

For the Bicentenary of the Fourvière Pledge

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On 23 July 1816, twelve young men met in the chapel of Our Lady of Fourvière. Jean-Claude Courveille, who had been ordained a priest the day before, celebrated Mass, which the others attended. Under the corporal a sheet of paper bore a Latin text followed by twelve signatures. That sheet itself did not survive, but four copies of the text, all in Pierre Colin's handwriting, are extant. The text was edited in *Acta S. M.* (vol. 4, p. 14-15), and in *Origines maristes*¹ (doc. 50). An English translation is given in Donald Kerr's *Jean-Claude Colin Marist* (p. 140):

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. All for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary the mother of the Lord Jesus. We the undersigned, striving to work together for the greater glory of God and [the honour] of Mary the mother of the Lord Jesus, assert and make known our sincere intention and firm will of consecrating ourselves, as soon as ever it is opportune, to founding the most holy congregation of Mariists. That is why by this present act and our signatures we irrevocably dedicate ourselves and all we have, insofar as we are able, to the society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we do this neither childishly nor lightly, nor from any human motive or hope of temporal gain; but seriously, having taken timely counsel and weighed all before God, solely for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary, mother of the Lord Jesus. We pledge ourselves to endure all sufferings, labours, inconveniences, and, if needs be, torture because we can do all things in him who strengthens us, Jesus Christ: to him we promise faithfulness in the bosom of our most holy mother, the Roman Catholic Church, and adhering to its supreme head the Roman pontiff with all our force; also to our very reverend bishop, our ordinary; that we may be good ministers of Jesus Christ, nourished by words of faith and wholesome doctrines, which, by his grace, we have received; confident that under the reign of our most Christian king, which is favourable to peace and to religion, this special institute will soon see the light of day. We solemnly promise that, under the most august name of Mary and with her help, we shall spend ourselves and all we have in saving souls by whatever way possible; all this is, however, subject to the wiser judgment of our superiors. Praised be the holy and immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Amen.

As to the date of the ceremony, the most explicit testimony is that of Étienne Terraillon (doc. 750, § 6). After mentioning "our ordination to the priesthood" on Monday, 22 July 1816, the feast of St Mary Magdalene, he adds:

On the following day, we climbed to Our Lady of Fourvière to place our persons and our project under Mary's special protection. Mr. Courveille said mass alone, and I assisted him. The others were content with receiving communion, because they saved their first mass for their native parishes. As a gesture of devotion, we placed our names on the altar as a sign of our dedication.

Climbing to Fourvière is no mean feat. To get there from the seminary of St. Irenaeus, one has first to cross the peninsula from the Rhône river to the Saône, then to cross this river (probably on the Feuillée bridge), and to climb through what was then Capuchin Hill (now Discalced Carmelites Hill), and then through what is now called Nicolas de Lange Hill. Once they had reached the top, probably sweating under their cassocks and on an empty stomach, the twelve seminarians gathered in the small chapel and attended the mass which Courveille celebrated, with Terraillon next to him. After the mass, perhaps they read out the pledge that had been signed by the twelve of them.

Who took part in that ceremony, and what became of their pledge to "found the most holy congregation of Mariists"?

1. The Signatories

During the school year, the number of candidates dropped from fifteen to twelve. We know pretty well who they were: certainly Jean-Claude Courveille, Étienne Déclas, Étienne Terraillon, Marcellin Champagnat, Jean-Claude Colin, and Jean-Antoine Gillibert. Of the other nine possible

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, the documents cited are edited in that collection.

candidates, if we accept Pierre Colin's assertion that the twelve 1816 signatories are "persisting always in their resolution" in 1819, three can be eliminated, namely Philippe Janvier, Pierre Pousset and Joseph Verrier (see *Forum novum*, vol. 4, p. 93). That leaves six, namely: Thomas Jacob, Jean-Baptiste Seyve, Maurice Charles, François Mottin, Jean-Pierre Perrault-Mainand and Pierre Orsel.

