

The Early History of the Marist Sisters *Gemma Wilson SM*

In October this year our Congregation will celebrate its bi-centenary. It is 200 years since Jeanne Marie Chavoïn and Marie Jotillon left their home village, Coutouvre, in 1817, to travel to Cerdon to join the two Fathers Colin. In this short talk I would like to share with you something of the origins of the Marist sisters and our early history.

When I was in the novitiate in 1960 we heard almost nothing of Jeanne Marie Chavoïn. Our novice mistress gave us talks on Jean Claude Colin, our Founder, and his spirituality. Today we continue to be grateful to him for his vision and the spirituality we inherited from him. Strangely though I have no recollection of her telling us anything of our own early history and of the woman we now call our foundress.

Around this time two Marist sisters, one French and one English, were asked to work with Father Jean Coste SM in his research into the early history of the Marists. As a result, during the 60s we received two wonderful volumes: the *Correspondence* and the *Recollections* of Jeanne Marie Chavoïn - Mother Saint Joseph. In other words we Marist sisters “discovered” our foundress! I remember that as a young sister at Mount Albert I was absolutely enthralled as I read her life, got to know her as a person, and learned how our congregation had begun and grown.

Marist History begins with Mary’s revelation to Jean Claude Courveille at le Puy, but the history of the Marist sisters begins in the village of Coutouvre in the Roanne district of France. Coutouvre was then part of the diocese of Lyons. Jeanne Marie Chavoïn was born and baptised on the 29th of August 1789, the first of two daughters born to Theodore Chavoïn and Jeanne Verchère.

Jeanne Marie’s father was a master tailor and their house (still standing today) was a busy place as his customers came and went. The youthful Jeanne Marie was described later as having a cheerful manner, an open, agreeable countenance and rare frankness. She was about my height and Philipon’s portrait shows her to be of solid build. It seems that Jeanne Marie never went to school but was taught how to read and write by her parents.

Other characteristics of the young Jeanne Marie which were noted by her contemporaries: she had an unbounded trust in Providence, profound and genuine compassion for the poor, sound judgement, a remarkable aptitude for business and a gift for organising.

We know too that as a young woman in Coutouvre she was the sacristan and so had the key of the church and would spend long hours praying there during the night.

All these characteristics were exemplified in her future life as foundress and superior of the Marist Sisters.

A couple of stories from her youth

A mason in the town having lost his wife was left with a little girl of 5, Françoise. To relieve him of his anxiety that his little girl was alone while he continued to earn his living Jeanne Marie took the little girl to her own room and looked after her until she could make some arrangements for her. Another anecdote: Jeanne Marie had a list of the destitute and outcast in the town. One was a woman with cancer whom she nursed. Apparently she kissed the cancer one day and the wound disappeared (Sr Pelagie who told the story years later said that the whole village believed in the cure.)

About 1806 a clerical student called Jean Philibert Lefranc spent some time in Coutouvre because of ill health. He formed a group called the Association of Divine Love composed of young women and some widows. The object of this group was to foster a life of prayer and charitable work. Lefranc drew up a short rule of spiritual conduct for them. Jeanne Marie was a member and invited a younger friend of hers, Marie Jotillon, to become a member too. Jeanne Marie had been worried about some tendencies to vanity she saw in her young friend. On her death bed Marie said of Jeanne Marie: “It was she who brought me forth to the life of grace.” As Marie’s body was being taken away for burial Jeanne Marie said: “There goes a half of myself”. The two made a retreat at the Chartreuse in Lyons about 1807. During this time Jeanne Marie spoke to Lefranc about her desire to consecrate her life to God and her uncertainty about where

God wanted her to go. Lefranc's words were prophetic and stayed with her: "You are not meant for a congregation already established but for one yet to be founded."

In fact she received several offers, including two from Cardinal Fesch, Archbishop of Lyons, but rejected them all. It was only in 1817, when she was already 31 years old, that she received a letter from Pierre Colin, brother of Jean Claude and parish priest of Cerdon, inviting her and her friend Marie to come to Cerdon to found the feminine branch of the Society of Mary. (Pierre had been curate in Coutouvre and so knew Jeanne Marie well.) She knew immediately that the invitation came from God and left with no hesitation at all. She never returned to Coutouvre though at the end of her life she was close enough to have been able to travel there in quite a short time. Even when Jeanne Marie and Marie arrived at Cerdon sometime in October 1817, they had to wait 6 years before they were able to formally begin the new congregation by coming together in community.

