

The Promise of Fourvière¹ *Faustino Ferrari sm*

This text of mine began almost as a *divertissement*. Not in the Pascalian sense, but as a sort of *gentle* impulse that I have felt grow in me these last months.

The preparations for the celebration of the bicentenary of the *Promise* of Fourvière are being completed, publications about it have appeared and there are various opportunities to reflect once more on that text. A few questions have surfaced for me: “What do I actually know about the *Promise*? Beyond the celebrated moments and the memory of a long-gone happening, is there still something that might have meaning for me, today?” Hence these notes have, rapidly, originated...

There are stories of Biblicists who after many years of studying the Word of God have found themselves sharing gospel reading with illiterate peasants and to have heard from them such profound and pertinent comments, but that after years of study had never occurred to them, professionals of the Word. I have tried something similar in these days. I took many things for granted...I took this text up again and gave myself time to reread it, calmly. The temptation, as usual, is to make life easy for oneself. And, in a case like this, to have recourse to comments and various works that have already been completed on the text. That is, indisputably, most useful. But I have restrained myself from following that shortcut². I have asked myself, instead: “But to you, what does the *Promise* have to tell you? What is elicited in you?”. I have sought, therefore, not to restrict myself to the historical data but also to move onto the symbolic plane³.

Reading the Text

Hermeneutics teaches us that the meaning of texts always goes beyond the intentions of their authors. It is, furthermore, important to know the context in which these texts were born. Not just at the historical and cultural level, but also the existential and psychological situation of the authors themselves. The better we know the context the more we gain in our comprehension of the text.

Then we have ourselves, reading the text. With our story and our cultural and social baggage. With our formation and our human and spiritual sensitivity. Those who have a juridical background are impelled, mainly, to identify those aspects that are proper to their professional formation. The same goes for the historian and the theologian. For those who occupy themselves with spirituality or social psychology...it cannot be otherwise. It is because of this that the most difficult aspect for us to approach in a text is precisely due to the fact that we have to reckon with the various *filters* through which we read it. We already carry around a pre-comprehension of the texts. Not only that. Our way of reading that text is closely correlated with the way in which so many have read it before us. In a certain sense, we have already been led to read and comprehend a text in a certain manner. Our comprehension is already orientated by a long history formed by the comprehensions that previous generations have had. This represents, in part, a great richness, but at the same time a limitation.

For me, a Marist, approaching the *Promise* of Fourvière does not have the same meaning that it would have, for example, for my brothers, for my friends or for people I happen to meet during the day. This text – and the event bound to the text – has become, in some way, a part of my personal story. Many of the people who know me do not even imagine its existence. They do not know that on the morning of 23 July 1816 a group of young Marist aspirants climbed to the shrine

¹ *Translator's note*: The translation is of the Italian text into English. Words, phrases and sentences offered (with good reason) by the author in other languages (French, Latin & Greek) are left untranslated so as not to nullify their intended effectiveness and/or resonance.

² I hope to have acted not out of self-sufficiency, but only to feel myself more *provoked* by the questions that emerged in me. I beg pardon for the inaccuracies that I may have stumbled into and for the possible excesses of the symbolic approach.

³ I agree with Guido Ceronetti that “All history should be written in symbol, in order to grasp something there”, in *L'occhio del barbagianni*, Milan, 2014, n. 89.

of Fourvière to make a promise. Reading the *Promise*, for friends and family, would surely have a profoundly different meaning than what it assumes for me and my confrères.

Two Hundred Years

What are two hundred years besides the almost fifteen billion year-old universe – or even to the five billion year life of the sun? Were we to place the period of the universe's existence along a line representing a year we would see the whole story of human civilisation located over the last part of the last day of the imaginary year – and that our two centuries would be no more than a few tiny seconds at the end of the line!

If, however, we want to make a comparison, in the field of the spiritual life, to the longevity of other religious orders, we should always ask ourselves: what are two hundred years as against the Western monastic tradition that in 2047 will celebrate the 1500th anniversary of the death of St Benedict? Or with respect to the disciples of St Francis, who within two decades will celebrate the 800th anniversary of the death of their founder? We could continue with so many other examples. Nevertheless, in the religious arena, it is not chronological time that counts, but symbolic time. As the evangelical theologian Oscar Cullmann has highlighted in his text⁴, the centre-point of time is given by the Christ event. The Christian no longer lives in a time that is merely chronological, but in a time that has become Christological.

The spiritual person lives out of spacial and temporal “centres”. In fact, while humans in general distinguish themselves by a religiosity that is developed within spacial centres, biblical persons are distinguished by their rapport with God and time that becomes the centre of their existence. Biblical faith is characterised by being a faith amalgamated with human history, where each event of humanity and of a people becomes the *locus* of divine revelation. Christ is incarnate *within* history, and Christ represents the *centre* of the entire human event.

This event – the Pascal event of the Resurrection of Christ – illuminates the whole of history, human and cosmic. It is the event that grounds all the other (numerous and small) events of our religious existence. In the spiritual journey, therefore, there subsist little *centres* that – illuminated by the event of the Resurrection – coalesce between them the forces and the energies to render actual that unique event of human and divine history that is Christ. According to the Biblical perspective it is not so much the *where* that occurs, but the *when*. A when that is not definitively consigned to history, but that is urged to take in the here and now, so as to be realised in the experience of every believer. In the Liturgical action, the fundamental moment of this actualisation, we can then celebrate in as much as:

Today the Saviour is born;

today the Church washed of guilt in the Jordan river is united with Christ, her husband;

today the sun of Easter blazes...

For Marists the *Promise* of Fourvière represents the centre of a spiritual experience that is called on to be renewed in time, day after day.

Promise

Our current era is not one in which to speak of *promises*. For our contemporary society the horizon is confined to immediate satisfaction of one's own desires. There is no sense in considering the future. Neither is there any sense in linking one's existence to a promise, an oath or a vow. That goes against the meaning of freedom. Being free becomes interpreted as not having any kind of tie. The marriage contract, for example, is replaced by cohabitation, a temporary union based solely on feelings – and love lasts as long as it lasts. If in the past there was the conviction that a certain profession would occupy a person's entire life, today absolute flexibility is called for, the capacity to modify oneself continually and to adapt oneself to a continually changing work environment. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has coined the term “liquidity” to

⁴ *Christ And Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History.*

denote this new existential situation for humanity⁵. Within this society we want to be free, in every instant, to take up the various opportunities that life holds for us. A promise would project us beyond the possibility of availing ourselves of all the opportunities presented by the fleeting moment.