Of those six, the last three were still not priests by 1819. Orsel had left the seminary on 28 April 1816, three weeks after receiving tonsure. Had he signed the pledge before leaving or did he come back to do so on 23 July? We do not know (see doc. 719, § 4). Perrault-Mainand had received minor orders on 6 April 1816; according to Déclas, he shared a room with Courveille (doc. 591, § 8). Mottin, who at the age of nineteen was the youngest and who was in his second year of theology, had received minor orders on 21 July.

Maurice Charles was a priest since 1813 and was a curate in Belmont (Loire), Déclas's birthplace. Perhaps he heard of the Marist project through Déclas. In any case, at the beginning of May 1816 he spent five days at the seminary and met Courveille there (doc. 837, § 3). He might have signed the pledge on that occasion. Déclas also recruited Thomas Jacob, who was in his second year of theology and who was ordained a subdeacon on 22 July. Jean-Baptiste Seyve was ordained a priest on that same day. Courveille had won him over to the Marist project (doc. 591, § 8). He had been away from the seminary from January to May 1816.

Gillibert is a special case. By 1812, he had completed his three years of theology, but he was too young for major orders. He became a subdeacon on 6 January 1814 (together with Champagnat, Colin, Déclas, and Terraillon). On 26 April, he left the seminary in order to accompany Cardinal Fesch, on his way to Rome as an exile². He was back in the seminary in November 1815 and was ordained a priest on 22 July 1816.

With regard to the individuals above, we know too little to get a sense of what drew them to the Marist project rather than to others. What about the remaining five, namely Jean-Claude Courveille and the four who made profession on 24 September 1836, namely: Déclas, Champagnat, Terraillon, and Colin?

That the two hundred and fifty seminarians of St. Irenaeus were subject to pressures from all quarters is well documented. The two vicars general Bochard and Courbon differed in many ways, but they agreed in complaining to the archbishop that people were poaching for vocations in his seminary. On 27 August 1814, Bochard wrote about "the possible loss of subjects that, sooner or later, will be lifted by various institutes: Sulpicians, Lazarists, Fathers of the Faith, etc., etc." (doc. 28). A month later, Courbon related that he had said, about the Fathers of the Faith, that "they enrolled for themselves your best candidates, educated at your expense" (doc. 29, § 1). In order to stop this loss of candidates, Bochard set up a society of diocesan missionaries, the Society of the Cross of Jesus, which became the Chartreux, and later the priests of St. Irenaeus. On 6 June 1815, he wrote about this to Cardinal Fesch (doc. 38, § 2) and he circulated among the seminarians a leaflet entitled "A Pious Thought", that they were invited to sign³. Bochard was hoping to rally the Marist aspirants to his own project. According to Déclas, Bochard "saw Mr. Corveil often and discussed with him the selection of candidates" (doc. 551, § 3). And Colin related: "How often people have tried to get me to join this or that work!" (doc. 819, § 9).

2. Recruiting

What drew the seminarians to one group rather than to another? One can point out three kinds of influences: from above, the criteria of the recruiters; from below, the attraction for this or that group; among equals, personal contacts. Among the recruiters, Bochard mentions the Sulpicians, the Lazarists, and the Fathers of the Faith. Naturally, these people are looking for the "best people," because they need future professors in their seminaries and their schools. Bochard, for

² See a letter of 20 May 1814, from Gillibert to Mioland, in the archives of the Chartreux, R 67, n. 28; cited by Landrey, *Complément aux Origines maristes*, p. 67.

³ The text is edited in OM, doc. 33. It was circulated "during the Hundred Days", hence between 20 March and 22 June 1815 (see OM 4, p. 492-493).

his part, created the Society of the Cross of Jesus in order to keep these people at the service of the diocese of Lyon. The attraction for a particular kind of ministry or of spirituality was probably also at work: the foreign missions, devotion to the Sacred Heart or to the Virgin Mary. The third factor, namely personal contacts among the seminarians, seems to have been the main influence in the recruitment of future Marists.

