

It makes a difference

Within six years of the Profession of the first 20 Marists in 1836, the whole Marist enterprise already numbered 60 priests, 400 brothers, 100 sisters, and many lay people, spread throughout a dozen dioceses. By then, 41 of them had set out for the missions of Oceania, and one had already been martyred. In a such a short time, and from such a small part of France, nearly 600 people had joined an enterprise, convinced that *this would make a difference to their own lives*. Furthermore, these people were driven to “go from place to place”, even to go to the ends of the earth, convinced that *this would make a difference to the lives of others*. And despite Champagnat’s conviction that they were just rough and unpolished stones, the Marists’ preaching *did make a difference to people’s perception of the Church*. Parishioners who had ridiculed and abused the missionaries at the beginning of their missions fell at their feet by the end. What was the secret? Statements by the pioneers reveal that their energies were mobilised by three convictions. In the first place, they believed that the name “Society of Mary” had been reserved for their time and for each of them personally, and that they were privileged to be “the first children of Mary.” As well as that, they believed that living by Mary’s attitudes of mind and heart was a particularly effective way of meeting what they saw as “the great needs of the people”. And this, they believed, would make a difference to their own lives, to the lives of others, and to the way the church was perceived and experienced. However, by 1842, it was clear that the plan of a many-branched Marist enterprise was impossible, and that each branch would need to be independent. Marcellin Champagnat had died in 1840, and the Brothers already had their own Superior General. If from now on in this book we seem to follow the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin, the founder of the Marist Fathers, it is because it was Colin whom Mayet followed with notebook and pen, and it was Colin who more than anyone else articulated what might be called the spirituality of the Marist project. There is only one aim of Marist spirituality and that is to live the life of Jesus; and there is only one source of Marist spirituality, and that is Mary herself; but each of the original congregations, and each of the congregations that developed over the years, has added its own particular instruments and its own variations to this one theme.

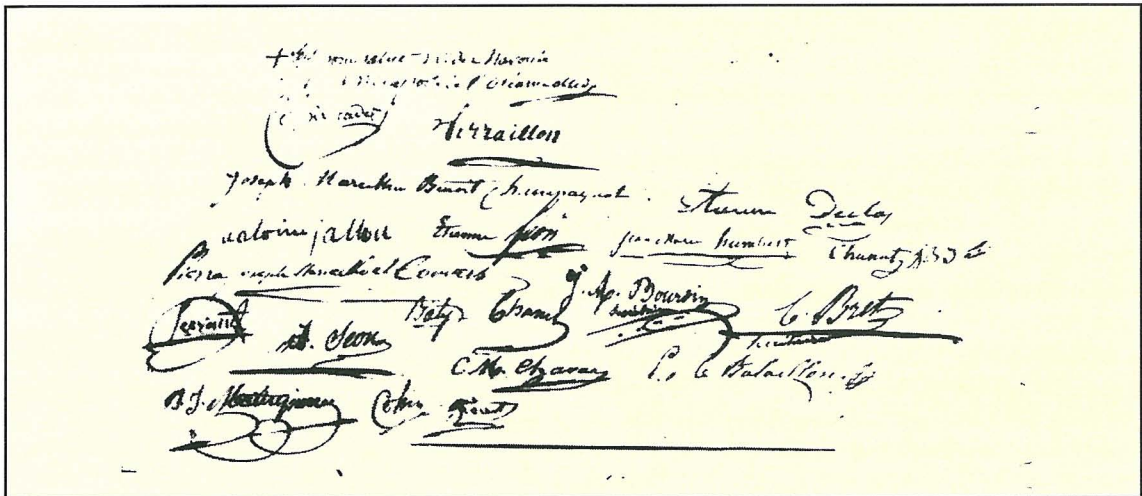
"The place where we used to meet most frequently was the woods in the garden of the country house. We used those meetings to inflame our zeal, at times with the thought that we had the happiness of being the first children of Mary, and at times with the thought of the great needs of the people."

Father Terraillon on the beginnings of the Society.

Specially chosen

Terraillon speaks of the first companions’ happiness in being the first children of Mary. This is a recurrent theme in the consecrations to Our Lady which concluded the annual retreat. We don’t relate easily to this notion of being the privileged children of Mary, or at least we find it difficult to give it acceptable theological content. At the same time, let us not dismiss too easily a theme which I believe is an essential ingredient in the kind of total commitment that the Marist project elicited. Jesus experienced God as a voice saying: “You are my beloved Son. On you my favour rests.” (Mk.1:11) Mary heard the angel say: “Rejoice, O highly favoured daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.” (Lk. 1:28) When the early Marists experienced themselves as the privileged children of Mary, as the objects of a loving choice, they were saying something about what the Spirit does in those who are led by the Spirit. “You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’).” (Rm.8:15)

Gaston Lessard, sm



The signatures of the first 20 men to become Marists. Among these men were Marcellin Champagnat, founder of the Marist Brothers, and Peter Chane, first martyr of Oceania. Three months after their profession, four of these twenty priests, along with Bishop Pompallier and three brothers, set out for the vast area of Oceania at the bottom of the world's map. Within five years of that profession ceremony, both Chane and Champagnat had died.

Gracious choice

The first Marists were convinced that the work of Mary was of her own initiative.... And today, though we have no tangible sign of her actual intervention on behalf of the Marist congregation, we cannot forget the invitation to ever keep in mind the origin of our personal vocation: it is by a gracious choice that we belong to the family of Mary.

John Jago, sm

It's up to us

What needs to be renewed, refounded or perhaps re-found, is the common vision that enthused the young seminarians in Lyon during their last years of preparation for the priesthood; the vision that led them to the chapel of Fourvière, that enabled them to persist in a common project throughout the years of dispersion, and after twenty years was vigorous enough to make them adopt what at the time must have seemed the most daunting of mission fields.

Jan Snijders, sm

Writing an obituary

Writing an obituary can help us to discover just where the centre of our lives is, and this can be a real eye-opener.

Suppose for a moment
you had a sudden heart failure
or met with a freak and fatal accident.
Your life is all over.

What you have done goes down in history,
and everything that you planned to do
or were going to get round to do
vanishes with the mind that considered it.
Imagine that you are a friend of yourself
and are writing an obituary for yourself.

What would you write?

On what was your heart set?

Whatever you built your life around -

was it what you dreamt for your life?

And was it worth all the effort?

The dream of those young seminarians
remained with them all their lives.

They thought it was worth living for -
and dying for.