

Fourvière - 23 July 1816

The following is an edited version of a longer article by Fr Justin Taylor SM.



The Event

On Monday 22 July 1816, Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene, in the chapel of the major seminary of the archdiocese of Lyons, Saint-Irénée, Louis-Guillaume Dubourg, Bishop of New Orleans, conferred priestly ordination on fifty-two candidates. Among them were Marcellin Champagnat, Jean-Claude Colin, Jean-Claude Courveille, Étienne Déclas and Étienne Terrailon. They had now arrived at the goal of many years of study and formation.

Early in the morning of Tuesday 23 July 1816, these five newly ordained, together with seven other seminarians, were climbing the 800 steps to the top of the hill that dominates the city. It may well have been raining, for 1816 was 'the year without a summer', with violently unseasonal weather caused by a series of volcanic

eruptions on the other side of the world in the preceding years. The summit of the hill was known as Fourvière (from the Latin name *Forum Vetus*) and was the site of the Roman and pre-Roman Celtic town of Lugdunum. Here stood a little chapel that was an ancient shrine of Our Lady recently restored as a place of pilgrimage to one of the numerous 'Black Madonnas' venerated in the south of France. Over the centuries, this sanctuary has been the scene of many acts of dedication, on the part of religious founders, departing missionaries and individuals, as witnessed by the plaques and votive offerings that cover its walls. Today it is overshadowed by the huge basilica built between 1872 and 1884.

During the preceding months, our twelve seminarians had formed a group and made a commitment. Now, they were about to separate. But, before they broke up, they wanted to

seal their commitment at Fourvière. They brought with them a written document, which they had all signed.

At the altar before the venerated statue of the Blessed Virgin, Courveille alone celebrated Mass – the other newly ordained were intending to celebrate their first Mass in their parishes. Terrailon, who had the best knowledge of ceremonies, assisted him. All received Holy Communion from Courveille. During the Mass the signed document was placed on the altar under the corporal, thus uniting their commitment with the sacrifice of Christ.

The signatories of the act declared their ‘sincere intention and firm purpose of consecrating ourselves at the first opportunity to founding a congregation of Mary-ists [*Mariistes*, the original form of the name]’. The use of the term ‘congregation’ implied that they had in mind something more than a simple association or a diocesan society.

What was its origin?

The story began at the major seminary, which was named after one of the earliest bishops of Lyons, Saint Irenaeus. One Wednesday during the school year 1814-1815, Étienne Déclas was cutting the hair of his fellow-student Jean-Claude Courveille at the seminary’s holiday house, just outside the city, where they all used to go on days off. At the time, they were reading in the refectory the Life of St Francis Régis (1597-1640), the great Jesuit missionary who re-evangelised the country regions of south-central France. Courveille, who came from those parts, confided to Déclas that when he became a priest he would imitate St Francis Régis and go through the countryside to the aid of the poor people, who had more need of visiting priests than those in cities and big towns. ‘We would go on foot, simply, eating the same food as the peasants. We would live on the milk and bread of the country folk. We would instruct them, and hear their confessions.’ He asked Déclas if he wanted to do likewise, and Déclas replied: *Yes*.

Nothing more was said for the moment, but from time to time during the rest of the year at the seminary Courveille would say to Déclas: ‘We will do like St Francis Régis’, and that was all. Then, just before everyone left for the summer vacation, Courveille took him aside and said: ‘You know, what we were talking about during the year, that’s serious. There’s going to

be an order that will do more or less the same as that of the Jesuits. Only, those who will be its members will be called Marists, instead of calling themselves Jesuits.' The two seminarians promised to write to one another during the vacation, and they kept their word.

This was a period of ferment in the Church in France. Courveille, Déclas and their companions had been born just before or in the early years of the French Revolution that began in 1789. While they were seminarians, Napoleon was ruling France and much of Europe. But, since 1812, his empire had begun to crumble. He was finally defeated at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. France once again had a legitimate king, Louis XVIII, brother of the executed (many would have said martyred) Louis XVI. Despite, or perhaps because of, persecution and difficulties, the Church in Europe was experiencing a new age of vigour and creativity. This was expressing itself in the foundation or re-foundation of religious congregations and a renewed missionary spirit, which was aimed in part at winning back those who had become hostile or indifferent to Christianity.

