

The Papal Brief of April 29, 1836:
A Mandate to Start the Church Anew?

During the next three days, my contribution will make us spend most of our time in France in the year 1836. At the outset, let us remind ourselves that the fruit we hope to gather from these reflections has to do with the church in Australia in 1986. That means Jesus Christ becoming present here and now. It means ourselves becoming as completely taken up with the kingdom of God as Jesus was and, because of that, becoming as actively and effectively engaged as he was in making his saving words and deeds available to our sisters and brothers. The hope that Marist tradition will provide for us inspiration, guidance, and tools to help us work more generously and effectively in the service of the kingdom here and now is our justification for taking time out to explore the past.

On July 21, 1836, the first Canadian railway train left Laprairie, near Montreal, with three hundred persons aboard and made its way to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, some thirty miles south. The train was named "Princess Victoria", after King William IV's seventeen-year old niece, who was to accede to the throne the following year with Lord Melbourne as her first prime minister. On this side of the world, 1836 was also the year when South Australia was set up as a separate entity, when New South Wales governor Sir Richard Bourke favored passage of the Church Act of 1836, and when Dr. Ullathorne published *The Catholic Mission in Australia*. Those events give us hints of what was happening in the English-speaking world. To come to the object of the present celebration, we need to move outside the Commonwealth to a world where English was (and remains) a foreign language.

Two years ago, acting as a tourist guide for a friend, an American priest, on the Champs-Élysées, I was still ignorant of the bustling activity that had taken place there in 1836. On July 29 of that year, king Louis-Philippe could watch from the windows of his Tuileries palace prime minister Adolphe Thiers inaugurating the Arch of Triumph which Napoleon had ordered twenty years earlier. In October following, in place de la Concorde, on the spot where Louis XVI had been beheaded in 1793, an obelisk was raised, a gift from Muhammad Ali, the leader of Egypt. While geographically closer to what we are celebrating here, those events are still no more than props to help us jump back into time.

None of the people mentioned so far were aware of the events you came here to celebrate. These were Marist family events, and only with time did they become enmeshed in the history of the world. It is handy to single out three dates and to use them as starting points for these opening reflections. On April 29, 1836, Pope Gregory XVI approved the Marist priests as the Society of Mary, excluding from this approval the sisters, the brothers, and the members of the third order. On September 24, Bishop Pompallier and twenty priests from Belley and Lyon met in Belley to elect the first superior general of the Society and to take vows as Marists. On December 24, Bishop Pompallier, four Marist priests, and three Little Brothers of Mary sailed from Le Havre to begin their missionary work in the apostolic vicariate of Western Oceania. Tomorrow and the day after, the last two dates will provide the themes for our reflection. Today, I invite you to consider the first of these events, the approval of the Society of Mary by Gregory XVI on April 29, 1836.

1. The plan presented to Rome

On August 25, 1833, Jean-Claude Colin wrote from Belley to Marcellin Champagnat at the Hermitage:

The time of our departure for Rome has arrived; I shall be in Lyon Thursday morning, on the 29th. Several of our confrères will accompany me as far as Lyon; we shall gather between seven and eight in the morning at Mrs. Chavassieu's, on Little Bombarde Street; we shall set out from there around eight o'clock to go up to Fourvière and place our trip under the protection of our common Mother. One of us shall say mass, which the others shall attend. It is necessary that you be there; you must sign a petition to His Holiness which all of us are signing at Belley. That signature does not commit us to anything; if someone cannot come, he should mandate someone else to sign for him. (OM, doc. 283, 1)

The three pilgrims, Colin, Chanel, and Bourdin, carried with them the hopes and struggles of all those who had been taken with the dream of a Society of Mary that would renew the church. It is not easy for us to appreciate the depth and richness of feeling which made up the life of these early Marists. Their language is, yes, a hundred and fifty years old.

The petition to the pope (OM, doc. 282), an important part of their dossier, was an effort to express some of that. The authors brought out their best Latin and their petition sounds somewhat grandiloquent. Still, we would miss the event of April 29 unless we managed to get a glimpse of the vision that had captured the hearts of these believers. Marcellin Champagnat, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn, Pompallier, Colin, had gathered dozens (in Champagnat's

case, hundreds) of men and women around the vision that Courveille had brought to Lyon from Le Puy, Mary saying she wanted a society that would bear her name to fight the forces of hell unleashed against the church in the end days. By the time Colin set out for Rome, that initial vision had flowered into a structured set of insights which made up the bold plan that the Marists were going to present to the pope.