At St. Irenaeus, Jean-Claude Courveille launched the Marist project of a Society of Mary, which he had brought from Le Puy. His first recruit was Étienne Déclas, who recalls:⁴

I was the first [...] to whom he spoke of his plan. It was in 1815, on a Wednesday, a free day.

Later, Detours provided further details, on the basis of what Déclas told David:

Probably at the end of the school year 1814-1815, Father Déclas, while cutting Mr. Courveille's hair, heard him say, in connection with the Life of St. Francis Regis which was being read in the dining room: "What if we did like St. Francis Regis and gave missions in the countryside. We would go on foot, in simplicity, eating the same food as the peasants. We would eat the milk, the bread that country people eat. We would teach them, and those people would thus have the opportunity to have confessors other than their parish priests! Father Déclas agreed wholeheartedly, and they arranged to write to each other during the summer holidays, and this was done (doc. 868, § 2).

At the beginning of the school year, at All Saints' of 1815, the recruitment process got under way again. Déclas recalls:

At the beginning of the school year, we hastened to look for companions. He [Courveille], for his part, spoke to Father Champagnat, to Father Colin, our reverend superior, to Mr. Mainand, who shared his room, Mr. Sève and others... As for me, I spoke of our project to Fr. Terraillon, to Mr. Jacob. Finally, we were fifteen seminarians (doc. 591, § 8).

Hence, Champagnat and Colin responded to Courveille's invitation, while Terraillon responded to that of Déclas. Still, in Colin's case, Déclas served as an intermediary. In fact, in his narrative to David he says:

When we were back [from the holidays], we began passing this idea on to others. We met for this purpose in Mr. Cholleton's room. It was from that room and from that meeting that Fr. Déclas went out one day to fetch little Colin, as we called him, Father Colin came and, as he liked the idea, he agreed to join the group (doc. 868, § 2).

There is hardly any doubt that Courveille launched the idea of a Society of Mary at the major seminary of St. Irenaeus. According to Déclas, Courveille first spoke about missions in the countryside along the model of St. Francis Regis. According to Terraillon, he began by saying that it would be good to have a Society of Mary as there was a Society of Jesus. Where had Courveille gotten the idea of the Society of Mary? According to Terraillon, it came from something Courveille told himself (doc. 750, § 1 and 3). According to Déclas, the idea had been "given" to Courveille, who thought it was an illusion from the devil, but "this thought pursued him" (doc. 591, § 5). In 1819, long before all these, Pierre Colin was referring to a "particular grace" (*Forum Novum*, vol. 4, p. 91). Throughout his years as superior general, Jean-Claude Colin referred to Mary's words: "I was the mainstay of the Church at its birth; I shall be again at the end of time." As Jean Coste demonstrated some time ago, these words are to be identified as the ones that Courveille claimed to have heard at Le Puy in 1812⁵.

Thus, at least as regards the four who had signed the Fourvière pledge and who made profession in 1836, it is fair to say that they responded to Mary's invitation as this was contained in the revelation made to Courveille. To be sure, this invitation comes down to us in a variety of formulations, according to whether we refer to the narratives of Courveille himself, or of

⁴ OM, doc. 591, § 7. On the development of the Marist project at St Irenaeus, see SH 170, in OM 4, p. 545.

⁵ Jean Coste, "The Role of Mary at the Birth of the Church and at the End of Time", in *Acta S. M.*, vol. 5, p. 275.

Terraillon, or of Jean-Claude Colin, but they concur as far as the essentials are concerned, namely that Mary wants a society that bears her name in order to respond to the needs of the church of their time. The Latin text of the pledge refers only “to founding the most holy congregation of Mariists”, but in doing so they are responding to Mary’s desire. The project, therefore, has a content that takes shape with regard to three realities: Mary, the Church, time. Mary is concerned with a Church facing needs linked to the times in which the signatories are living.