For the Christian, however, the foundation of promises is God himself. “God does not fulfil all our desires, but all his promises”, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us. While man experiences fragility within his own existence, to the point of infidelity, God reveals himself to us in his fidelity. The sinful condition – our closing within ourselves, attempting to make ourselves the centre of the world – encounters the freedom that is given by God who remains faithful to the promises despite all our fluctuations. Human promises are grounded on the experience had of God. Man feels supported in his own existence because he is experiencing the fidelity of God that never lessens. In the divine horizon the human promise opens itself to the expectation of the future that is always a gift of God. Human promises cannot count on their own powers and capacities, but they may become instruments with which we declare our availability to welcome, in our today, the future that God gives us.

Experiencing the fidelity of God allows us to find an anchor of salvation within the emptiness and fluidity that surround our existence. Recalling the promise made two centuries ago by the small group of Marist aspirants, means actualising this dynamic of faith that opens us to the future of God.

Fourvière

Fourvière is a hill that dominates the centre of Lyons to the West. Originally it was the site on which the ancient Celts erected a temple to the god Lug and around which the Romans established the settlement of Lugdunum. Defined by Jules Michelet⁶ as the “mystic mountain” and the “hill that prays”⁷, it is dominated today by the basilica of Notre-Dame. The name Fourvière comes from the Latin *Forum Vetus*: it was the old city centre, with its market and temples. As in the case with so many other pagan religious centres, also at Fourvière, *apud forum Veneris*, a chapel was built, initially dedicated to St Thomas a Becket and subsequently to the Virgin Mary.

It was to this chapel of Fourvière that, on the morning of 23 July 1816, twelve young men ascended – a few new Priests, others still seminarians. One celebrated Mass, the others assisted. Together they made their *promise*.

At this *Forum Vetus* they assisted at the formulation of a new project: the firm – irrevocable⁸ – resolution to give life to a congregation. Once more we are recalled to the symbolic level. Upon the ruins of the *Vetus* are scattered the seeds of the *novum*⁹ – of a project that now desires to embrace the whole world.

Climbing

Fourvière is a hill. To get there one has to climb. These days access is facilitated by two funicular railways and by streets along which vehicles can run. Once upon a time, to get to the top, it was necessary to go on foot through the alleys of the old city.

Climbing, ascending, usually are symbolically associated with spiritual experience¹⁰. One climbs the mountain of God. Biblical passages that narrate these ascents are numerous. God reveals to Abraham not to stay on the plains¹¹. Moses, for example, climbs Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of the *Ten Commandments*, while the prophet Elijah walks for forty days and forty

⁵ Cf in particular: *Modernità liquida*, Roma-Bari 2002; *Amore liquido. Sulla fragilità dei legami affettivi*, Roma-Bari 2006; *Vita liquida*, Roma-Bari 2006.

⁶ Jules Michelet, *Le Banquet*, 1878.

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ In the Latin text: *irrevocabiliter*.

⁹ *Forum Novum* is the symbolic name that Fr Edwin Keel thought up for the periodical dedicated to Marist studies, published since 1989. But here the symbolism contained in the term can take on a broader dimension.

¹⁰ Cf Marie-Madeleine Davy, *La montagna e il suo simbolismo*, Gorle (BG), 2000.

¹¹ Gen 19: 17.

nights to the mountain of God, Horeb. We have the psalms of an entire section of the Psalter, the songs of ascent¹². They were the chants that the pilgrims raised while climbing towards Mount Zion on the occasion of the festivals.

Also the gospels relate to us certain crucial facts from the experience of Jesus that, symbolically, are located on the top of a mountain: the Sermon on the Mount¹³, the Transfiguration¹⁴ and the Crucifixion¹⁵. Mary, for her part, after the visit of the Holy Spirit sets out towards the mountain region¹⁶.

Mountains become, for the spiritual person, a metaphor for the interior way. Climbing signifies growing, growing interiorly.

We today, have rather lost this spiritual dimension. In our intoxication with speed and within time that has become restricted and fleeting. The trek has become a stroll while for travel we choose more comfortable and speedy transportation.

In the age of spiritual tourism we have fallen into the temptation of using more easy and comfortable means. The goal of our pilgrimage is reached thanks to every comfort and convenience. We forget that in order to be able to access a spiritual *centre*, walking and time are necessary. There, one has to reckon with the fatigue of going on foot and ascending. To become companions for a while, slowing down so that we begin to recognise the rhythms of our heart and of our steps. Pointed towards the *centre* is, before all else, going to encounter the *centre* that is in us – to the mysterious presence of God who acts in the depths of our heart.

There are many ways to climb to Fourvière. To approach what represents, symbolically, a *Mountain of God*. We run the risk, maybe, of being too distracted, taken up with the usual frenzy that spans our days. How much does silence inhabit us? Are we still pilgrims of the Absolute? Are we wayfarers of the eternal Wayfarer?

How can we climb Fourvière today? As amused tourists, or as pilgrims? To perform a fossilised ritual, or stretching out towards an important stage in our spiritual journey? For ourselves, or for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord Jesus?

What are the thoughts of those twelve as they climb up the side of the hill that morning of 23 July? Are they filled with joy or are they still a bit hesitant? Is their pace sure and quick or slowed under the weight, not of fatigue, but of a last-minute re-evaluation? A few companions have said *forfait*; they have withdrawn when all seemed ready. What has provoked in them this defection? Is the climb effected in silence and interior prayer or interspersed with some banter aimed at breaking the tension of the moment?

We do not know. We do not know what crossed the minds of those young men.

Today we can only, in our turn, climb along the narrow streets that lead to the shrine, with our thoughts, our concerns and our hopes.

Yet, on this journey, we are not alone. We climb Fourvière thanks also to so many who have preceded us. Our story is part of a rich and fruitful history. In a certain sense, it is easier for us to climb to the shrine. We already know that God has accomplished marvels through the seeds germinating from this *Promise*.

Twelve

The preserved copies of the text of the *Promise* do not record the signatures nor a list of the signatories¹⁷. The original text, possibly retained by Courveille, has been lost, like other documents concerning Marist origins¹⁸. Indirect testimonies handed down indicate that there were twelve who made the Promise on the morning of 23 July. We do not know all their names. The identification of some remains hypothetical. It is the task of the historian to search through

¹² They are psalms 120-134.

¹³ Mt 5: 7.

¹⁴ Mt 17: 1-8, Mk 9: 2-8 & Lk 9: 28-36.

¹⁵ Calvary, albeit small hill just outside the walls of Jerusalem, is symbolically a mountain. Mt 27: 33, Mk 15: 22, Lk 23: 33, Jn 19: 17.

¹⁶ Lk 1: 39.

¹⁷ *OM* 1, introductory note doc. 50.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

the sources, to find the testimonials, to reconstruct the facts. From the religious and spiritual point of view this remains secondary.