Between her arrival in Cerdon in 1817, and September 1823 Jeanne Marie shared the joys and the anguish of the Colin brothers in their efforts to get approbation for the new society. After a time living with the sisters of St Joseph in the town, she went to live in the presbytery as the housekeeper for Jean-Claude and Pierre (This happened when she had reached the canonical age required to be a housekeeper to priests - 35!). She made several journeys on behalf of the group seeking approbation for their project. She wrote later that she used to go to the church with them to pray when they had received some setback, or to give thanks when there seemed to be a glimmer of hope. Father Jean Coste, an expert in the history of the Marist project, in his last address to the Marist Sisters at the 1994 chapter in Rome just 3 months before he died, said the following: "I would go as far as to say that Jeanne Marie Chavoïn was the co-founder of the Marist Fathers!"

During this time Marie Jotillon went to St Clair to join a group of women gathered together by Jean Courveille. But when she heard that it was now possible to begin to live in community with Jeanne-Marie she travelled back to Cerdon.

On the 8th September 1823 the first community of Marist sisters began to live in a couple of rooms over a stable. Jeanne Marie wrote later: "We were very poorly housed, with a bad floor, over a stable with a horse. I think the floor had holes right through in several places. I often thought the horse was better housed than we were" (RMJ 101). This building was destroyed by fire in 1944 during the German occupation, but the stream nearby where the sisters would have gone to draw water still exists. The third member of the first community of Marist sisters was Marie Gardet, a niece of Marie Jotillon. Very soon others joined them and soon there were too many of them for the tiny dwelling, so on 1st June 1824 they moved to a larger house which they had to share with a very cantankerous widow!

Mother Elizabeth Rougement who was one of the first postulants wrote the following many years later:

"One cannot think without being deeply moved of all they had to suffer in their new surroundings, housed in a draughty little thatched cottage, the approach to which was difficult and wild, dirty and very damp, with no heating but what came from a stable below their room, where there was a horse for whose benefit all holes had been carefully stuffed up. In the depth of winter they were without fire-wood or provisions, but they were always light-hearted, never uttering the least complaint, with no regret for the comfort they had left behind. They did not even think of letting their people know how they were placed; these would certainly have hastened to provide abundantly for their needs. One of them told me one day that it was impossible to understand what joy they experienced in that little thatched cottage." RMJ 162, 9-10

The fledgling congregation was plagued with illness, specifically tuberculosis. The sisters did not understand the danger of contagion so that in the first years of the Congregation six young sisters died. The first Marist sister and the first to die, was in fact Marie-Adelaide Dubreuil who made her vows on her death bed in Cerdon in December 1824 at the age of 19.

On the 8th December 1824, 9 postulants, including the Foundress herself, received the habit and became novices. Before the ceremony there was an election and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn,

Mother Saint Joseph, was elected superior of the little group. This was the first public ceremony in the Society of Mary.

Not long after this the sisters moved to Belley where Bishop Devie had found a house for them. This house was called Bon Repos. There is still a community of Marist sisters living there today. It is also our congregational historical centre. Jeanne Marie wrote the following some years later:

“We left Cerdon at midnight on June 27th 1825. The rain was unceasing yet never was there a happier journey. We made the journey on foot except for the weaker ones who found a place on the luggage carts. We reached Belley on the 29th about midnight spending the previous night in Rossillon. What poverty we found at Bon Repos where we found ourselves in a strange country where we knew no one except Bishop Devie.” RMJ 99

The sisters made their first vows in 1826. By 1829 there were 20 of them and over the next few years the small house was gradually enlarged as more young women entered the Congregation. Two of them were nieces of Father Colin and one a niece of Marcellin Champagnat. We have a letter Marcellin wrote recommending his niece. One of Father Colin's nieces later became our fourth superior general, Mother Ildefonse Colin. Another of these early sisters was Françoise Chanel, Sr Dominique, sister of Saint Peter Chanel. She died, probably of tuberculosis, in 1839. Peter received news of her death from confreres arriving in October that year.