3. What the Signatories Brought with them

At the same time, each came with his own past, his talents, his tastes. These factors played a role in the fact that their number went from fifteen to twelve, then to five, and eventually to four. About those who left the group, we know too little to put our finger on what led them elsewhere. Courveille left the group only ten years later, and he is a special case. This leaves Champagnat, Déclas, Terraillon, and Colin. Apart from their having been ordained priests the day before, what do we know about what they might have been thinking and feeling on 23 July 1816?

Déclas was thirty two years old, the oldest of them. He was born in December 1783; hence, he was not yet six years old when the French Revolution broke out, but he was sixteen when Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in 1799. Hence he had known, at least from afar, the ten years of unprecedented turmoil that France endured then. Under Napoleon he had barely escaped being drafted⁶. In November 1810, at the age of twenty seven, he entered the minor seminary of Saint-Jodard, where Étienne Terraillon and Thomas Jacob were also students. Two years later, at Verrières, in a second section of philosophy that had a hundred and thirty students, among his companions were Jean-Claude Colin, Thomas Jacob, Jean-Baptiste Seyve, and Jean-Marie Vianney⁷. Hence, when he entered the major seminary the following year, he already knew Terraillon and Colin. Courveille arrived at St. Irenaeus a year later, in November 1814. We have seen how, in the spring of 1815, he spoke to Déclas about preaching missions in the countryside, like John Francis Regis, and how Déclas recruited Colin the following year.

Terraillon had been at the minor seminary of Saint-Jodard at least since November 1806. He was then fifteen, in the beginners’ class. Pierre and Jean-Claude Colin were also there, Pierre in philosophy, Jean-Claude in the second year (doc. 8). In November 1808, Terraillon was in the same class as Jean-Claude, who was repeating (doc. 11). During the next three years from November 1809 to July 1812, Terraillon remained at Saint-Jodard, while Jean-Claude Colin was at Alix. In November 1812, Terraillon entered the first division of philosophers, together with Champagnat, while Colin was in the second division with Déclas (doc. 21). In November 1813, he joined the others at the major seminary. Two years later, Courveille and Déclas were recruiting candidates for the Marist project. More than once, Terraillon spoke about the meetings where this project took shape⁸. The starting point was Courveille’s inspiration at Le Puy, which Terraillon repeated always pretty much in the same way: “Wherever Jesus has altars, Mary also has her small altar next to it. Jesus has his Society; Mary should also have hers”.

Champagnat also came with his past. He recalls: “I managed to learn to read and write only with infinite difficulties, for the lack of competent teachers” (doc. 755, § 1). A professor from the major seminary came for Marcellin at his home, Le Rozet, somewhat like Samuel found David in Bethlehem⁹. Jean Coste’s study on the mandate given to Champagnat provides the details on how Champagnat joined the Marist group¹⁰. At the meetings in which the project of a Society of Mary

⁶ OM 4, p. 260, note 1 refers to a letter dated 20 August 1861, in which Yardin tells Poupinel how Déclas, walking on a country road, saw two policemen coming towards him. As he feared being questioned by them, he left the road, turned his back to them, dropped his trousers as though to relieve himself. The policemen went by, expressing their disgust.

⁷ See OM, doc. 894 and 21.

⁸ Besides his written narrative from 1840-1842 (doc. 750), we also have a statement from about December 1850 (doc. 705) and a narrative written ten years later (doc. 798).

⁹ See Jean-Baptiste, *Life of Marcellin Champagnat*, chapter 2; 1 Sam 16, 6-13.

¹⁰ Jean Coste, “Le mandat donné par ses compagnons à Marcellin Champagnat en 1816”, in *L’étude de la spiritualité mariste*, Rome 1984, p. 1-16.

took shape, Champagnat kept saying: “We need brothers.” To which the others replied: “Take care of it.” He did, but always within the framework of the Marist project, even if it had to be bent somewhat to accommodate the teaching brothers.