In a case like this, historians have to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion, asking themselves what could possibly be there behind all this. The number twelve is *too perfect* not to arouse suspicions¹⁹. Are we not faced with an *a posteriori* reconstruction? Is this not, at the *beginnings* of the Society of Mary, a projection of the *beginnings* of the Church? Would one not want to connote even symbolically the event of the *Promise*? If this indeed effectively happened, who fashioned this reconstruction? Legitimate questions, but they remain without plausible answers. Just there, where the historian gives up, powerless before a lack of data, it is however, possible to locate additional trails that project onto the *spiritual* gradient of the events. Indeed, starting from the incompleteness of the historical data we can highlight certain elements. First of all, at the beginnings of the Society of Mary we can observe a repurposed *topos* consistent with many religious experiences: the return to the origins. The *Ecclesia semper reformanda* has a gaze dynamically and constantly turned toward her own beginnings. Through the image of the twelve we are sent back, immediately, to the primordial Church, as described in the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles and to the *cor unum et anima una* as a perennial ideal to be embodied today.

The Apostles were gathered in the Cenacle around Mary. The first aspirants of the *Promise* were assembled in the chapel of Fourvière and they do so not only in the name of Mary, to found a congregation that would carry her name, but above all – and here we move once again to the symbolic plane – to congregate around Mary.

Some of them remain anonymous to us. Going beyond the desire to know their names, in anonymity there is delivered to us a possibility of recognition.

Who are the four unknown ones of the *Promise*? I am not particularly curious to know. I believe we should move towards a different perspective.

In the post-resurrection story of the miraculous draught of fishes seven disciples are presented²⁰, gone out at night to fish on Lake Genezareth²¹. The haul foreshadows the mission of the disciples in the world, and, the meal with the risen Christ, the Eucharist. Also in this episode we have a disciple – the seventh – who remains anonymous²². The gospel passage lends itself well to a continuing realisation: readers/listeners of every time can identify themselves with the anonymous disciple and the meeting with Christ around the meal prepared on the beach is renewed as the possibility of a personal experience for every disciple of every time. A biblical reading attentive to anonymous personages that dot evangelical events permit us to undertake a process of identification with them and to be able to relive an original experience of discipleship.

In the same way, applying the self-same criterion to the *Promise* of Fourvière, in those first anonymous Marist aspirants each of us, even today, can recognise and identify himself. It pleases me to think that each of those unnamed four represents, in a certain sense a part of us – of us who have arrived two centuries later.

Four unknowns. Wanting to continue with is kind of game we recall that, at that moment, the Marist project had seven branches. On the symbolic plane one might also consider that each branch, on that day, had its own *figura anonima*.

Certainly, an objection is immediate and obvious: everyone there that day represented the Marist project in all its complexity – and they were all males! But we can add further traces of meaning to each aspect that peppers that event, rightly to actualise it better in our day.

Not only that. An event is still vital as long as it continues to bring forth the possibility of adding new significances to its original meaning.

The historians could also not hide their disappointment at not being able to reveal the identity of these four unknowns. We, however, can rejoice because in them we are permitted, as on that far off 23 July, to take the same street that climbs towards Fourvière to accompany the first Marists.

¹⁹ Cf *OM*, doc. 535 § 1; doc. 748, § 2; doc. 294 § 1 (this deals with the *Summarium* of 1833).

²⁰ Also in this case we are faced with the symbolism of numbers. Here, seven indicates fullness and completion.

²¹ Jn 21.

²² There are two anonymous disciples if John is identified with the *disciple whom Jesus loved*.

There were also four who participated in the fulfilment, in various forms, of the *Promise*. The fifth, Courveille, was soon ousted from the project, on account of several troublesome situations in which he was seen as protagonist. To the initial enthusiasm and fervour, various personal paths led to different choices. There were, surely, those who would not have identified any more with the project as it took off. Were there those who considered it the fruit of a youthful *fever* and, therefore, spent? Maybe someone had been under the influence of Courveille's personality and consequently distanced himself? We do not know what might have been the reasons, second thoughts and justifications adopted by each of them. Join up or pull back? Associate oneself or wait and see how things develop? Give life to the project or abandon it?... These are the dynamics of life. Dynamics which are not restricted to that distant historical fact, but which are a part of each of us. Follow the dynamics of a personal project or stay united in a common project?

A Common Project

Even small features are significant for taking in the perspectives of subsequent development. The Promise is presented to us not as an individual work, but a collective one. *We the undersigned...*²³ The verbs used are in the first person plural: [We] *affirm, declare, dedicate, offer ourselves, promise, undertake...* Each has placed his own signature at the foot of the text. We are faced with a joint declaration. Often, however, this type of promise or vow would be drawn up on single, personalised pages and signed individually.

This is no small matter. From its earliest beginnings the Society of Mary was understood as a group, as an ensemble, as a *consortium* and not as a sum of single individuals. The term does not appear in the text, but is as it were a sub-plot, the watermark of the entire project. To form the *family* of Mary.

To receive the name Marist and to undertake the foundation of the *Society of the Holy Virgin Mary* means to enter and be a part of her family. We could paraphrase a Pauline text: so therefore, entering to be part of the Work of Mary, *we are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens of the saints and members of the family of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary*²⁴.

Yes, it is a group. It is not a first. There is recognition as sons of the same Mother. If it is true, as is often noted from the outside, that one of the traits that characterise the Marist experience is a certain lived family dimension, then the seeds of this aspect are already present in the *Promise*.

Mariists

It is the name used from the beginnings. We usually find it employed in the briefest handwriting. But the use of the double "i", in the construction of the name, is correct. To the root *Mari-* is added the customary suffix (*ists*), used to designate religious orders. Reasons of euphony, probably, quickly led to the contraction of the name.

These days a name has become a sort of label. Consumer society has imposed on us the power of the *logo*. The *logo* is the tag that usually represents a product (and, by extension, this might be a company, a service, an organisation, but also a musical band and much else besides). A company is recognised immediately by its identifying *logo* – in whatever corner of the world. A couple of years ago a survey established that the *logo* of a chain of fast food restaurants had greater worldwide recognition than the symbol of the Cross. Through pounding advertising, logos manage to create in the consumer, trust in the product and the feeling of a sense of superiority those who have become users. In the end, we could say that the product is not as important (it might even be shoddy), as the image that we have of that product. The image conveyed by the power of the *logo*.

From the Biblical point of view a name is much more than a simple appellation or a label attached to a person. The name is tightly connected, interlaced with the one who carries it. In a certain way we can say that *also we are* our name. It is constitutively part of us.

