

Fourvière, 23 July 1816

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 Terraillon. They had now arrived at the goal of many years of study and formation. Colin's elder brother Pierre, a priest since 1810, was at Saint-Irénée for a few days before his ordination, but had already left on 20 July, a Saturday, to be back in his parish for the Sunday.

Early in the morning of Tuesday 23 July 1816, these five newly ordained, together with seven other seminarians who had not yet completed their studies for the priesthood, 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. Terraillon, 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. Did they read it out aloud after Mass? They may have done, but that is not recorded in the contemporary accounts, which describe in some detail what they did.

The original document, with its signatures, has unfortunately disappeared. Four copies, however, exist, all written in the hand of Pierre Colin. They seem to be ‘blanks’, bearing neither date nor signatures. I believe they were intended for new members to fill in and sign when they joined the original group. The act is couched in the first person plural, ‘We’. Its authors formally identify themselves as ‘We the undersigned’ – which would indicate that our text is a document to be signed rather than read out (when one would expect something like ‘We assembled here’). The fact that it is drawn up in Latin, together with the use of a number of formal and emphatic expressions, testify to the desire of the signatories to invest it with the highest degree of solemnity of which they were capable. At the same time, the document betrays – even in its insistence that its authors were not acting ‘out of some whim of callow youth’ but ‘seriously, after mature consideration, and listening to the advice of others’ – that they were still young and liable to be suspected of rashness and imprudence. Their self-dedication was not, however, a vow or even, properly speaking, an act of consecration, but a declaration of intent.

The act begins ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ and continues: *Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam et Mariae Genetricis Domini Jesu honorem* – ‘All for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary the Mother of the Lord Jesus’. Adding Mary’s name to the familiar Ignatian ‘All for the greater glory of God’ was a widely adopted practice at the time. However, the precise formulation used here seems to have been characteristic of Courveille. 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. This intention was confirmed by their promise of fidelity to Christ ‘in Our Most Holy Mother the Roman Catholic Church, pledging our wholehearted loyalty to its supreme head the Roman Pontiff, as also to His Lordship our Bishop.’ Rather than simply an affirmation of papal primacy, this probably implies an intention to seek the approval of Rome for the ‘congregation of Mary-ists’, which was therefore to have a large sphere of operation. Their self-dedication was total and envisaged even martyrdom. They were confident that ‘under the government of the Most Christian King, favourable to peace and religion’, the Society would shortly come into being. In the context of 1816, this expressed the hope that the Society would soon be established during the reign of the recently restored Louis XVIII, who

was referred to by the title Most Christian King traditionally borne by the kings of France. The allusions to peace and religion made a pointed contrast with the latter years of Napoleon, marked by constant wars and by ill-treatment of the pope. There had also been a prophecy that encouraged them to expect that the Society would see the light of day under ‘the Most Christian King’; it was often mentioned or alluded to in the years to come. The young men did not specify any apostolic work or works to which they would devote themselves but promised to ‘spend ourselves and all we possess in saving souls by every kind of apostolate under the sacred name of the Virgin Mary and with her protection and help’. They concluded with a clause, suggested perhaps by their protector Jean Cholleton, a professor at the seminary, that they left all to the better judgment of their Superiors.

Obviously this act of commitment did not come out of nowhere.

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 Saint 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 Saint 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).

An obvious recruiting ground for revived or new congregations was a seminary such as Saint-Irénée at Lyons. The vicar general of the diocese, Claude-Marie Bochard, was concerned that the most fervent seminarians would be siphoned off by these orders. He wanted to keep them for the diocese. During the school year of 1814-1815, he circulated among the seminarians a manifesto with the heading '*Pensée pieuse* (Pious Thought)' seeking recruits among the seminarians for his project of a Society of the Cross of Jesus.

