

The Fourvière Promise for Us Today

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The Fourvière pledge is the continuation of a story that began four years earlier, in 1812, in the cathedral of Our Lady of Le Puy,² but it also marks the first steps leading to the launching of the five branches of the Marist Family.

In the next few years the Marist projects took shape:³

-the Marist Brothers, under the direction of Marcellin Champagnat, opened their first house on the 2nd January 1817 at la Valla;

- in 1823, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn, Marie Jotillon and some other women came together to start what became the congregation of the Marist Sisters;

- Jean-Claude Colin, his brother Pierre Colin, and Etienne Déclas brought the first community of Marist Fathers together in 1824 in Cerdon;

- following them, lay-people, women and men, came together more or less regularly, and launched the Marist fraternities;

- which, in their turn, gave birth to the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, founded in Futuna in 1858 by Françoise Perroton and her companions.

The Fourvière pledge, which launched the Marist project, is a commitment overflowing with hope and enthusiasm. It encapsulates the aspirations of young priests and seminarians, deciding to launch themselves into an unknown future, but one which they acknowledge as filled with light and without limits. Their faith, the difficult times in which they are living, their personal stories, have formed them to face up to the difficulties which they will have to confront in the following decades. Their strength is the belief that they have been chosen and called by Mary to work at the particular Mission which she has entrusted to them.

Two hundred years later we recognise that our founders' commitment to work with conviction and total dedication did not finish with them. Thousands of Marists given to the Work of Mary within each of the five branches have been so engaged in a similar spirit of confidence and dedication. May our celebration this morning be also a thanksgiving for the faithfulness of each one of them.

Yet, nothing is perfect, and we must also recognise that, in the course of these two centuries, everything has not been positive: one would need to be quite naïve to believe that! May this Eucharist be, also, an occasion to ask forgiveness of the Lord and of those men and women who have been wounded by our actions, or, on the contrary, by our omissions.

This celebration of the *Fourvière pledge* brings us all together, and, with Mary, we want to give thanks to God and to ask of him the grace to deepen our Christian and Marist commitment, putting all our trust in him who alone gives us the strength: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks to our faith, as we were told a while ago in the first reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, *thanks to our faith* we are all united in this gathering, and your presence here shows your solidarity in the accomplishment of our mission. For all of that, we thank you, and also give thanks to our Lord.

But this day should also ask us the following question: how can this anniversary become the occasion of a new departure, a new spark in our mission?⁴

Thanks to our faith we are constantly invited to deepen our relationship with Christ, through meditating on the Gospels, through a life of faith, fired by an effective hope, giving us the necessary courage to do great things for Christ.

¹ Homily for the Bicentenary of the Fourvière-Pledge, Lyon, 23 July 2016; Scripture readings: Hebrews 11:8-15, 39-40; Psalm 26; John 2:1-11.

² Gaston Lessard sm, *Becoming a Marist*, St Augustine, 2015 p. 20.

³ *The ascent to Fourvière: commemoration of the bicentenary of the Fourvière Pledge 1816-2016*, Justin Taylor sm, p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 37f.

Some of the signatories of the Fourvière pledge played a key role in the founding of our congregations. By doing so, they have traced out for us a courageous path. Do we feel within us an identical courage to continue their work?

Their ideal makes me think of a word of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, some months before his death. He said; *“the world’s problems cannot be resolved by sceptics nor by cynics, whose horizons are limited to visible realities. On the contrary, we need men and women who dream of things that have never existed, and who question themselves, saying: “why not?”*.⁵ We also need men and women religious, lay men and women who are able to dream of things that have never existed, and who ask themselves the question: “why not”?

When we look at what was accomplished by the four signatories who continued with the project of the Fourvière pledge – Marcellin Champagnat, Jean-Claude Colin, Etienne Déclas and Etienne Terraillon – we see that they must have often asked themselves the question: *why not?* But their questioning was built on the belief that, with the Lord, it is possible to “*move mountains*”, since he himself has told us so.

In our world of today, we need to be men and women bearing new convictions, and capable of translating these convictions into action. Our founders were able to say, *why not us?* We are called to dream, – “dare to dream” - this is the theme proposed to the young adults gathered this week, not too far from here at la Solitude, who are about to leave for the World Youth Day. May they return home capable of transforming their dreams into reality.

As we watch Mary act, as in the gospel which we have just heard,⁶ we understand why we Marists take her as a model to come to Christ. The gesture of Jesus at Cana is unprecedented: changing ordinary water into a wine of the highest quality, it is a miracle revealing the hidden capabilities of Christ, attentive to the needs of the village people, as he will be for the entire world.

This miracle at Cana takes us, for a moment, into a different world, where joy, conviviality and fullness are assured.

The extraordinary nature of what Jesus does shows us his attentiveness to what surrounds him. It is the first sign of his public ministry, and it shows us a spirit of mercy which will reveal itself throughout his life, in all the other miracles that we find in the Gospels. Each of these miracles has a very precise meaning in Jesus’ pedagogy.

The miracle of Cana clearly goes much further than what we can see at first sight. By this gesture, Jesus reveals his glory not only for the wedding guests, but for all those who, throughout the centuries, will open their eyes and their ears to see and hear the full message of Jesus. The importance of the event goes way beyond the event itself. The account opens out to the work and mission of Jesus: he has come so that people “*may have life, and have it in abundance*”.⁷

I will conclude with a quote from a confrere who is present with us this morning. He said: “*We do not know what each one of us will become in the coming years. Neither did they (the first signatories). What we do know, what we do believe, is that we must – like them – leave ourselves to be configured by Mary. That we need to reach out others in loving them, in loving Life. Our commitment together, in body and soul, will be the best way to honour the promise of Fourvière. This is not about arriving, but rather about setting out!*”

Let us leave the final words to Mary who tells us as she told those who served at the wedding at Cana “*Do whatever he tells you*”.⁸

⁵ John F. Kennedy to the Irish Parliament, June 1963. Cf a quote of George Bernhad Shaw: “You see things and you say to yourself: why? I dream of things that have never existed, and I say: why not?”

⁶ John 2:11f.

⁷ John 10:10.

⁸ John 2:11.