The meaning of the name accompanies the existence of the person who carries it. What is more, if this story undergoes new developments, the name can change. As it was for Abraham,

²³ *Nos infra scripti.*

²⁴ Cf Eph 2: 19.

who became father of numerous peoples²⁵. As it was for Jacob who, having fought with God, became Israel²⁶. As it was for Simon, son of Jonah, who became Peter in as much as symbolising the bedrock on which the Church came to be built²⁷ ...

At the same time, the name *transforms* the person. This contributes to the formation of our personality. We become who we are thanks also to the name we carry – it is what has been given us. None of us, usually, chooses the name we are given at the baptismal font and that is recorded in the registry. We have received it and it is a seed that grows with us.

If history has consigned the text of the *Promise* to us without the names at its foot, there is one name that has been reported back – explicitly and in several variations –: it is that of Mary, which appears five times. In all this we can catch a symbolic significance as well.

Marists do not only carry the name – *delectu gratioso* – that means to be honoured by comparison with Mary, but want to allow themselves to be permeated by such a name.

Sub augustissimo nomine

The first aspirants find themselves in the name of Mary. Why is the name so important for them? The Society of Mary is not, at that time, a name exclusive to Marists²⁸. However, we are not dealing with a label. It is something more than a sign that comes to be used for differentiating or as a reminder. It is not even a particular aspect of their Marian devotion. The name denotes a membership. It is feeling oneself part of a *work* – indeed a *family* – and recognising oneself in it.

These are aspects on which Fr Colin insisted for the whole of his life.

It is worthwhile recalling how much we discover in article 1 of the 1872 *Constitutions*, there, where the name and purpose of the Society are indicated. The name and purpose are not separate elements, but closely united. Each redirects us to the other. It is not possible to understand fully the one without holding the other present too.

It is about a name that:

- *sufficiently indicates the banner under which [the SM] desires to serve in fighting the battle of the Lord*
- *what its spirit should be*

In addition, the *mellifluous name* is the sign which allows Marists to:

- [be] mindful of the family to which they belong
- understand that they are to emulate the virtues of this holy Mother
- and indeed even to live her life.

Not just that. Marists are invited *semper prae oculis mentis habentes...* [always keeping before their mind's eyes ...]

Fr Coste wrote:

“Fr Colin insists strongly, in as much as founder, on the relationship between Mary and the congregation as such. She is its founder, has made it her family, given it her name; has chosen it and its members; creating between her and them an alliance, from which every duty and act of true sons is derived, reproducing in the Church the mystery of her hidden and efficacious life”²⁹.

These are elements proper to Fr Colin and we can attribute them to the *Promise* only notionally. However, it is also true that, from a symbolic point of view, the seed contains in itself potentially the whole successive development. It needs just the right ground in which to grow.

Who wrote the *Promise*?

²⁵ Gen 17: 5.

²⁶ Gen 32: 29.

²⁷ Mt 16: 18.

²⁸ Jean Coste, *Maria e i padri maristi*, 1955, pro manuscripto, n. 1

²⁹ *Idem*, 1,2.

We do not know. We could posit, indeed, that almost certainly it was the fruit of a communal effort. Probably, someone wrote a rough draft that was then discussed and coalesced in common accord.

We might also suspect that there was someone from outside of the group who may have revised the text. Someone who found it opportune to insert a couple of notes to check the enthusiasm for such a vast project. Surely moved by good intentions. With the goal that the simplistic enthusiasm of the promises would not exhaust itself when faced with the first obstacles. Someone who sought to act in such a way that those young men might not fly to high, to avoid that in confronting the first difficulties the project would be exposed as a catastrophe.

Regarding this, a name we could put forward: Canon Cholleton. Was he the final redactor of the text? It is possible. He offered his own protection and support to the Marist project from the beginning and later became a Marist himself³⁰. Indeed, at the time of the election of the first Superior General Fr Colin hoped (and expected) that it would be Cholleton to take up the task.

All that is left to us is the text without signatures – and without knowing who concretely redacted it.

For the greater glory alone...

The *Promise* contains a sort of self-defence, a *dialectic* between youth and maturity.

It shines through the lines of the text that, in the months preceding that 23 July, critiques (and also advice) would not have been lacking around the Marist project. We can imagine the comments raining down from various parties. From formators, from teachers or from fellow seminarians themselves: *We shall see therefore what remains of all this enthusiasm of yours... You are young and do not yet know the difficulties of life, but when you know... When you mature a little, you will face reality with more seriousness...* such is the tenor, usually, of the good advice with which preceding generations liberally furnish the younger generation. It is a consistent attitude, that is renewed in every age. The greater the youthful enthusiasm, the greater are the expressed attempts at dampening, debasing or suppressing that enthusiasm. This is constant down the centuries, as is the accusation that the new generation lack values and does not have the capacity to implement its professed dreams.

Those who climbed Fourvière claim:

<i>(English text)</i>	<i>(Latin text)</i>
not childishly	non pueriliter
not lightly	non leviter
not from any human motive	non ex aliquo humano fine
or hope of temporal gain	aut spe temporalis emolumentum

But:

<i>(English text)</i>	<i>(Latin text)</i>
seriously	serio
maturely	mature
having taken council	assumpto consilio
weighed all before God	omnibus coram Deo perpensis
for God's glory alone and the honour of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord Jesus.	propter solam maiorem Dei gloriam et Mariæ Genitricis Domini Jesu honorem

Analysis of the structure of the text allows us to put some aspects into relief. There is an evident parallelism between the negative and positive segments, as we can see by comparing the passages in the following table:

³⁰ OM IV, Entry Cholleton, in *Répertoire biographique*, p. 230-233.

not childishly	seriously
not lightly	maturely
not from any human motive	having taken council
or hope of temporal gain	weighed all before God

It is evident that in the text the affirmation “not childishly” does not refer to spiritual childhood nor to gospel passages in which Jesus calls on the disciples to become as little children³¹. The reference here is to the passage about the call of the prophet Jeremiah. In the *Vulgate*, in fact, we find “*Do not say I am a child*”³². Jeremiah, in response to the divine call to become a prophet, objects that he is not old enough³³. However, there is another Biblical reference we could mention. Paul, in what commonly has come to be called “The Hymn to Charity” contrasts acting and thinking as a child with the maturity of the adult. “*When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child. But, having become a man, I have abandoned that which was of the child.*”³⁴

Against *pueriliter* is contrasted *serio*, that is the capacity and will to carry out one’s duties and commitments.

It is not farfetched to see a reference to the biblical text also for the following “*non leviter*”. We read in the Book of Sirach “*One who trusts too easily is light-minded*”³⁵. In the text of the *Promise* the sense expressed is really one of inattention, facility and an enthusiasm that soon vanishes because it remains superficial. It is the levity of chaff dispersed by the wind³⁶. To all this is contrasted “*mature*”. That is to say, an opportunity that must be siezed promptly, urgently without delay. *Mature* also recalls the image of the fruitfulness of the tree and harvests ready for reaping³⁷.

