

Collaborators in “continuing the mission of Mary in the Church”

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Last year we celebrated 200 years since the twelve Marist aspirants climbed the hill to the shrine of Our Lady of Fourvière. There they pledged to found a new Society bearing the name of Mary and living her spirit.

This year we rejoice with the Brothers celebrating the bicentennial of their foundation by Marcellin Champagnat.

I am very aware that, for the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM), the seeds of our branch of the Marist family began some 30 years after that Fourvière moment, when an intrepid forty-nine year old woman from Lyon set out for Oceania in the company of some Marist priests and brothers. Collaboration is rooted in the SMSM origins, and today I offer a reflection on how this has been lived out by us working together with other branches of the Society of Mary.

In the 1984 Constitutions, there is a Chapter entitled: The Marist Spirit in our lives. The final article reads:

56. Conscious of the grace given us
to be part of the Marist family,
concerned with *continuing the mission
of Mary in the Church*,
we willingly collaborate
with members of the other branches,
priests, brothers, sisters and laity,
ready to help one another in the work of evangelization,
and seeking with them
a deeper understanding
of the spirit of Mary
which, as Father Colin says,
is something so delicate and so profound
that it can be grasped only
by sustained meditation and prayer .

For the SMSM the expression: ‘The work of Mary’ is translated rather as the ‘Mission of Mary’. We mean the same thing.

The outline

1. a brief consideration of the strong idea of Mary’s family - of Marists – as I see it in the early years and its implications for working together
2. I wish to show how it is through Marist family ties, and thanks to them, that we SMSM exist as a missionary religious congregation in the Church
3. Then to offer some concrete examples of collaboration of the SMSM with other branches in the work of Mary.

When I asked our sisters for examples of collaboration, they responded with literally dozens of ways it happened, so I will focus on only one or two highlights/ outstanding examples for each branch. I also acknowledge that, in Mary’s family as in any family, there are shadows as well as lights.

THE SOCIETY OF MARY, the Family of Mary

The idea of membership in the Society of Mary was very dear to Founders Jean-Claude Colin, Marcellin Champagnat and Foundress Jeanne-Marie Chavoin. They referred to the Marist project as ‘The Work of Mary’ – an indication of how they understood the founding inspiration. For Fr

Colin, 'Mary's Work' was 'God's affair'.¹ To be a member of this family was to be intimately linked with doing the 'work of Mary', and living her spirit. The early Marists were convinced that they had been chosen and incorporated into the family of Mary precisely to do 'her work', a work of mercy. It gave them a corporate focus, a common vision for mission - and reason to collaborate.

To Jean-Claude Courveille at Le Puy, Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, spoke of her work, her 'mission': "Here is what I want. I have followed my divine Son in everything... Now in sharing his glory, I follow his path still in the work he does for his church on earth..." (So-called Revelation of Le Puy, 1812).

Bearing the name of Mary herself tells us we Marists are to be instruments of God's mercy among God's people in today's messy, tumultuous yet luminous world. The different branches of the Society reach out in so many places to all sorts of people.

Not only did the first Marists share a common call and vision, but also they made use of opportunities to collaborate in doing the work of Mary...

Early examples of collaboration among Marists

In the story of Marists in the early years, I read of instances where one branch is the means for another to work in the same area – e.g. in some places where Marist Fathers and/or Brothers were established they requested the presence of Marist Sisters.

There were also reasons which prevented close collaboration in implementing the vision. One was the division of the Archdiocese of Lyon. Marists found themselves under bishops in two dioceses: Lyon and Belley. Another reason could be that each branch was concerned with its own development as a congregation / institute.

In the article of the constitutions I quoted earlier, the SMSM are urged to **collaborate willingly with members of the other branches... ready to help one another in the work of evangelization**. Being the last born of the family, we SMSM have had a somewhat privileged relationship with other branches in this area of collaboration – and right from the beginning. As I said earlier, collaboration is rooted in the SMSM origins.

Collaboration encouraged by requests from Oceania through the Society of Mary

From the beginning of the mandate given to the Society of Mary in accepting the Oceanian missions, the need for collaboration between priests, brothers – and women (sisters) - becomes evident.

