

Tree and branches

The original idea of the Marist project was never to see the light of day. The plan of a vast congregation of priests, brothers, sisters and lay people, all working under one leader or Superior General, was too complicated for the authorities in Rome to grasp, and too full of potential difficulties. It was something hither to unheard of, and neither the Canon Law of the day nor the Church's theology had any way of seeing clearly how and where this idea fitted in to the life of the Church. Nevertheless, the idea of the Marist project as a tree of several branches was never completely abandoned by the founders of the project. From the beginning and until it was definitively quashed, the idea had always been favoured by the early Marists. When Jean-Claude Colin made his first trip to Rome in 1833, his purpose was to present the idea to the authorities to see their reaction. He was left in no doubt about their thinking. The plan was judged as "gigantesque, monstrous" and "could not be approved under any aspect."

Marcellin Champagnat died in 1840, and was replaced as Superior of the Brothers by Brother François. The union of Brothers and Fathers was not intended to be broken by this fact, however, and when Colin made his second visit to Rome in 1842, he invited Br. François and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn to present their views on the continuing union. The Brothers sent a petition pleading for continued union. The petition recalled that the Brothers and Fathers had begun together, and asked that they should continue to grow alongside each other. Champagnat had always lived in the hope that the enterprise would retain the union of all the branches. The same feeling was expressed by Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn regarding the Sisters. However, Colin's visit to Rome in 1842 convinced him that the project of a congregation of several branches would never be approved. He began to see that a separation of branches was inevitable. He put the question to the General Chapter of 1845: "Is it appropriate that the Superior General of the Marist Fathers be also the General of the Brothers of the same name?" The Chapter replied "NO". A second question put to the Chapter concerned the Marist Sisters: "Should the Society of Mary accept control of religious communities of women?" Again the answer was "NO". The years that followed this two-fold decision were painful ones. By 1852 the Brothers had been approved as a Congregation in its own right, independent of the other branches. In 1884 the Marist Sisters were also approved as a separate Congregation.

September, 1842

Father Colin spoke to us in a charmingly cheerful and carefree fashion about the business he had had to deal with in Rome, and especially of the difficulties he had encountered with regard to the Marist Brothers.

Then with much laughter he recounted the questions put to him by Cardinal Castracane. "How many of you are there?" – "There are six hundred, Eminence." – "And yourself, you are superior general not only for the Fathers, but of the Brothers and the Sisters too?" – "Yes, Eminence." – "And that works, all the same?" – "Eminence, it works all by itself." The Cardinal, he told us, could not get over it. "In Rome they do not have any idea of the religious societies in France." He then returned to the Brothers and their affairs, and how he had felt when he saw so much opposition on the Cardinal's part. These feelings had made him doubt whether God wanted the Brothers to be united to us other than by the bonds of the Third Order.

The Mayet Memoirs

Colin and Marist Fathers

We know very well that Jean-Claude Colin was not the one who gave the idea of the Society of Mary; he did not even give the name. The name was given by Jean-Claude Courveille, the first one to launch the idea. In spite of this, I have no scruple whatsoever in giving Colin the title of Founder of the Marist Fathers, for it was he who put down the foundations which allowed for its establishment. It was Colin who gave us a structure, a spirit, a manner of acting. And I believe that his role as Founder, which crowned all his activities, came from the fact that he really based the Society, not simply on a vague idea, but on precise and solid foundations - there was a rule of life and, when he sent the Fathers on mission, there were directives to be followed. He not only launched an idea, like Courveille, but, as a Founder, he also conveyed a true spiritual and apostolic experience to those whom he gathered together.

Jean Coste, sm

Chavoin and Marist Sisters

When he returned from his second journey to Rome in 1842, Jean-Claude Colin's behaviour towards Jeanne-Marie Chavoin changed very much indeed. He had gone to the Curia to present the Constitutions recently approved by the Marist Fathers' General Chapter. Despite the Curia's refusal in 1833, Colin still hoped the Society of Mary would have three branches – a fourth with the addition of the Brothers - and in the Constitutions there was even an article which foresaw their union under one Superior General. Furthermore, a request by the Brothers – which had also been approved by the Chapter – was in the dossier for the Curia. When, after lengthy discussions concerning the union of Fathers and Brothers, Colin realised that the Curia's opposition was final, he did not even mention the Sisters. During the year 1843, he studied more deeply than ever before the juridical situation of women's congregations, and came to a number of conclusions. The first was the natural result of the replies he had received from Rome: the time for three or four branches was over; the Sisters' congregation, like that of the Brothers, must be independent of that of the Fathers. The second conclusion was the result of the juridical study which he had made. His initial idea – that of Cerdon – was null and void. He had been thinking of the big Orders with solemn vows where cloistered nuns depended on the male branch of priests. That was no longer possible.

Antoine Forissier, sm

Marist Missionary Sisters

I am amazed at the confidence the first Marists – bishops, priests, brothers and Pioneers – had in the young ladies of Oceania. It is striking to see how soon they suggested consecrated life to them. Some of them became Tertiaries; others were formed into diocesan congregations. For many years they were guided by an SMSM; today they are completely autonomous:

* The DAUGHTERS OF MARY, in New Caledonia and on Vanuatu, founded in 1875 by Bishop Vitte and Sister Marie de la Croix, approved in 1962.

* The SISTERS OF OUR LADY OF NAZARETH, in Fiji, founded in 1891 by Bishop Vidal and entrusted to Sister Marie de Jésus, approved in 1950.

* The SISTERS OF NAZARETH, in Bougainville, begun in 1930 by Sister Marie Ignace Schaal, with the encouragement of Bishop Wade. This congregation disbanded during World War II but reorganized in 1947 and was approved in 1962.

* The DAUGHTERS OF MARY IMMACULATE, in the Solomon Islands; founded by Bishop Raucaz in 1935, scattered during the war, it was reorganized and approved in 1947.

These four congregations inherited the Marist spirit of the first missionaries. Today they are a forceful presence in their respective dioceses.

Claudine Nakamura, smsm

Champagnat and Marist Brothers

All his life, Marcellin Champagnat clung tenaciously to the original dream of a Marist family with several branches. It was Champagnat who kept the group of Marists together in Lyons after the division of that diocese found Colin in Belley and Champagnat in Lyon. Champagnat had formed eight or nine of the first group of 20 priests to be professed as Marists in 1836. In fact, the Society of Mary may never have seen the light of day had not Champagnat pressed for the election of a Superior General in 1830, at a time when Colin was being excessively cautious and hesitant. Champagnat directed many candidates to the Marist Sisters, and in a letter to Bishop Devie he supported Colin's idea of the Third Order at Belley in the 1830's. Moreover, he had written: "The Society of Brothers cannot be considered the Work of Mary by itself, but only as a branch of the Society itself. There is nothing I am not prepared to sacrifice to save the Work of Mary from shipwreck. I assure you that I believe more than ever that God wants this work." And in his spiritual testament, dictated only three weeks before his death, and when Marists still hoped for a single congregation with several branches, Champagnat insisted on the unity of spirit, of heart, of mind and of soul that should exist between Fathers and Brothers, under the leadership of a single Superior General.