A key moment was the re-establishment of the Society of Jesus by Pope Pius VII on 7 August 1814. Other societies also revived, notably the Sulpicians and the Vincentians. There were also new foundations in France, many of which had already begun unofficially: the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Coudrin, 1800); the Society of the Missions of France (Rauzan, 1815); the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (Mazenod, 1816); the Daughters of Mary (Chaminade, 1816). Later came the revival of older orders: Benedictines (Guéranger at Solesmes, 1836), Dominicans (Lacordaire, 1840).

After the vacation, at the beginning of the school year 1815-1816, Courveille and Déclas began to recruit among their fellow-seminarians. Courveille spoke to Marcellin Champagnat. Déclas spoke to Étienne Terrailon and Jean-Claude Colin. Terrailon remembered what Déclas told them, quoting Courveille: 'Everywhere that Jesus has altars, Mary too has her little altar alongside. Jesus has his Society; Mary should have hers too.' They were 'amazed' by these words and 'left quite dumbfounded'. In the end about fifteen or sixteen seminarians were at least interested in the project.

The little group found a patron in Jean Cholleton, professor of moral theology in the seminary and spiritual director of several of them, including Courveille and Colin. They used to meet in his room, no. 34 on the third floor. At the country house, they met in Cholleton's room there, or else, weather permitting, in the garden, among the trees. The tradition of the place continued to associate the groves of trees, and in particular a mulberry tree capable of sheltering about a hundred persons, not only with the beginnings of the Marist project but with many other ardent reflections and discussions of seminarians.

Many ideas

Jean-Claude Colin had his own 'idea' of a society and decided to join forces with Courveille. Marcellin Champagnat, it appears, had already given thought to establishing a group of teaching brothers for catechising and instructing children of the country districts, such as he himself had been, and of whose religious and educational needs he was personally so well aware. Like Colin, he had so far done nothing about his project; unlike Colin, he spoke openly of it in the group and insisted that teaching brothers should form part of the Society of Mary. Champagnat's response to the invitation to join the Society was to say: 'I have always felt in myself an attraction for an establishment of brothers; I willingly join you and, if you see fit, I will be responsible for this part'. According to Champagnat's first biographer among the Little Brothers of Mary, Brother Jean-Baptiste, he often told the group at Saint-Irénée: '*We must have brothers, we must have brothers, to teach the Catechism, to help the Missionaries, to run Schools for children*'. They replied: 'Well then, you take responsibility for the brothers since you have had the idea.'

The introduction of the brothers' branch represented a significant new departure. So far, the historical model for the Society of Mary had been the Society of Jesus. However, the model for a company of teaching brothers was not, of course, the Jesuits but congregations such as the Brothers of the Christian Schools founded in France by St Jean-Baptiste de La Salle (1651-1719).

Many branches

By the 1830s the Society of Mary was representing itself in official documents as consisting of several branches – male and female religious and lay tertiaries – united under a common

superior general. This complex composition was not, however, simply the result of piecemeal historical developments. Rather, it was said to be a feature of the original project since its inception, so must go back to the discussions among the seminarians at Saint-Irénée. This three-part scheme recalls the great medieval orders, such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans, which brought together friars engaged in apostolic activities, contemplative sisters and dedicated laypeople.

That all gives a plan for an institute whose overall shape was modelled on the 'great orders', but whose branch of priests was modelled on the Jesuits, while the branch of teaching brothers was to be modelled on the Christian Brothers of La Salle. What would be the particular model for an eventual branch of sisters or for a lay confraternity or third order? Such complexity was to prove unacceptable to Rome.

What happened next?

After the Mass at Fourvière, those who had made the act of commitment went their separate ways. Marcellin Champagnat was appointed as curate at La Valla, where, on 2 January 1817, he gathered the first Marist Brothers. Jean-Claude Colin was made curate at Cerdon, where his brother Pierre had been appointed parish priest. Pierre brought to Cerdon Jeanne-Marie Chavoin and her first companion Marie Jotillon, who laid the foundations of the Marist Sisters.

In 1824, Étienne Déclas was allowed to join the Colin brothers at Cerdon, thus forming the first community of Marist Fathers. This was also the year that Marcellin and the brothers built The Hermitage and the first Marist sisters took vows. From Cerdon and then Belley, Jean-Claude Colin and Déclas began to preach parish missions in the Bugey. Groups of lay tertiaries gradually came into being. The Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary have roots in the Third Order. Thus the multi-branched Society of Mary, envisaged by the seminarians at Saint-Irénée and the object of their act of commitment consecrated at Fourvière on 23 July 1816, gradually took shape.