As for Jean-Claude Colin, two things seem pretty clear: on the one hand, already before the major seminary, he had in mind the project of a society that enabled him to say no to several proposals¹¹, whereas he reacted to the Marist project by saying: “This is for you!” (doc. 819, § 9). On the other hand, the project he joined was the one that Courveille launched and which Colin described with Mary’s words: “I was the mainstay of the Church at its birth; I shall be again at the end of time.” With regard to what he may have contributed to the discussions that took place before the ceremony of 23 July, we know no more. Only during the following years will he emerge from obscurity.

4. The Project on the Way

How would the signatories of the pledge fulfill their commitment? By coming together at Le Puy. Unexpected as it is, this fact is clearly established¹². Déclas recalls: “When we separated, we said each one would go where Providence would send him, until when we would come together and go to Le Puy, where the first idea of the Society had been given and where we would have been welcome” (doc. 591, § 10). This plan still held five or six years later (see doc. 68), but it never materialized. Does this mean that the impetus that expressed itself in the pledge just vanished without producing any result? The history of the Society of Mary is there to say no. The number of candidates did go from twelve to five, but the core soon grew with new recruits.

On 2 January 1817, less than six months after ordination, Champagnat opened at La Valla the first novitiate for teaching brothers with Jean-Marie Granjon and Jean-Baptiste Audras. He was thus fulfilling the mandate he had been given by the signatories of the pledge. For Champagnat always saw the teaching brothers as a branch of the Society of Mary. How strong this conviction was with him can be seen in two solemn texts written shortly before his death. On 18 September 1837, he wrote: “I place, purely and simply, into the hands of the Superior general of the Society of Mary the branch of Marist brothers which had been entrusted to me in eighteen sixteen” (doc. 416, § 1). And on 18 May 1840, in his spiritual testament, he exhorted the brothers to maintain union with the priests: “May one and the same spirit, one and the same love unite you to them as branches to the same trunk and as the children of the same family to a kind Mother, divine Mary” (doc. 417, § 5).

Until they became pastor and curate in Cerdon, Pierre and Jean-Claude Colin had hardly lived together, but from 1816 on they almost never left each other. Pierre found out about the plan for a Society of Mary only after several months, perhaps even a whole year, but then he insisted on joining it (doc. 819, § 43) and without further delay he arranged for two former parishioners, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and Marie Jotillon, to come from Coutouvre to set up the women’s branch of the Society (doc. 513, § 7).

Henceforth two important events will affect the development of the Marist project. First, under the influence of a strong impulse paired with deep joy, Jean-Claude Colin wrote down a draft rule¹³. Second, he made a vow to bring the project all the way to Rome¹⁴. These events cannot be assigned a precise date, but they took place before 9 October 1819, when Pierre Colin wrote to the bishop of Pinerolo¹⁵. That letter was followed by the one written to Cardinal Pacca in November

¹¹ See Jean Coste, “Le père Colin et la Société de Marie avant le grand séminaire”, written in 1955, published in *Forum novum*, vol. 17 (December 2015). Coste wrote there: “On Reverend Father Colin’s testimony, it can be considered a historical fact that he had, before going to the major seminary, a certain idea of a society dedicated to the blessed Virgin, that he had written some notes on that topic, and that he had spotted a few companions who might some day be part of that work.”

¹² See *Origines maristes*, vol. 4, p. 546, SH 202.

¹³ See doc. 815 and 816.

¹⁴ See *Forum Novum*, vol. 2, p. 276-288.

¹⁵ Doc. 913, edited in *Forum Novum*, vol. 4, p. 79-86.

1819¹⁶, and the one written to Pius VII on 25 January 1822 (doc. 69). This last letter bore three signatures, namely those of Jean-Claude Courveille, “superior general”, and the two Colin brothers, “priests”. The reply of Pius VII, dated 9 March 1822, was addressed to Courveille, “priest”, at Cerdon (doc. 74). In it the Pope invited Courveille or one of his associates to discuss this matter with the papal nuncio in Paris. Jean-Claude Colin did this at the end of November 1822¹⁷, and again in the spring of 1823. Until then, the plan was always to meet at Le Puy in order to begin there the Society that had been talked about on 23 July 1816. On 8 February 1823, the Colin brothers wrote to the nuncio: “It will soon be seven years that we have been waiting to get together” (doc. 82, § 6).