In 1842 Fathers Pierre Bataillon and Julien Vidal forwarded to Lyon a letter from the Christians of Ouvéa who asked for "some devout women (some sisters) to teach the women of Ouvéa" - to help the people "learn all sorts of useful things".²

Once the Tertiary Marie Françoise Perroton was in the Marist mission in Wallis, several priests wrote to Father Colin, the Superior General, requesting companions for her. Father Charles Mathieu wanted "good young country girls and with common sense, able to grow what they need to live on, and in so doing, teach their pupils to work in their turn";³ Father François Junillon wanted to ensure that a work proving so useful to the mission would continue;⁴ and Father Joseph Mériaux wrote of his concern for the loneliness of Perroton and the need for companions for her.⁵

The Society of Mary was instrumental in responding to these requests.

Collaboration as "auxiliaries"

¹ Cf. *Origines Maristes (1786 – 1836)*, Edited by Jean Coste SM – Gaston Lessard SM, 4 Vols., Rome, 1960 - 1967, doc. 449.

² Letter from all the Christians of Ouvéa to the faithful in Lyons, 10.11.1842, in *Our Pioneer Sisters from correspondence 1836-1885 (= OPS)*, Rome, Vol. I, 1973, Letter 8.

³ Mathieu (Wallis) – Colin (Lyon), 26.08.1849, OPS Vol. I, Letter 20.

⁴ Junillon (Wallis) – Colin (Lyon), 11.12.1850, OPS Vol. I, 25.

⁵ Mériaux (Wallis) – Colin (Lyon), 30.06.1851, OPS Vol. I, 26.

When the ten pioneers who followed Marie Françoise Perroton were sent out to Oceania, they were under the auspices of the Society of Mary. They were to be **auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries** in the work of evangelization. The spirit they inherited was from the Marist Fathers; they were all members of the Third Order of Mary. Fathers Favre and Poupinel wrote Rules to help them enter into the work of Mary. Even in testing circumstances that challenged their membership in the Family of Mary, they clung to being Marist as an integral part of their identity. I would suggest that the support and encouragement of Marist priests and brothers (not all!) greatly contributed to our early sisters persevering through the difficult times they experienced.

If the SMSM became an official branch of the Marist family in the Church and able to continue the work of Mary as women who are missionaries, Marists and religious, it is due to the active role of the Society of Mary. How?

THE SOCIETY OF MARY – The Priests & Brothers

During the early years of the Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania the sisters experienced many forms of poverty in their lives. However I want to mention in particular two forms of poverty that they struggled to live in faith. First, they lacked *formation* for the missionary community life they were living, and secondly there were huge question marks about their own future and the future of their work as they were not **organized as a religious congregation**. Result: insecurity.

However the Church, in the persons of the Vicars Apostolic (who were themselves Marists) recognized the value of the sisters' lives and service, as did the Society of Mary.

Organization

There were several attempts to establish the sisters on a right footing canonically – including

- the plan to incorporate them into the Marist Sisters (Father Colin was against this);
- having the sisters join the Religious of Our Lady of the Missions (a plan that worked temporarily for some of the pioneer sisters);
- the foundation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Oceania by Bishop Louis Elloy for his Vicariate of Navigators/Samoa in which only one pioneer persevered- the co-foundress.

None of these efforts provided a long-term solution.

When Bishop Armand Lamaze was Vicar Apostolic for Central Oceania (consisting of Tonga, Wallis and Futuna) he erected the **Third Order Regular of Mary** (TORM) canonically as a diocesan religious congregation for his Vicariate.⁶ Later Father Jean Claude Raffin, assistant general to Father Antoine Martin and director of the TORM novitiate of Sainte-Foy, prepared the draft of a rule for the sisters in the missions and sent it to the Vicars Apostolic for their comments. An inspirational commentary on the final approved rule was written by our M.M. Denyse in 1902. This Rule and Directory was used by TORM throughout the congregation for almost thirty years.