Bochard knew his men and how to touch their youthful generosity and aspirations. He also cleverly excluded potential competitors. He sketched the woeful state of religion in France. God surely meant to raise up those who would respond to the needs of the times, as he had done in every age since the Apostles, men like Ignatius at the time when Luther appeared on the scene, or Vincent de Paul after the Wars of Religion in France. So much for the past. What about the present age? Was no remedy for the human race kept in store for 'our times, when it is so corrupt, so depraved, so lost?' He addressed the individual seminarian ('O my brother'). If the Lord chose him at this time to do his work, how would he respond? If the angel of God knocked at his door, he should follow the example of the 'Queen of Saints' and answer with humility and obedience. He would thus be joining forces with 'so many fervent brothers whom zeal for God's house is already devouring for this great work.' Bochard sketched the 'harvest' that offered itself: preaching, giving retreats, missions, spiritual direction, seminaries, colleges, schools – enough to engage the zeal of every heart, every kind of spirit and talents. He raised the prospect of an 'association' of zealous priests to

undertake all these works and contrasted it with religious orders, which were, he held, inappropriate to the needs of the times.

Bochard's manifesto gives an idea of the spiritual atmosphere prevailing in the major seminary of Lyons when Courveille began to speak to Déclas of his plans for a Society of Mary as a counterpart of the Society of Jesus. After the vacation, at the beginning of the school year 1815-1816, they both began to recruit among their fellow-seminarians. Courveille spoke to Marcellin Champagnat. Déclas spoke to Étienne Terraillon and Jean-Claude Colin. Terraillon 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.

Courveille later remembered that they spoke as often as they could about the Society of Mary. Terraillon too recalled the early meetings of the first recruits. They would 'fire one another with enthusiasm' about how lucky they were to dedicate themselves to the 'success of such a fine work'. Two themes recurred in their discussions: their happiness to be the 'first children of Mary', and the 'great need of the peoples'. They would also have discussed the ways in which, as Mary's sons, they proposed to meet that need. Now and again, Courveille would speak to them, most often about the 'need to imitate Mary, above all in her indescribable humility'. They resolved from the start not to advertise their project, but to give serious thought to the best means to adopt in order to bring it to a successful outcome. So each one reflected on who might be asked to join; but before speaking to possible candidates, the whole group discussed their suitability.

Jean-Claude Colin already had his own 'idea' of a society, which so far remained with him alone. He must have recognised sufficient similarity between it and the Society of Mary to which Jean-Claude Courveille was recruiting. In any case, he decided that the best way of realising his own project was to join forces with Courveille. As he was later to say, with

remarkable insight into his own character: ‘Never would I have had the courage to nois[e] this idea abroad. And later, when the thing was known, I was able get involved in it, without having the appearance of being its creator.’ At the same time, his adherence to the Society of Mary did not represent for him the abandonment of his own project but its federation with Courveille’s.

He was not the only recruit who came to the Society of Mary with his own project. Another was Marcellin Champagnat. He, 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 Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle (1651-1719).

There are other indications that the Jesuit model was not the only one for the Marists. 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.

To speak of ‘branches’ does not necessarily entail being aware of the image of a tree. In Colin’s own mind, however, this image was vivid and effective. In 1838 he said at table: ‘The Society was presented to someone (words said with embarrassment, reserve and mystery) under the emblem of a trunk with three branches’. Colin often came back to the image of the tree with three branches. In fact, such mysterious sayings, often expressed with embarrassment, were typical of the way he would refer to the origins of the Society. Was he the one to whom the Society was presented under this emblem and to whom these prophetic words were spoken? That is not certain, and I personally think it unlikely. In any case, the origins of the Society of Mary were accompanied by many ‘revelations and prophecies’.

What was the source of Courveille’s own inspiration? Since 1836 he had been a Benedictine monk at Solesmes. Marist Father Gabriel-Claude Mayet tracked him down there and questioned him about the origins of the Society. On 18 July 1851, he replied:

The first inspiration of the Society of Mary or of the Marists was given in the cathedral of Le Puy, at the foot of the big altar where there is the miraculous statue of the divine Mary, on 15 August 1812, and it was repeated several times until 1814.

Mayet’s further questioning elicited a fuller account in February 1852. At the age of ten Jean-Claude Courveille, who was born not far from the ancient cathedral city of Le Puy, caught smallpox, which left him almost blind (probably through scarring of the corneas), a condition that the doctors pronounced incurable. This made it impossible for him to pursue his desire of becoming a priest. In 1809 he went on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Le Puy – another ‘Black Madonna’ – and rubbed his eyes with oil from a lamp that burned in front of her statue. Immediately he could see perfectly even the smallest objects in the cathedral and since then had no further trouble with his eyesight. In 1810, before the same miraculous statue, he promised the Blessed Virgin to ‘devote himself entirely to her, to do all that she wanted for the glory of Our Lord, for her honour, for the salvation of souls.’ All his thought was to become a priest so that he could fulfil this threefold vow through his priestly zeal.