The year 1823 signals the end of that period of waiting. When the diocese of Belley was set up again (it had been suppressed in the wake of the French Revolution), the Marist aspirants found themselves split between two dioceses. Two questions arose: where will the Society begin and who will be its superior? At least for the Colin brothers, the answer was not obvious.

With regard to the beginning of the Society, if it were not going to be at Le Puy, then it would be Lyon, where it had been launched. But the Marist file had ended up in the hands of the newly appointed bishop of Belley. Jean-Claude Colin’s work on a draft rule and his vow to look after the affairs of the Society until the project was presented to the Pope led to Colin’s visits to Nuncio Macchi in Paris. When the Nuncio met the new bishop of Belley, he had on his desk the Marist file, with the draft rule and the letters from the curate of Cerdon (diocese of Belley), so the thing to do was to entrust the file to the bishop. This is how the Marist file ended up in Belley, and that is where the Society began. On 10 May 1824, Jean-Claude Colin reported to his bishop what he told Barou, a vicar general in Lyon, namely that “already we could consider that the Society has started in Belley” (doc. 100, § 4).” In fact, this was somewhat premature, because on 29 October, Pierre Colin wrote to the bishop: “Today the little Society of Mary begins. Mr. Déclas arrived in Cerdon” (doc. 114, § 1).

This, however, did not settle the matter of who would be its superior. Courveille, it is true, called himself superior general from January 1822 to 1828, and he even called himself founder in 1826 and 1828¹⁸. Champagnat seemed quite content to allow him to use those titles, but in May 1824 Colin did not consider him such, since he wrote at that time that he had “spoken openly about the position of superior of the Society” to Cholleton, who had become a vicar general of Lyon (doc. 100, § 9). At that same time, the archbishop’s council gave Courveille permission “to go help Mr. Champagnat in his institute of teaching brothers” (doc. 101)¹⁹. On 19 July, Vicar general Cholleton approved the printing of a leaflet about the Little Brothers of Mary, in which Courveille was given the title of superior general, while Champagnat was given that of director (doc. 108, § 15-16), but on 28 July the archbishop’s council called Champagnat “the main founder” of the brothers (doc. 110).

Thus, in 1824, what was left from the people who signed the Fourvière pledge was split between two dioceses: Courveille, Champagnat, and Terrailon were in that of Lyon, while Jean-Claude Colin and Déclas were in that of Belley. But what was the relationship between the two groups? And who was the leader? As a matter of fact, the dealings with the authorities originated in Cerdon, with Jean-Claude Colin, but the diocese of Lyon considered that the Society had its headquarters in La Valla, with Champagnat and his work of brothers, and Courveille, who was there to help, but who claimed to be the superior general. This was a serious misunderstanding. The Colin brothers tried to clarify the situation by writing, on 10 November, to archbishop de Pins, the administrator of the diocese of Lyon:

¹⁶ On that letter, which has not been preserved, see OM 3, p. 1014-1018.

¹⁷ Greiler, *Jean-Claude Colin. Descriptive chronology of his life*, p. 55, places in 1823 the *celebret* given to Colin 23 November 1822 (OM, doc. 78).

¹⁸ See OM 4, p. 520.

¹⁹ In 1833, Champagnat expressed bitter regret at having heeded the advice of Gardette, the superior of the major seminary, and at having gone to Épercieux to fetch Courveille (doc. 286, § 2).

Your Lordship, Monsignor, is already aware of the work about which we wish to speak to you, but we believe you can only know it imperfectly so far, because the bishop of Belley and our spiritual director are the only ones to whom we gave all the information.