Time does not permit me to share every detail of the early history of our sisters. So here are some highlights:

The sisters set up a small boarding school at Bon Repos for poor children, most of whom could pay very little or nothing. The sisters used to make gloves and other things to sell to pay for all their expenses. In Cerdon their apostolate had been visiting and supporting the sick and the poor. In Belley their work was more and more in the education of the poor within the walls of the convent. Father Colin wished the sisters to be semi enclosed like almost all the feminine congregations of the time. However, it seems that the Foundress herself had no hesitation in going out to visit people who needed support. Her vision for us was not that of a semi-enclosed congregation but of a fully apostolic one.

This was one of the issues in her deteriorating relationship with Colin which had been excellent until the 1840s.

There were other issues. For example, she wanted the sisters to say the office of the Blessed Virgin while making gloves to sell, while Father Colin insisted they should go to the chapel!

Jeanne Marie always maintained that our spirit was one of poverty, simplicity and love of work and the fact that she liked the sisters to sew while praying to make ends meet, no doubt stemmed from this vision of hers (A famous saying of hers, often quoted by our young sisters in Brazil was, “We don't want great ladies among us!”). Perhaps, however, the most important issue and the one which caused her most anguish was that she was very anxious that the rule of the first sisters be written by Colin.

Many times she implored him to write it for them. Finally, when this didn't happen she wrote one herself as an interim measure! Of course this did not help their relationship! Just one month before her death in June 1858, she wrote to him for the last time, imploring him to write a Rule for the Sisters. She was too ill to write so dictated it to her niece, Sr Thérèse de Jesus:

“Very Reverend Father, God has entrusted His work to you, Our Lady has chosen you to give her children the Rules they must follow to reach Heaven more surely. I see from the copy of the Constitutions brought from Belley that all is not done. Oh I beg of you, continue what you have begun; you alone know what Our Lady wants for us; fulfil the mission She entrusted to you if you want her to bless you and welcome you one day to be with her. There must be no spirit in the Rule but that of Our Lady, and you know that this good Mother chose you to make it known to all her children and to trace for them the path they must follow to be true Marists.”

Back to 1851: In the end Father Colin asked her to resign and at the chapter of 1852 Mother Ambrose (Marie Mortier) was elected superior general. The historical account of this election tells us that our foundress knelt at the feet of her successor to pledge her obedience to her.

Over those first years, in the 1840s and 50s, several new foundations were made in France. However, between 1826 and 1845 though there were 86 professions only four houses were opened. This was possibly because there were enough semi-enclosed religious communities already in that area of France and the most pressing need was for sisters who were not limited by the rule of enclosure.

Our foundress' final home was in a new foundation in a little town called Jarnosse, which was, as I mentioned before, not far from her own Coutouvre. Here she had a very substantial house built, still standing today, where the sisters lived and had a boarding school for poor children. In Jarnosse it seems Jeanne Marie was able to live her own vision of what the Marist sisters should be and do. The sisters were very much inserted into the life of the village, known and loved by all, so much so that at her funeral the whole village was present! Jarnosse and the way of life of the sisters there was her legacy to us her Marist Sisters.

Jeanne Marie Chavoin, Mother Saint Joseph, died on the 30th June 1858 at the age of 69, surrounded by her community. Just one week after her death, our first foundation outside France was made in Spitalfields, in a parish run by the Marist Fathers, in a very poor area of London. A few years later a foundation was made in Carrick-on Shannon in Ireland where our sisters are still living today. Today, though small in number, we Marist sisters are in 14 countries on 4 continents.

I will not attempt to share the later history of the Congregation but will conclude by sharing with you how we Marist sisters see ourselves today. Perhaps the following words from our constitutions best express what it means to be a Marist Sister:

“Our Congregation is characterised by the desire to make the mystery of Mary in the church the daily inspiration of its life and action, and not by any special work nor by the promotion of any particular form of Marian devotion.

Everything in the Congregation: the choice of works, the way in which they are carried out, the life-style of the sisters, should reflect this aspiration: to think, to judge, to feel and to act as Mary did. This spirit, which we wish to make our own, will ensure that our presence in the church and the world is both active and discreet as was that of Mary.” Constitutions Marist Sisters No 4.

May she help us to be true to this calling.

RMJ: *Recollections: Mother Saint Joseph, foundress of the Marist Sisters*, ed. Historical Committees of the Marist Fathers and Sisters, 1965-66.