During the fifty years as TORM we had an organization that was not officially “canonical”. Sisters vowed obedience to the Vicars Apostolic who were our superiors; they called sisters to vows, made appointments and gave permissions; in the stations the priest was both superior and confessor... The sister “superior” in the vicariate had a “maternal” authority over the sisters.

When Father Ernest Rieu became Superior General in 1923, he and one of his assistants, Father Jules Grimal, determined to work for a solution to the TORM situation. Again a proposal was made to unite the TORM with the Marist Sisters, but this was decided against.

When the case was first presented to the Sacred Congregation for Religious, its Secretary told Father Louis Copéré, the Marist procurator to the Holy See, that:

“[t]he organization of this Institute is original, even unusual, but seeing that it is required by the circumstances and that it functions satisfactorily and procures the good of the missions, the Holy See

⁶ OPS Vol. V, Doc. 10, Historical Background, p. 45.

cannot but approve it, even at the price of departing from canon law. To do otherwise would be to hinder the work of the missions in the Antipodes”.⁷

At the time this was written there were more than 200 sisters and 40 novices.⁸

Eventually the process to canonical organization took eight years...

- Father Léon Dubois was sent to Oceania to consult with Vicars Apostolic and sisters.
- Father Grimal worked with Mother Mary Pia while preparing the first constitutions.
- When pontifical approbation was granted to the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary in 1931, Grimal worked with the newly appointed Superior General Mother Mary Rose of Lima and her council for the implementation of the constitutions.

In this fairly lengthy presentation, I have wanted to highlight the role of the Society of Mary in our **very existence** as SMSM. It has been this collaboration – labouring with – that has enabled us to continue to work in the mission of Mary for the Church.

Formation

The second form of poverty I mentioned earlier was the lack of formation. Priests of the Society of Mary had a large share in forming us as Marists in the early days. At the first house of formation in France, Father Claude Méchin worked with Madame des Groues in the 1880s – our first “formation team”...

Over the years Marist Fathers both in the Pacific missions and in home countries such as New Zealand, Australia, USA, France and Italy have continued to give “Marist formation” through conferences, direction, and retreats, and also through the many publications and studies made available.

Collaboration in more recent years continuing the mission of Mary

Throughout our history there have been many instances of collaboration between the SMSM and the Society of Mary, particular in parishes where both communities live. But I wish to name only several recent examples.

In 1992 the Society of Mary opened a community for mission in the former German Democratic Republic; with their encouragement (and that of the Bishop) we SMSM joined them in Dessau, working in collaboration there for fifteen years. In Alfonsine, Faenza, Italy, in 2000 the SMSM joined the Marist priests and seminarian in pastoral ministry.

The 2009 General Chapter of the Society of Mary took the decision “to develop a city centre network *to address the needs of an increasingly secular world*”.⁹ Father Hannan and his council invited the SMSM to join them in the apostolate at the church of Notre Dame de France in London. Since 2012 two SMSM have collaborated in this mission with the Society of Mary. Earlier this year Sister Catherine Jones SMSM became a member of this London community.

In other countries, too, there have been numerous examples of collaboration in both parish apostolates and also in spiritual projects or works.¹⁰

Whether in a small island or on a great continent, the blessings that come from collaborating are manifold.

MARIST BROTHERS

As we know, the original plan for the Society of Mary was that it would have several branches: priests, brothers, sisters, lay people. This structure of a large Society of Mary remained in the

⁷ OPS Vol. V, Doc. 94, Letter from the Procurator to the Holy See Father Louis Copéré SM to Father Joseph Bonnefoux SM (Provincial of Lyon and superior of the novitiate after the General Council of the Society of Mary moved to Italy), 3 March 1923 [4].

⁸ OPS Vol. V, Doc 97, II 3. a)

⁹ John Hannan SM, *Time to look outward*, No. 183 – XIII, 8, 27 March 2016, p. 4, quoting *Statements and Decisions of the General Chapter 2009* (SD), no 19-22.

