referred to by the Scriptural title of "wisdom"
and "artisan" –
to shape and form and draw forth
from the depths of their being
a particular image of the disciple of Jesus?

And what might happen
if these disciples of Jesus
– men, women, children, priests, sisters,
brothers, lay people –
gathered together to rebuild the church?

That was the dream of those pioneers
of the Marist project,
and they promised God
they would go anywhere in the world for it.

