

Return to Origins: Fourvière and the Many-Branched Marist Tree

Gerard Hall SM

In these challenging times for the Church and religious congregations, much effort is being given to internal restructuring of all Marist congregations. Quite evidently, this is an important and timely work. What is being suggested here, in an effort to “return to the sources” of the Gospel and their founders’ spirit and vision,¹ is that further discernment and consideration be given to a wider restructuring in line with the original vision of the Society of Mary, one close to the heart of Jean-Claude Colin, Marcellin Champagnat and Jean Marie Chavoïn, as a “many branched tree” which would be inclusive of men and women, priests and lay, celibate and married, in a single society.

As we embark on celebrations of two hundred years of our Marist Foundations at Fourvière, we may simply wish to affirm the manner in which the Holy Spirit has given birth to multiple Marist ways of living the Gospel in discrete institutes. And certainly we affirm the many positive ways in which the various Marist branches, especially in recent decades, have co-operated in doing “Mary’s work”. Some will not see the need for further restructuring across the Marist branches: for them, Marist life is already adequately faithful to the original “multi-branched tree” vision, even if this is not well reflected in our structural separations (noting these were enforced upon us).

Another perspective is to revisit the original vision of the Marist project which was to be structurally inclusive of all states of life – lay and ordained, male and female. This is not the first attempt to envisage a way of bringing “everyone back into the same structure” perhaps in the manner of post-Vatican II “new ecclesial movements”.² This approach both celebrates the inclusive Marist vision of Church “open to all” and embodies the Vatican II *communio* vision of Church for whom Mary is mother, model and archetype. This image of Church, captured in Marist focus on Mary’s presence in the new-born Church, has become integral to post-Vatican II theological reflection on Mary as true believer, first disciple, and central image of what the Church is called to be in its life and mission.³

The purpose of this paper is simply to provoke thought and discussion on this question of which structures may most effectively enable Marists to be catalysts in “building the new Church” in the image of Mary. More specifically, it provides a possible alternative to current structures on the basis of one ecclesial movement, the *Dei Verbum Missionary Community*, pontifically approved in 1965. According to its current President, Sr Lucia Guerra, DVFM is “not a confederation of three communities but one single institute with three branches” consisting of: two branches of consecrated celibates (a female branch and a male-clerical branch); and a laity group of married couples. While each branch retains its relative independence with its own elected leader and council, there is an overarching structure consisting of branch leaders and an elected President (alternating between female and male branches). The DVFM structures, while “complex” and “not without tension,” are adjudged central to their identity and mission of being a broad and inclusive spiritual family.⁴

¹ Vatican II, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), #2.

² See Michael Green FMS, “Something new for our time: Understanding the 1816 Marist pledge of Fourvière as a project of mercy”, in *Champagnat: An International Marist Journal of Charism in Education* 18/1 (2016): 9-20 (cit. 16). <http://www.champagnat.org/img/caricate/big/Champagnat%20Journal%20Autumn%202016.pdf>

³ See John Honner, *The Marian Church of Pope Francis*. <http://spirituality.ucanews.com/2013/08/15/the-marian-church-of-pope-francis/>

Note discussion and papal endorsement (John Paul II, Benedict XVI & Francis) of the declaration of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#773): “The ‘Marian’ dimension of the Church precedes the ‘Petrine’”. See also Michael Green’s development of these ideas for Marist life and mission in his “Something new for our time”, 17-20.

⁴ See Sr. Lucia Aurora Herrerias Guerra VDMF, *Being Part of an Adventure: Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity*. <https://globalsistersreport.org/column/trends/being-part-adventure-verbum-dei-missionary-fraternity-31421>

In Marist terms, the “tree with many branches” could be similarly ordered (at least initially): two Sisters’ branches; Brothers’ branch; Priests’ branch; and Marist Laity branch (or multiple branches to include, for example, Third Order of Mary, Marist Association of Marcellin Champagnat, regional Associations of Marist Laity). Naturally, all this would take time to discern, and depend on at least in-principle agreement of leaders of the four religious institutes in collaboration with their members and Marist lay branches. The very process of discernment would need to be an experience of a Marist spirituality of communion through prayer, study, dialogue, patience and awaiting the voice of the Holy Spirit – as Mary awaited in the midst of the Apostles before Pentecost. So this may or may not be what God and Mary are calling us to. But something of the spirit of that first Fourvière beckons!

If we accept the Church and world of our time are in a period of ferment akin to post-revolutionary France, and equally recognise the original idea of the Marist project has not – at least not yet! – come to be,⁵ our Fourvière celebrations challenge us to ask the question: should we revisit the founding dream in more radical fashion as a way of deepening our call and mission as Marists to build the new Marian Church of mercy in our post-Vatican II milieu? Needless to say, reclaiming the original Fourvière vision in this suggested manner does not entail adopting the structures of government Colin took to Rome (Rome was right on that score!). This is why situating our identity, charism and mission as Marists in the “new ecclesial community” structure appears to provide a genuine alternative.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree that such an imagined restructured Society of Mary is closer to the original vision of J-C Colin, Marcellin Champagnat & J-M Chavoin?
2. Do you agree that such a restructured Society of Mary is better enabled to “build a new Marian Church of Mercy” in the spirit of Vatican II than prior structures for juridically separate institutes?
3. Do you think such a restructured Society of Mary is actually feasible? If so, do you have suggestions of how this could best be discerned in a “Marist spirituality of communion” that would be inclusive of all branches and Marist laity?
4. Are you aware of other possible structures than the VDMF that could/should be canvassed.

⁵ See Craig Larkin SM, “Tree and Branches—Marist History”, in *A Certain Way: An Exploration of Marist Spirituality* (Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1995), 152 [Also available Online].