¹⁰ Star of the Sea parish, Honolulu (4 years, 1953-57); All Hallows Mission Centre in San Francisco (1955-1971); with Haitian and Hispanic immigrants in Sts Frances and Blaise Parish, Brooklyn NY (ca 1986-94) (3 SM, 3 SMSM, 1 FMS in the beginning).

mind of Marcellin. As one of Champagnat's biographers, Brother Stephen Farrell, wrote: "Marcellin's fantastic amount of work with the Brothers had never distracted him from what was, for him, his ultimate aim: the creation of a large Society of Mary as originally envisaged by the seminarians at St Irenaeus."¹¹ This dream was shared by Chavoïn and Colin.

One body; several branches – all doing Mary's Work ... a vision Champagnat held throughout his life.

From his understanding of his vocation as a Marist, Marcellin characteristically worked in collaboration with others.

We see him collaborating with the Marist Fathers. While always upholding the distinct identity of the Little Brothers of Mary as educators, he sent a number to work with the priests in the missions of Oceania. In order to further the work of Mary he recruited candidates not only for the brothers, but also for both the Society of Mary and the Marist Sisters. It is no surprise that Champagnat's sons collaborate so well with their lay partners.

But I would like to highlight the **encouragement** and **mutual support in mission** that is evident between the brothers and our early sisters.

The sense of belonging to Mary's family was strong among the priests, brothers and our pioneer sisters. In their letters the sisters give news, tell of those who are sick, of the unexpected and distressing death of Brother Jacques in Futuna in 1863.¹² From their various islands they send greetings to the "Fathers and Brothers";¹³ feastdays were often celebrated together. The Sisters helped out with domestic tasks such as sewing and laundry for the priests and brothers, and the brothers assisted not only with practical matters in the convent (e.g.) painting, special lighting, or occasionally sending something extra from the Procure like apples or jam.¹⁴

Marie Françoise Perroton experienced much loneliness during her first years. A family from Brittany moved from Wallis to the Marquises in the year after she arrived. Brother Joseph (Muraour) visited her often, and sometimes came with Father Junillon to drink *kava* in her house, but he was transferred by Bishop Bataillon. She shared in a letter to Father Julien Eymard: "Father Junillon will be the only one left here. He is a holy man and very kind, but it is not appropriate that he visits often. However, he does so out of charity for me..."¹⁵

In Sydney Brother Augule provided a great service for the missions as a shoemaker. Perroton mentions him in five of her letters. She contracted elephantiasis, and suffered for many years from not having suitable shoes that fitted her. Other pioneers also appreciated the special service this brother offered, and years later it is with sadness that Sister Marie de la Merci¹⁶ in Sydney in 1878 writes to Father Poupinel that the brother was losing his sight.

When the first group of three sisters set out with other Marists for Oceania in 1858 on the *Omer Pacha*, there were some trying times in the long and sometimes rough sea voyage. Sister Marie de la Pitié and her two companions greatly appreciated how the "Brothers ... have been real nurses for us".¹⁷ "...One of the Brothers was made responsible for attending to our needs. He used to bring us soup and prepared us something to drink. He speaks a little English, which made it easier to obtain what we wanted".¹⁸

One of our pioneer sisters, Sister Marie de la Croix, an excellent teacher, at least twice wrote from New Caledonia how she really liked the teaching methods of the Little Brothers of Mary,

¹¹ Stephen Farrell FMS, *Achievement from the Depths*, Parramatta, Mac-Arthur Press Pty Ltd, 1984, p. 165.

¹² Merci (Sydney) – Yardin (Lyon), 09.03.1859, Letter 16, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

¹³ Examples: Miséricorde (Apia) – Poupinel (Sydney), 21.01.1867, Letter 40; 02.03.1868, Letter 44, 07.09.1869 Letter 51; Pitié (Futuna) – Poupinel (Sydney), 12.02.1859, Letter 9; 02.12.1861, Letter 32; Bon Secours (Sainte Marie Conception) – Poupinel (Sydney), 01.12.1861, Letter 26 (*all unpublished letters*; Rome, general house).

¹⁴ Croix (St Louis) – Poupinel (Sydney), 16.03.1869, refers to things received from Brother Joseph-Xavier in Sydney, Letter 109, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

¹⁵ Perroton (Wallis) – Eymard (Lyon), 06.10.1847, Letter 4.