These first two concepts are completed by a fuller formula “not from any human motive”. What are these human motives? Should we see these in the more broad and generic sense? Or rather, can we try casting light, starting from the other element that I propose be read in parallel? “having taken counsel” and in line with the recommendation found in the Sirach: we are placed before an invitation that has been received and made their own: “Listen, my son, and accept my opinion; do not reject my advice”³⁸. Should we wish to read “human ends” on this wavelength, we could then contemplate Pauline passages, where one contrasts divine wisdom with human wisdom³⁹.

Finally, the *hope of temporal gain*. The word “*emolumentum*” appears only twice in the *Vulgate*; in the book of *Ecclesiastes*⁴⁰ and in the prophet *Malachi*⁴¹. These verses are of interest to

³¹ We note also that regarding somewhat affected Marian devotions this *non pueriliter* delivers us a spiritual prospect of quite a different scope. Translator’s note: In English there is the significant distinction between “childish” and “childlike”.

³² Jer 1: 7.

³³ Before completing his twenty-ninth year a young Hebrew could not speak credibly in public. Here, however, the youth of the prophet is not taken to refer just to his chronological age, but also his psychological immaturity.

³⁴ 1Cor 13: 11. “*Cum essem parvulus loquebar ut parvulus sapiebam ut parvulus cogitabam ut parvulus quando factus sum vir evacuavi quae erant parvuli*” Here the *Vulgate* offers the term *parvulus*, that carries a similar meaning to *puer*, but with an accent on smallness, weakness, insignificance and paucity. The word used the Greek text (νηπιος), as well as indicating boy, lad, little one (or animal cub) express the idea of childishness, inexperience, simplicity, foolishness and silliness.

³⁵ Sir 19: 4. *Vulg.*: “*Qui credit cito levis corde minorabitur.*”

³⁶ Cf Ps 1: 4.

³⁷ Cf Joel 4: 13, (*Vulg.* 3: 13).

³⁸ Sir 6: 23. *Vulg.*: 6 : 24. “*audi fili et accipe consilium intellectus et ne abicias consilium meum*”.

³⁹ We cite a few of these passages: For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1Cor 1: 19-20). [M]y speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1Cor 2: 4-5). For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. (1Cor 3: 19).

⁴⁰ Eccl 4: 9. *Vulg.*: “*melius ergo est duos simul esse quam unum habent enim emolumentum societatis suae*”

⁴¹ Mal 3: 14. *Vulg.*: “*et dixistis quid locuti sumus contra te dixistis vanus est qui servit Deo et quod emolumentum quia custodivimus praecepta eius*”.

our analysis. Ecclesiastes advises that two are better than one, they make more profit that way. Malachi, however, presents us with the resistance of those who see no advantage in observing the commandments and maintain it is pointless to serve God.

The *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*⁴² Chapter III, speaks of the economic management of ministers of religion. There are listed the values of the stipends that the state ensures these *functionaries* will receive in recognition as *civil officials* after having pledged an oath of fidelity. How could we not conclude that this type of *emolument* is also implicated?

Emolumentum, in addition, within the ecclesial ambit, refers to the benefice, to the earnings from activities tied to the ministry. Corporations arise to gain economic advantages. That this could be the Marists' purpose is denied here. "No, our congregating is not due to the desire to achieve economic success or recognition". All this can be measured only *coram Deo*⁴³. This setting oneself before God, involves a distancing from the deceptions of one's own mind, own heart and own lips.

Coram Deo: to live all of life in the presence of God and for the glory of God. *Omnibus coram Deo perpensis* is, however, a recurring expression in curial language as well as in the manualist Theology of the time.

We could consider all that we have briefly analysed in this paragraph as a simple premise to what uniquely must be considered: "For God's greater glory alone and the honour of Mary, Mother of the Lord Jesus". To us it sounds almost as a vain, redundant repetition, being already proclaimed immediately after the first invocation of the Most Holy Trinity and repeated a little later, as a refrain. But this triple witness represents the centre, the fulcrum of the entire *Promise*: to contribute to the glory of God and the honour of Mary through the establishment of a Congregation.

The trials and sufferings

To reinforce what we have affirmed up till now, there is another passage, prepared to confront various trials and possible sufferings to bring the Marist project to fulfillment. *Poenis, laboribus et incommodis*: There is a kind of crescendo in this list, that culminates in the following *cruciatibus*. The pains, the labours, the harmful and heavy even up to the possibility of torture and martyrdom⁴⁴. Is one to suppose a certain ingenuousness in all of this? Does this treat only of a youthful ardour? In reality, these persons, although young, had behind them a tragic experience. The years of Revolution before and after the Empire were studded with a series of painful and violent events. The story of the Empire, which had finished only a few months, was marked by continuous wars undertaken by Napoleon on very many fronts in Europe. Even earlier, the Revolution culminated in the days of the *Terror*. It had been a tragic period not only for civil affairs, but also for the Church herself. Not only for the secularisation of property, but for the closure of monasteries, the confiscation of goods and the destruction of places of worship. After 1792 some churches were transformed into Temples to Reason. Feasts to the Supreme Being were instituted and Theophilathropists celebrated their own secular liturgies... In that period, many saw prison and some were taken to the guillotine on account of their Christian faith. Even relatives and acquaintances of the young Marist aspirants (Colin, for example) had experienced within their own skin the pains and labours of the period just passed. This is not a pious expression.

He, therefore, who undersigned these words was not talking of something generic and abstract – of a remote and vague possibility. There is a serious, grave awareness that such as lived, in some cases also by their relatives or in their own childhood, could recur in the near future. Consider, then, how they make the Pauline text their own⁴⁵. It is worthwhile rereading what Paul writes, beginning from the previous verse to the one cited: "I have learned to be poor and have

⁴² We will return to this document later.

⁴³ Gal 1: 20. Vulg.: «*quae autem scribo vobis ecce coram Deo quia non mentior*». 1Tim 5 : 21. Vulg.: «*testor coram Deo et Christo Iesu et electis angelis*».

⁴⁴ *Cruciatibus* carries a number of meanings: 1) torment, pain, affliction, grief; 2) torture, martyrdom; 3) (in the plural) instruments of torture.

⁴⁵ Phil 4: 13. Vulg.: «*omnia possum in eo qui me confortat*».

learned to be rich; I have been initiated into everything, in every way: to satiety and to hunger, to abundance and indigence. I can do all in him who gives me strength.”

I have learned...I have been initiated in all...

