

## **Marist Presence in County Var**

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I invite you to discover the long saga of the Marist presence in County Var all the more as it involves the whole Marist Family. I will only mention the key events.

As early as 1836, a parish priest asked Marcellin Champagnat to mission Brothers... From 1840, at least 17 School Foundations were being founded, with one in particular in La Seyne in 1852. In 1903 the anti-congregation laws had all of them closed.

The Marist Fathers made themselves known in Toulon in April-May 1843 when the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> departures of 12 missionaries, among whom Bishop Guillaume Douarre, were organized.

Compelled to wait for favorable weather and winds for six weeks, the Marists did not go unnoticed. As early as July 1843, rich persons from Toulon such as Victor Clappier and Blaise Aurran requested from Colin the establishment of a community of Marist missionaries in Toulon. Colin responded favorably to the local Bishop: « We will start silently, in small numbers and we shall do our ministry in the rural parishes rather than in the larger places, if that suits your highness' will.»

### **La Seyne-sur-mer, La Capucinière**

This did eventually take place on All Saints Day in 1845, in an old convent, La Capucinière, in La Seyne sur Mer. First four missionary priests gathered there but they found it hard to carry out home missions as they did not grasp the local language. Barthélemy Epalle was the superior. But in early 1846, contacts were made with the government to be granted the right to open a school. It would take a long time and then in 1848 the revolution put the process to a halt.

### *La Seyne-sur-mer, institution Sainte-Marie*

Eventually a school did open on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1849. This was largely due to the Falloux law, Falloux being the new Minister of Education in Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's government. The superior, Jean-Marie Millot, chief executive Jean-François Viennot and four new fathers (the missionary priests had been appointed somewhere else) took charge of the school. In October, there were 14 fathers and 65 students... In 1851, Pierre-Julien Eymard, the future founder of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, became the superior for the next four years.

### *Montbel (La Crau)*

In 1850, Blaise Aurran met with Colin, who was on a visit in La Seyne. He offered him a large property so as to have a novitiate built. The site was Maubelle, later called Montbel, in La Crau, twenty kilometers North-East of Toulon. The house opened in 1852 and was first a novitiate, then a scholasticate and finally a retirement home ... until 1903.<sup>1</sup>

### *Toulon, house of the missionaries, Bon Pasteur Street*

As early as 1851, the nocturnal Adoration Charity got underway and Eymard the new superior at La Seyne, who gave his full support, convinced Colin to send fathers to Toulon. They first established themselves in the St Peter's Chapel, then in the Holy Spirit Hospital. But soon they purchased an old Convent for penitent girls, Bon Pasteur Street. Their commitments were many: confessions, missions in parishes, St Joseph's and Notre Dame of the sick archconfraternities, circles of men, and prison chaplaincy.

### *Toulon, St Joseph's College, Bon Pasteur Street, then Peiresc Street*

In October 1856, two fathers opened at the house a day school that grew so big that after a few years the premises were too small. In the new Toulon districts the fathers had a new school built which opened its doors at Easter 1864. Soon afterwards 140 students attended the classes. The

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<sup>1</sup> Rich landlord in the region whose wife died in 1836. He devoted his fortune to help the schools, religious novitiate, and homes for the poor... He contacted Champagnat and then Colin. By the end of his life, he made his religious vows as coadjutor brother. He spent his last years at Montbel and he died at the age of 93 in 1877.

school was only for junior pupils until 1924. In 1867/69 new buildings were erected so as to expand the facilities. On April 1868, his Eminence Elloy, Marist Bishop of Oceania inaugurated and blessed the new chapel. In 1870, ten fathers were reported to be present on the premises.

### **The 1880's**

At that time, there were four communities in the Var County: the two schools, the house in Toulon and the house in Montbel. Everyone got a shock when the Second Republic was proclaimed after the war in 1870. As early as 1879, Jules Ferry, the minister for education, had two laws prepared which were passed on March 29<sup>th</sup> 1880; one was against the Jesuits and the second demanded that all the unauthorized congregations (among them the Society of Mary) ought to ask for official authorization within the following three months. After discussion with the other congregations, the Marists decided not to comply and in the following months of October and November orders of the Prefect declared the dissolution and the expulsion of all the communities. Toulon and Montbel were to comply with the orders but not the schools and that is the reason why. General Superior Julien Favre was granted by the pope in Rome on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1879 an indult which officially allowed the priests in schools to be released from their vows and to be integrated in the secular clergy supervised by the local bishop. That is what is called secularization. Thus, the fathers in the schools who remained Marist fathers deep down as they secretly continued with their religious practices, resumed their teaching without being threatened by the French administration.

Very soon, the Marist Fathers staying in Montbel and in the residence moved back to their house. However in 1895 the Fathers had another residence built, Victor Clappier Street, not far from the Junior School, Peiresc Street. The Chapel was inaugurated December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1896.

### **1901-1928: a troubled period**

At the end of the century, the government prepared new laws against the associations and congregations. The 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1901 law, which favoured the associations demanded the congregations to request an authorization permit and they all complied. But in March 1903, the new prime minister, Emile Combes, took a tougher stand and the Parliament refused almost all the authorization permits. As early as April 1<sup>st</sup>, all the communities were disbanded and expelled from their houses, which became then property of the state.

If the schools could still open their doors, as well as some communities because of the 1879 indult, most of the communities had to close down for good like Montbel. Civil service tribunals sold the properties by auction. But most of the time the properties were bought by friends or by real estate associations gathering friends or former pupils. It goes without saying that the Marist Fathers could buy them back when the opportunity would arise to do so.

The Montbel property was sold in 1904, the house in 1911, St Joseph's junior school in 1914 and St Mary's La Seyne in 1923. The Marist fathers were not interested in keeping Montbel. In 2011 they became landlords of the Residence as the Society of Mary was recognized as a legal congregation in 2005. Two real estate associations in partnership with the Marist Fathers own the schools.

### **The Marist Sisters in Toulon: Cours Fénelon**

From 1933 to 1941, some Marist Sisters came to replace the Franciscan sisters at St Joseph's. They devoted their time to material services and taught primary school pupils. In December 1941, they took charge of Cours Fénelon, Picot Street in Toulon, with two extensions, one of which was in the Clappier House. In 1951, they moved to the property in Le Mourillon, St Joseph's Mount, and had new buildings built. In 1983, the charge of Principal of the school was given to a lay person. It is important to mention that a second community laid base in the working class area of Valbertrand from 1979 up to 1984.

### **Mar Vivo (La Seyne), home for retirement of the Marist Fathers, from 1957 until 2010**

The Belley retire home moved to Mar Vivo, Villa des Fleurs in 1957. Many fathers retired there and died, not far away from the sea shores.

1965, St Joseph's College left the city center of Toulon and moved to Ollioules and La Cordeille site.

After Vatican II, lay people were asked to take responsibility in the schools. Along with the fathers lay groups got involved. In that effect, a few dates need to be recorded

1993 (St Joseph's) and 1994 (St Mary's), the Principal is a lay person

1997 birth date of the association Marist Lay People

2002, birth date of the Association Marists in Education

2004, the Marist Fathers became tutors of Cours Fénelon

2005, legal recognition of the Society of Mary.

This is the saga of the Marists in County Var. I hope that you have been able to perceive that throughout the years initiative and creativity have managed to preach the Gospel especially among the young. Today two Marist communities of fathers and sisters are still present in Toulon as well as three Marist schools. May the dynamism of the Holy Spirit and the companionship of Mary help the pursuit of the Marist presence in this corner of France.