¹⁶ Merci (Sydney) – Poupinel (Lyon), 02.08.1878, Letter 51, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

¹⁷ Pitié (on board the *Omer Pacha*) – Favre (Lyon), 05.12.1857, Letter 2, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

¹⁸ Pitié (Sydney) – Bioletti (Francheville), 09.03.1858, Letter 3, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

and she was using a lot of their books.¹⁹ Unfortunately a fire in July 1867 consumed all the many books she had collected.²⁰

The examples I have given are from the period of our pioneer sisters. This mutual encouragement is surely a most effective way of supporting one another in the joys and sorrows of life experienced in doing the work of Mary...

As time went on, collaboration continued in other ways in Pacific missions, but to consider more recent examples...

The Marist Brothers have truly opened the doors for us to become more involved **geographically** in the mission of Mary, giving us the opportunity to “help ... in the work of evangelization” (Constitutions 56).

Thanks to the initiative and encouragement of the Brothers, the SMSM opened communities in the **Philippines** and in **Kiribati**. In these countries, like true brothers in a family, the Brothers offered us both means of accommodation and work to get us established. In General Santos City in the Philippines, we still have three SMSM collaborating in mission at Notre Dame of Dadiangas University... 30 years this year. The Brothers also supported and encouraged the SMSM in our early years in **Peru**, **Colombia** and **Madagascar**. And for a time we had a community at the Brothers’ school in Save, **Rwanda**.

During the recent *Ad Gentes* missionary thrust of the Brothers we were delighted to be able to host/have those missioned to Bangladesh. For over a year the Brothers lived with the SMSM in Dhaka; the house remains their base whenever they go to the city from the new St Marcellin High School for children of tea plantation workers. Currently one SMSM is in charge of the girls’ hostel and teaches English at the school; a second SMSM is still waiting for a visa.

THE MARIST SISTERS

Colin’s opposition to the Marist Sisters setting out for Oceania along with the other Marist missionaries must have been a blow to the zealous missionary heart of Jeanne-Marie Chavoin. Surely this woman who started collaborating with the two Colin brothers when she moved into Cerdon had many insights regarding the Marist spirit.

Marist Sisters and SMSM have had few opportunities to collaborate in Mary’s work except in projects that involve several branches of the Marist family. However, as Third Order Regular of Mary, we were given the opportunity to prepare the way (even if unbeknown to us) in two Pacific mission situations.

With a growing “white” population in vicariates under British rule there was a great need for sisters who could speak and teach English. During a visit to Lyon in 1891, Bishop Julien Vidal invited the Marist Sisters to take over the school in Levuka, Fiji, which the TORM had started. When the superior of the TORM novitiate in France, Madame des Groues (M.M. de la Croix) was asked if she opposed this she replied: “Oh! No... The moment that my daughters cannot fill this post I have no right to oppose the work of God and the good of souls.” She told the community about the change, adding, “Remember, my daughters, that you are to dig the foundations and prepare the place for others.”²¹

In February 1924 the Marist Sisters took over the English school in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, at the invitation of Bishop Joseph Blanc.²² Then four years later the convent and school in Houma was handed over to the Marist Sisters who felt the need of a second community and in a village setting.²³

In retrospect we SMSM can see this “handing over” as an essential aspect of life as missionaries “ad extra” – even if a number of our sisters did not understand it in quite this way at the time. The call for the SMSM to “let go” and hand over to others, in particular to local people,

¹⁹ Croix (St Louis) – Poupinel (Sydney), 22.10.1867, Letter 93, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

²⁰ Croix (St Louis) – Coeur de Jésus (Lyon), 25.08.1868, Letter 102, *unpublished*; Rome, general house.

²¹ Mother Marie Pia SMSM, *Madame Adele Marie Troussel des Groues, Mother Marie de la Croix, TORM, 1835-1898*, Rome, April 2001, p. 39.

²² M.M. Edith (Tonga), notes, South Pacific Province archives, Mangere, Auckland.