Fidelity to the Roman Pontiff

Next we have the part regarding the promise of fidelity to the Roman Pontiff and to the local Bishop. We have to put ourselves in the historical context. During the Revolution and the Empire the French Church had lived a through a hard and troubled division. However, already before this there had been a long phase of *gallican* tendency. Gallicanism was a political and religious doctrine that accorded the Pope a primacy of honour and jurisdiction, but at the same time promoted a strongly autonomous organisation for the Catholic Church of France. Hence, there was a different ecclesiological conception at stake. To *Gallicanism* there was opposed *Ultramontanism*: signified by such expressions as “the one who resides beyond the mountains”, that is to say, the Pope. I.e. it was the doctrine that proclaimed papal primacy over individual national churches. The doctrine of *Gallicanism* spanned the entire political and religious history of France from the 17th till the First Vatican Council (1870).

During the French Revolution the question reached its sharpest point. On the 12th July 1790 the constituted National Assembly aiming to modify the relations between the French State and the Church approved the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*. Due to the resistance of the Pope to accepting such a decision, the Constitutive Assembly ordered that on 4th January 1791 all (Bishops, Parish Priests and Vicars) must swear an oath of fidelity such as to be recognised as civil functionaries. Those who did not swear the oath were punished by the loss of ministry or stipend. Pope Pius VI returned several shots. He condemned the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in the brief *Quot aliquantum* (10 March 1791) and then followed the brief *Charitas* declaring the consecration of new Bishops a sacrilege, suspended *a divinis* constitutional Bishops and Priests (those who had sworn the constitutional oath) and condemned the oath of fidelity itself. The Church found herself divided between those who remained committed to the required oath and those who refused to swear. Things improved only with the Napoleonic concordat (1801), but the internal tensions and divisions of the Church remained in place.

This is the ecclesial experience that the young Marist aspirants had behind them. Hence, we cannot read these lines only as a good intention. The text, rather, is revealed to be a clear and precise taking of a position between two opposed ecclesiological visions.

We must not read this only as a *political* proposition aimed at overcoming certain shackles with which the Marist project already had to contend⁴⁶. In fact it is necessary to analyse attentively what is written, particularly in the last part of this promised fidelity.

In the text of the *Promise* of Fourvière we read: “*Ut simus boni ministri Christi Jesu, enutriti verbis fidei et bonae doctrinae quam ipsius gratia assecuti sumus*”. This constitutes a paraphrase of a New Testament quotation taken from the First Letter to Timothy. We find, actually, the Pauline text: “*haec proponens fratribus bonus eris minister Christi Jesu enutritus verbis fidei et bonae doctrinae quam adsecutus es*”⁴⁷.

We seem, however, to have tracked down the literary source through which this quotation has passed. It is to be found in the concluding part of a document of the Archbishop of Dublin, John Thomas Troy (1739-1823), dated 12 January 1793⁴⁸ – a *Monitum*⁴⁹ that the question of the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* promoted in France during the Revolution. The *Monitum* explicitly invokes the brief *Charitas* of Pius VI. Here is the version we read: “...*Boni Ministri CHRISTI JESU, enutriti Verbis Fidei et bonae doctrinae quam assecuti sunt*”. The text offers two variants

⁴⁶ In the first place, Bishop Bouchard’s project, that is to say the foundation of an association of diocesan Priests who would occupy themselves only with seminaries, missions and retreats.

⁴⁷ I Tim 4: 6.

⁴⁸ Textually: “*pridie id. Januarii 1793*”.

⁴⁹ Published in: *Giornale ecclesiastico di Roma*, anno VIII, n. VIII, Roma 1793, pp. 78-80. There is a copy of this journal in Lyons in the Part-Dieu Library (Fonds Jésuite des Fontaines). I have not been able to ascertain the existence of further copies in other libraries in the city. The text of the *Monitum* is reproduced in the appendix.

with respect to ours of the *Promise*: the verb changes from the third person plural to the first (a change necessitated in as much as the *Promise* is in the first person plural) and the absence of the added words (*ipsius gratia*). In distinction to the Pauline text, which is already expressed in the plural.

Two brief considerations can be put forward with respect to the hypothesis that this is really the text that has been used for the drafting of the *Promise*.

1) The content of the *Monitum*: Archbishop Troy takes a clear and decisive position towards those who sympathise with or adhere to the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*.

2) The context of the *Promise*: For the young Marist aspirants this quote would have come to assume the import of a sort of declaration. In this way they wanted to reiterate their own position within the French Church⁵⁰. This is not just a pious exhortation that a few young Priests, fresh-baked from the seminary, insert here, mindful of their recent studies. It is a declaration of intent, an option for the Church of Rome and for an ecclesiology that this implies⁵¹. We can see then that the *Promise* already contains the traces of a theme very dear to Fr Colin and to which he will return constantly, with tenacity.

A third consideration could be made regarding a slight orthographical variant (*assecuti* instead of *adsecuti*). However, we are unable to establish what could have been the *Vulgate* text used and therefor it is impossible to take this element on as an additional proof. The transition from *sunt* in the *Monitum* to *sumus* in the *Promise* resounds, almost as a decisive appropriation of the content of the text.

In summary, we are faced with a text that appears a little more complex than at first sighting. Behind which there is every evidence of the discussions held by the clerics and also in the seminary. We can affirm that here the Marist aspirants opt for *Ultramontanism* in a decisive way. They had just agreed to act with *maturity and seriousness*. Now we are in a position to reiterate that their commitment will be to a Church that is *Catholic* and not circumscribed by the dimensions of a national church.

The Most Christian King

Every time I reach this point in the *Promise*, I am overtaken by a sort of unease. I do not believe that only *political reasons* are in play here. The fact is that in me today, the republican idea is so connatural; of political power expressed in the republican form and of the neat distinction that must exist between civil, public and religious dimensions. The reason is due to the fact that as a Marist I cannot help but apply a sort of reading actualised by the text, and which, faced with this passage, forces me to deal with an insurmountable contingent border, bound to a very precise historical context.

The historian Jacques Le Goff explains:

“It was from anointing that the kings of France derived their miraculous [*thaumaturgic*] power. That which will make the king of France, who would be called, by the end of the Middle Ages, the most Christian King, that which placed him above all the other kings of Christendom, is the fact that the oil with which he was anointed during the consecration is the only one with a supernatural origin. It came from the Sacred Ampule carried by a dove (the Holy Spirit or his messenger) for the baptism of Clovis by Saint Remigius. The king of France was the only one to be anointed with divine oil, come from heaven”.⁵²

⁵⁰ The *Monitum* had enjoyed a certain diffusion and resonance; one can reasonably presume that it would also have been known in the Church in Lyon.