In 1812, renewing the same promise to Mary at the foot of the same altar, he told Mayet that ‘he heard, not with the ears of the body, but with those of the heart, interiorly but very distinctly’ the following words:

Behold ... what I desire. I have always imitated my divine Son in everything and followed him right to Calvary, standing at the foot of the cross when he was giving his life for the salvation of men. Now that I am in glory with him, I imitate him in all that he does on earth for his Church, of which I am the protector and like a mighty army for the defence

and the salvation of souls. In the time of a frightful heresy which was on the way to overthrowing the whole of Europe, he raised up his servant Ignatius to form a society that bore his name in calling itself the Society of Jesus and those who composed it Jesuits, in order to fight against the hell that was breaking out against the Church and my divine Son. So I want, and it is the will of my adorable Son, that, in these last times of impiety and unbelief, there should also be a society that is consecrated to me, which bears my name and is called the Society of Mary, and that those who compose it should be called Marists, to fight against hell ...

When Courveille wrote to Mayet, he was recalling an experience that had occurred to him forty years previously. This experience had been powerful and unforgettable. On the other hand, we should not be surprised if what he wrote for Mayet was in part composed rather than simply remembered. In the mean time, his reading of Saint Teresa of Avila supplied him with apt expressions to describe the experience as something ‘heard interiorly but distinctly’. Something similar may also be true of the content and structure of what he ‘heard’. In his report to Mayet we find the parallel between the Society of Jesus and the Society of Mary that had struck Terrailon. As the latter told it, however, the parallel was symbolised by the two altars, to Jesus and to Mary, side by side. The parallel in what Courveille wrote in 1852 recalls Bochard’s ‘Pious Thought’, with its reference to Saint Ignatius and the Jesuits at the time of the Reformation, and its conviction that, in a new situation just as dramatic for the Church, God would raise up a new society. Courveille introduced a further note. Behind the parallel between the two societies was Mary’s ‘constant imitation’ of Jesus in everything. Mary was with Jesus on Calvary, as he gave his life for the human race; she is with him now in glory, imitating everything he does on earth for his Church. So of course, as well as the Society of Jesus, there would be a Society of Mary, whose providential hour was ‘these last times of impiety and unbelief.’

Eschatology is therefore present, though not prominent, in Courveille’s account of what he had ‘heard’ from Mary. Eschatology was also one pole of a mysterious saying that Jean-Claude Colin frequently repeated in the years to come. At the end of 1837 – so more than twenty years after Colin left Saint-Irénée – Mayet records that he quoted the following words:

The Blessed Virgin said: ‘I was the support of the Church at its birth; I will be also at the end of time.

He repeated these or similar words several times and on one occasion added: ‘These words presided over the first beginnings of the Society.’ He rather mysteriously attributed them to ‘a priest’, undoubtedly Jean-Claude Courveille (who, by now, was never named in the Society that he had begun). These words so often repeated by Colin were the way he remembered

what Courveille told the group at Saint-Irénée about the revelation he had received at Le Puy. Colin had reduced a longer and more diffuse utterance into one that is simple, pointed, almost poetic – and memorable. In other words, he has shaped it into a ‘saying’, a unit of tradition.

One important element of the saying quoted by Colin is still, however, unexplained, and that is the role of Mary in the Church at its birth. It is very difficult to relate this to anything in Courveille’s account of the locution of 1812 – unless we suppose that Colin understood that Calvary, at which Mary was present, as she ‘told’ Courveille, was the birthplace of the Church. That the Church was born on Calvary is in fact an idea found among certain Fathers of the Church; and Colin could have known it. But nowhere does he refer explicitly to this notion. On the other hand, the role of Mary in the newborn Church after the Ascension of Christ became a major source of inspiration for Colin in contemplating the Society of Mary.

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, in 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 later adhered to the Marist project – presumably by adding his signature to a copy of the original act of commitment – and brought to Cerdon Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and her first companion Marie Jotillon, who laid the foundations of the Marist Sisters. They would soon have learnt about the wider Marist project and about the promise so solemnly reaffirmed at Fourvière. 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. Time would tell how it would fare.