²³ *Ibid.*

has been more evident in the past sixty or so years. As a result it allows us to respond to other needs in mission and to be sent elsewhere.

WITH MARIST LAITY

The SMSM are historically and spiritually connected with lay Marists. The pioneer sisters were all enrolled as members of the Third Order of Mary. For years much of their spiritual reading and practices were from the Manual of the Third Order – they imbibed its spirit, and several corresponded with Tertiaries back in Lyons. Their title was: “Sisters of Charity of the Third Order of Mary in the Missions of Oceania”.

In the days of our pioneer sisters and those who followed them, often there was just one sister in a school. A most effective way of teaching was the multiplier effect of having older students teach younger ones. As these students were often boarders, and followed the practices of the sisters (which, in turn, were Marist prayers and practices) these students imbibed the Marist spirit.

In December 1850 Marie Françoise Perroton was teaching about 100 girls in Wallis. When, at Bishop Bataillon’s request she left there in August 1854, some young women she had formed decided to continue her work: they established two communities of girls, one in Mua and the other in Matautu.

Then, as now, a powerful way of collaborating is through presence and encouragement – such as participation of sisters in gatherings of Third Order of Mary, Marist laity meetings, Marian Mothers – and also with laity in the Champagnat family. I acknowledge that for a long time the Brothers have encouraged lay collaborators in their work of Christian education. For thirteen years I was privileged to be part of this ministry in the Philippines.

WITH THE MARIST FAMILY

I wonder if the hearts of Colin, Champagnat and Chavoïn rejoice whenever there is collaboration among the Marist branches in projects or apostolates that are expressions of continuing the work of Mary... No one branch has the fullness of Mary’s spirit, so such collaboration is a fuller expression of the Marist spirit.

To mention just a few family projects:

Here in New Zealand a significant contribution was made to Church renewal for fifteen years through Marcellin Hall;

France was the base for the project at St Priest, Lyon. Members from the four branches continued their various ministries and community residences and came together regularly as a fraternity.

The Marist Volunteer programme that was sponsored by all branches in the States allowed young people to live in a local Marist community and share in ministry (c. 1988-2006).

Educational institutions with family collaboration include a secondary school in Senegal; St Bede’s College, Savarekareka, in Fiji; the origins of the Corpus Christi Teachers’ College in Suva; the initial collaboration for the Form 6 students in Samoa...

Over recent decades there have been Marist Family renewals in Fribourg, several in Rome, Belley, New Zealand at Marcellin Hall.... These are opportunities to get to know other members of the family better and to encourage one another in the Work of Mary.

At both grassroots and leadership levels Marists come together, as also for family events and celebrations.

CONCLUSION

Article 16 of our Constitutions I quoted earlier challenges the SMSM in one other area: it calls us to seek with other branches “a deeper understanding of the spirit of Mary...” Every year in France representatives from the five branches meet in their continuing research on Marist studies and spirituality. This is what we are doing today in this Marist Studies Seminar. Thank you, Brothers, for initiating this.

Last year Father John Hannan, Superior General of the Society of Mary, wrote a letter entitled: ***Time to look outward***. I was delighted to see how he stresses that an important orientation for the Society is “to work untiringly with the laity and other branches of the Marist family”.²⁴

At the beginning I mentioned how early Marists were convinced that they were chosen as members of Mary’s family precisely to do her work, a work of mercy. Brother Emili Turú points out that the first Marists dreamed of a Church with a Marian face... of establishing all over the world an oasis of mercy. Brother suggests that we could even say that those Marists committed themselves to initiating a *revolution of mercy*.²⁵

It is not just by chance that the Fourvière Year coincided with the Year of Mercy! How can we best collaborate in being instruments of mercy – so relevant at this time when Pope Francis is asking us to continue the Year of Mercy.

As members of the Marist family, doing Mary’s work in the Church, how can we continue to live collaboration?

²⁴ Hannan, *op.cit.*, no. 25.

²⁵ Brother Emili Turú FMS, Letter of the Superior General, *Fourvière: the Revolution of Tenderness*, Rome, 6 June 2016, p. 2.