⁵¹ *OM* 1, doc. 50, Nota 3 p. 223: “La promesse de fidélité au Pape est ici des plus explicites, et l’expression en sera reprise littéralement dans les constitutions de la Société de Marie (cf. *Summarium regularum* de 1833, n. 114; Constitutions de 1842, n. 4; Constitutions actuelles [1960], n. 9).

⁵² Jacques Le Goff, *Preface*, p XXXII in Marc Bloch, *I re thaumaturghi*, Turin 1989. Orig. *Les Rois Thaumatourges* (1924).

With the fall of the Empire and the onset of the Restoration also Luis XVIII was awarded the title of *Most Christian King*⁵³. With the Restoration, however, we witness the attempt to start a process of eradicating the entire preceding period. Indeed, one wanted to return to the exact situation that pertained before the start of the Revolution, as if it were possible to cancel in one blow all that had happened, sharing the same foundations as the *ancien regime*. This was the political climate of the period.

Still, certainly at the level of the populace, one wanted to forget a time that was studded with a continuous series of wars and which had manifested moments of hostility towards the Christian religion. For which one can well understand the hope for a sovereign who would show himself a friend of peace and religion.

The reference to *the Most Christian King* in the *Promise*, however, more than having immediate political motives, seems to be connected to a mysterious revelation. It appears that the foundation of the Congregation was prefigured under the aegis of a *Roi très chrétien*. It concerns a conviction to which Fr Colin returns many times⁵⁴. However, it remains veiled in a halo of mystery. Revelation: to whom? When? In what terms? We know very little. This smidgeon is represented by the idea that the development of the Society of Mary would be favoured by the appearance of an expected *Most Christian King*.

It is a very common *topos* in so many beginnings. One had for a time the conviction that the birth of an important personage, a foundation, the beginning of a new reality, etc would take place under the auspices of a favourable star, concurrently with an exceptional event or the fulfilment of a revelation, of a prophecy.

An idea that recurs at various times and places is also that of approaching a favourable epoch. Mystery and prophecy intertwine. The Virgilian Golden Age⁵⁵ or the times extolled by the Prophet Isaiah in which *lamb and lion will graze together*⁵⁶. In which *a people that walked in darkness sees a great light*⁵⁷ or the days of *swords forged into ploughshares*⁵⁸. The terrestrial paradise depicted by Dante through the words of Matelda⁵⁹ or the myth of the land of Cockaigne that represents “almost a plebeian version of the aristocratic Golden Age” (Piero Camporesi). The Age of Aquarius and the Blessed Isles. The advent of the *Age of the Spirit* of Gioacchino da Fiore and the development of various millennialisms that have taken place. *Spring* depicted symbolically by Botticelli and the *Age of Gold* in the allegory of Lucas Cranach the Elder. Or, again, the *Age of Mary*...to contact the expectation of the second coming and the messianic times. All this to say, how countless are the themes the recur and vary at similar times.

We live in the age of disenchantment. Our perception of life and reality is secularised. The *masters of suspicion* have left us cautious. Now, we cannot but observe these elements with disenchantment, often with a certain (self)sufficiency and also, at times, with a dose of irony.

Yet...

I have friends who listen with pleasure to the songs of Franco Battiato⁶⁰, but without paying particular attention to the meaning of the lyrics. They do not ask themselves who might be the *king of the world*⁶¹ or to what does *the era of the wild white bore*⁶² refer. The ancient elements

⁵³ Before the revolution of July 1830, all sovereign cabinets gave the Monarch of France the title *Most Christian King* and *Most Christian Majesty*. Cf Gaetano Moroni Romano, *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica da S. Pietro sino ai nostri giorni*, Vol. XXV, Venice 1844, p. 224.

⁵⁴ Cf in particular *OM*, doc. 425 § 12 e doc. 437.

⁵⁵ Virgil, *Egloga* IV, 6: “*iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna*”. Virgil is not the only Roman poet to speak of a Golden Age, we have examples also in Ovid, Tibullus, Catullus, Seneca, and Juvenal, to name but a few. Even before, among the Greeks, one could mention Hesiod and Plato.

⁵⁶ Is 11: 6.

⁵⁷ Is 9: 1.

⁵⁸ Is 2: 4.

⁵⁹ *Purgatorio*, XXXIII, 139-144.

⁶⁰ This singer-songwriter has performed his songs also at the Vatican, during the pontificate of John Paul II.

⁶¹ The reference is to the homonymous text of the esoteric writer René Guénon.

⁶² This indicates the era of the Druids, the legendary Celtic epoch. A mythological era in which *New Age* followers believe that the spiritual power of the Druids be superior to the temporal power of kings and warriors.

return again today. The language and the way they are presented change. What remains are a few constant *myths*. If in the past they assumed a Christian connotation, now, probably they are presented in a secularised or *New Age* version. There remains the same human desire to see oneself draw near to a favourable time, an opportune time.

Nevertheless, Pollack writes: “For the first time in three thousand years of Western civilisation taken in its entirety [...] there is practically no constructive and generally accepted image of the future. [...] Our age has lost the capacity to correct itself and to renew through time the images of the future”.

Today, perhaps, we are given to address this particular situation – that no longer knows how to imagine a future age unless in terms of *New Age* or cultivating millennialist catastrophes and inihilaitons – rightly to start from the Biblical perspective that makes us grasp the *kairos* moment, not in expectation of particular signs or a time to come, but in the *hic et nunc*. “I exhort you not to receive the grace of God in vain...Behold the favourable time, behold now is the day of salvation”⁶³. In this way we do not even need to produce a sort of realisation of the image of the *Most Christian King*, let us leave it relegated to the confines of its historical context.

The Salvation of Souls

The *Promise* is not explicit on the ends of the new *little Congregation* to be founded, apart from stating, with a rather generic formula the *salvation of souls by all means*. There are no hints at specific works or particular apostolic activities.

Perhaps, the Marist aspirants well know that, after the experience (in a certain sense the *purification*) of the secularisation brought by the Revolution, it is no longer the time to think of great works? Does this *salvandas animas* not imply much more than a generic purpose? And the attention to the spiritual life of the persons who would become central, foundational, for the Marists! The whole attention of the Marists is to be directed towards persons and not structures. The subsequent history shows two elaborations that differentiate themselves. The Marist Brothers have favoured the intuitions and aims of Fr Champagnat regarding teaching, with the development of all the means to further such activity.

Fr Colin, from his side, had never wanted that the Society of Mary would be characterised by particular works. Certainly, there are missions, foreign and *apud fideles*, teaching in schools and shrines... but the *Work of Mary* must remain open also to what is *other* and, likewise, show itself prudent about a few particular ministries. While the accentuated colinian opposition to parishes could be understood as diffidence when faced with a ministry that could have locked the Marist in a cage of organisation and structure.