The Society has already started in the diocese of Belley. Before it grows further, we feel it is absolutely necessary for us to give Your Lordship, Monsignor, a complete account of all that concerns the work, to tell you about the rules which are now in the hands of the bishop of Belley, about the persons who, without having worked externally for the work, had conceived the project before anyone else thought of it, about the approaches to Our Lords the bishops and to our former superiors in Lyon (doc. 117, § 3-4).

When Jean-Claude Colin finally managed to meet Archbishop de Pins and inform him about the situation, the archbishop felt he had “been tricked” and “appeared particularly annoyed” (doc. 121, § 1). Here stands the only surviving letter which Jean-Claude Colin wrote to Jean-Claude Courveille. Dated 29 November 1824, the letter was addressed to the “Director of the Little Brothers of Mary”:

Sir,

I have just made a trip to Lyon, where I had the honor of seeing the Administrator. I told him about the approaches that have been made for the work, about the rules, the letters that you signed to the Sovereign Pontiff and to the Nuncio, in which we spoke of the rule of the Society. I told him that these letters are in the hands of the Bishop of Belley, as well as all the other documents and the rules regarding the Society; that it was the Nuncio who put all this into the hands of the Bishop of Belley. The Administrator was somewhat surprised and taken aback, for he told me that he did not know all this.

This letter is a sign that relations were strained between two persons who had known each other for ten years and who both signed the pledge of 23 July 1816. In 1816, the Marist project was clearly the affair of Jean-Claude Courveille, whereas Jean-Claude Colin was merely one of those who joined him. By 1824, the relations have not been broken, as this letter attests, but they have been reversed. Not because Colin would have usurped Courveille’s place, but because Courveille is the only one who considers himself superior general, while Colin is in fact pursuing the approaches to the authorities. By 1830, Courveille had left altogether, and the Marist aspirants of Lyon and Belley chose Colin as the central superior, before they elected him superior general in 1836.

Conclusion

Must we conclude that the Society of Mary to which we belong no longer has anything to do with the project that was launched at Fourvière? That would be a mistake. The Society of Mary into which the first Marists and we ourselves made profession is truly the one launched at Fourvière on 23 July 1816. Yes, its departure point is the inspiration that Jean-Claude Courveille received at Le Puy and around which the signatories of the pledge gathered. This inspiration was re-formulated into the words attributed to Mary: “I was the mainstay of the Church at its birth; I shall be again at the end of time.” In 1848, Colin said: “at the very beginning of the Society, these words were what served us as foundation and encouragement” (*Entretiens spirituels*, doc. 152).

However, between 1816 and 1824, the membership of the group of signatories underwent much change: most of its members left, others joined. The commitment to making the congregation of Mariists remained centered on Christ Jesus, who made them strong. But it was also enriched by what those who remained and those who joined later brought to it.

Champagnat began setting up the branch of teaching brothers. In December 1823, he gave Brother Jean-Marie Granjon an account of the schools he had just visited: Bourg-Argental (90 children), Boulieu (more than 100 children), Vanosc, Saint-Sauveur, Tarentaise, to which we need to add Saint-Symphorien-sur-Coise and La Valla. Then Champagnat wrote, in a paragraph that offers a good picture of the man of faith who harbors no illusions:

Plenty of novices also show up, but almost all poor and rather young. Still, three have the age of reason, for they are past thirty. One is a business man, another is a cobbler and the third is a man of nothing. But with nothing the good God has done great things²⁰.

By 1824, Jean-Claude Colin had already written a rule where the Marist project took shape. That text is the product of a deep spiritual experience in which the theme *hidden and unknown* is dominant. Among the newcomers we find Pierre Colin and with him Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and Marie Jotillon, who founded the branch of Marist Sisters.

Thus, by 1824, the Fourvière pledge had shown how strong and fruitful it was by drawing to the project such rich and diverse personalities. Such growth still had a long way to go, but already it opened a promising future to the Society of Mary.

²⁰ The letter is edited in *Lettres de Marcellin J. B. Champagnat*, doc. 1.