We can affirm that Fr Colin remained, in a certain sense, always faithful to that *generality* expressed in the *Promise*.

It is to be noted that the *salvandas animas* is not directed at others, but is omni-comprehensive. It concerns all, including the signatories to the *Promise*. Certainly, it would be at least contradictory to think of the salvation of others without considering pursuing one’s own. However, we must not forget that in the Constitution this double end of the Society comes to be placed together⁶⁴.

By all means (*modis omnibus*). Could we understand this as a juvenile exaggeration? In line with the high tone of the entire *Promise*? A cliché?

It is, on the contrary, a particular specification of how one must go about the salvation of souls. We know that Fr Colin had learned over time this *modis omnibus*. We read in *A Founder Speaks*: regarding this, Rome proved very useful to me. It is there that I learned the maxim: “The law is made for man”. If I cannot save him with the law, I will seek to save him without the law”⁶⁵. We are, therefore, placed in front of one of the seeds of the *Promise*, which as Marists we are invited to cultivate in every time⁶⁶.

⁶³ 2 Cor 6: 1-2.

⁶⁴ *Const.* 1872, n. 1: “*tam in propriam perfectionem quam in proximorum salutem*”.

⁶⁵ FS 163 § 2. Cf also 95 § 3.

⁶⁶ It is already here that being instruments of divine mercy finds its first initial cue.

An Act of Devotion!?

From a juridical point of view the *Promise* has no binding value, it is merely a declaration of intent. Sometimes one hears the assertion that it was an act of devotion on the part of a few new Priests and seminarians who made a little pilgrimage to the national shrine and together undersigned an all-in-all redundant text, a little precious, stately in places and drenched in the clichés of the devotion of the time. For others, beyond this, it is a text circumscribed by a determined historic time. It is another Ecclesiology, another vision of the world...no longer has it anything to do with our actual situation.

But what truly was the *Promise* of Fourvière? An act of devotion or an act of foundation? A simple text, of little value and without any claim, or containing already *in nuce* some spiritual germs for subsequent developments? A text like so many others of that time, or the tiny platform of heterogeneous objectives that a few of the aspirants would in time bring to light? The text of the *Promise* is all of this – and more besides. As hermeneutics teaches us, how we read the text depends on what spectacles we put on. Maybe today the spectacles are a little fogged and we do not manage to see well? Perhaps we maintain that the difficulties of our time are much worse than those of 200 years ago and we console ourselves with the idea of this belief? Maybe we think that these were youths who had the whole of their lives before them to realise their projects, while we, today, are mostly full of aches and pains and of an advanced age – more than planning we think more about our death? Or do we foster a little jealousy towards these youths whom we believe a little naïve, but able to dream?

Rewriting the Promise

Many things have happened during these two hundred years. For better and for worse. In the civil world and in the ecclesial. Certainly, it has not been a time of peace. Innumerable wars have taken place and to two of these historians have given the name *world wars*. Modernity has seen the multiplication of advancements in science and technology. Notable developments in medicine have favoured the preservation and prolongation of human life. From a situation of precarious subsistence, our societies have advanced to the development of material wellbeing. However, these years have also known Auschwitz, the Kolyma Gulags, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Chernobyl. They have been years marred by *genocides*⁶⁷ and entire populations have been destroyed: Armenians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Cambodians, Rwandans, Bosnians...violent and bloody dictatorships have arisen. Almost everywhere kings have become fewer and republican forms of government have been established. Globalisation appears as an ambiguous phenomenon that always ensures greater riches for a very limited number of persons while the major part of the world population is left to fall into extreme poverty. Yet again we perceive ourselves living under looming incessant menaces: nuclear, ecological, demographic, epidemic, terrorist, catastrophic...but, above all we feel threatened at the level of security. Meanwhile, the economy has become the sole axis to which human activity is referred.

Information Technology allows us to carry the whole world around with us on a *tablet* or *smartphone*. Information arrives in real-time. We can witness any event sitting comfortably at home. We have experienced an acceleration, unthinkable even short while ago, and we have become the users of everything and immediately – immediately, we forget what we have just experienced and are unable to discern but faint glimmers of the future.

Man, the social and communitarian animal, trains himself ever more to live an exasperated individualism. Someone has defined our epoch as the *era of solitude*.

We follow after the *masters of suspicion*. Our vision of the world has changed profoundly. Our conception of man, of the cosmos and of God is incredibly different from that of the young Marist aspirants. To read reality we use most diverse epistemological instruments. Moved by pragmatism, our approach is *critical* and dialectical.

From an ecclesial point of view, these two hundred years have witnessed two Ecumenical Councils. Have commenced, amidst a thousand challenges, the ecumenical journey. The Catholic

⁶⁷ A neologism coined to describe one of the worst crimes man could commit.

Church tries, with much reluctance and stuttering, to take even the road of inter-religious dialogue. A new chapter has opened with our *elder brothers* the Jews. There has been liturgical reform, with the use of local languages for celebrations. New experiences of religious life have arisen, such as secular and fraternal institutes.

No one studies the manuals of Theology of two centuries ago. Biblical, Patristic and Theological studies today are very different from times past. Ecclesiology has changed. The Church no longer sees herself as a pyramid *society*, but as *the People of God*. Mariology has moved onto a terrain marked out by Chapter VIII of the Conciliar Document *Lumen Gentium*. But at the same time our societies have become secularised. Christianity has passed from being a religion of the masses to one practiced by select persons. By now, marginal in many places. One witnesses a widespread need for spirituality that, however, finds its own answers almost exclusively in the great supermarket of *New Age* and do-it-yourself religions.

The average age of the faithful increases – even more so that of Priests and Religious. Many Congregations are close to disappearing. The Church is found to be no longer European and Western. One talks, already, of post-Christian society.

From a Biblical, Liturgical and celebratory point of view, *to remember means to actualise*. How can we remember the *Promise* of Fourvière, today? With a celebration that recalls that long-ago event – implementing a sort of *archaeological* operation. Or rather, is it necessary for us to make the *Promise* our own? In what way?

Perhaps a little exercise might be appropriate, that of grappling with rewriting that *Promise* today, with our story and our own spiritual sensitivity. Not as an academic or formal exercise, but as a spiritual action. Not as a personal assignment, left to the good will of each individual, but as a communitarian act. We do not know who drafted the text of the *Promise*, but we do know that it was a communal act. Appropriately in virtue of this, in a certain manner, we can try in our own small way to make that dream real.

Cf Appendice

Monitum di Mons. John Thomas Troy (1739-1823) del 12 gennaio 1793 -

Monitum of Archbishop John Thomas Troy (1739-1823) Dublin, 12 January 1793

Translator: Peter Janssen sm