Two things characterized the Marist plan. One was its structure, the other was its radicality.

The Marist plan was all-embracing. Hence its open structure. The new order that Courveille and his friends at the seminary of Lyon were envisioning was initially modelled on the ancient orders of monks or of friars: it comprised an order of men, an order of women, and a third order of people living in the world. While they were still at the seminary, Champagnat had insisted that the plan include teaching brothers, so it became a four-branch structure. The branch of priests was also to include brothers. The third order, in particular, was meant to be the very antithesis of an elite group. For the thrust of the enterprise was to reach everybody, or rather to exclude nobody. If the name Mary meant anything, it meant welcome. The dream of the early Marists was that there would be in the church, or rather that through the Society of Mary the church would become, a place where everyone could feel welcome, including those labelled "sinners". This openness of structure and multiplicity of branches was characteristic of the Marist plan from seminary days.

A second characteristic of the Marist plan was its radicality. This aspect is linked to Colin's first six years as a curate in Cerdon. This is when Colin felt impelled to put down in writing ideas that grew into the rule for the new society. Here, the perspective was different. The name Mary had further implications. If the Society of Mary was going to make a difference in the life of the church, if it was going to be a source of renewal, it would need to dissociate itself from the deep-rooted evils that plagued the church, particularly the clergy, namely attachment to money (covetousness), seeking after honors (ambition), and love of power. In prayer during the night, in his work during the day, Colin understood that the Society of Mary could become a new way to reach people who had been cut off from the life of the church, but it would need to be totally free of self-seeking.

This led Colin to write in the rule, for example, that, if the superior realized he had entertained thoughts of covetousness for more than fifteen minutes, he was to call the council together and confess his fault before the councillors. We seem to be far from meditation upon Mary present in the newborn church, yet Colin justified his radical injunction by appealing to her example.

In a similar context the expression Hidden and unknown in this world gradually took shape in Colin's mind as an essential component of the spirituality of the apostles of the new age.

As Colin set out for Rome in 1833, he felt he had something important to tell the pope about the life of the church. He was aware, of course, that he might encounter some resistance: "When I went to Rome, I was going to fulfill my vow; I felt everybody would laugh at me; it did not matter; I wanted only a yes or a no; I wanted to fulfill my vow." (OM, doc. 457). Still, the dominant feeling was one of confidence.

2. The plan rejected

The encounter with bureaucracy began before the three pilgrims even left France. They arrived in Marseille on August 31 at seven thirty; the steamship was leaving at eight. But they needed visas to enter the papal states. Of course, the ship had left by the time they got them, but the roman consul was kind enough to direct them to a merchant ship that was to sail five days later. After a few hours at sea, which were enough to make Colin and Chanel seasick, they had to pull into port for repairs. There, they waited five days for the wind. When it came, it soon turned into a bad storm, and it took them forty eight hours to reach the coast of Tuscany, where they took refuge for a day. They finally made it to Civitavecchia. Bourdin writes: "When one arrives in Civitavecchia after sundown, the civil offices are closed; so, we slept aboard. Until ten the next day, we were led to believe we might be quarantined. The cardinal of the place, to whom everything is referred, sent to tell us we were free" (doc. 287, 1).

Things were not much better in Rome. It was time for the summer holidays. All business was coming to a halt for two months. Wherever they went, they were told: "Come back after St. Martin's day" (doc. 292, 2). They did manage to get an audience with Gregory XVI, just before he left for the country. They were told to be ready for eleven o'clock the next morning. At eight thirty, they found out that their audience was at nine. Colin had been waiting more than ten years for this moment. He wanted to talk to the pope, to tell him about the spiritual experiences that made him believe God wanted the Society of Mary; he wanted to open his heart to the father of all christians; he even wanted Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn to come to Rome to tell the pope about her spiritual experiences. Here is what took place at the audience, as told twenty years later in Fr. MaÉtrepierre's lectures to the novices:

When the three priests were at the feet of the Holy Father, Father Chanel tried to speak to him in Italian but he stumbled and remained mute; Father Bourdin tried to go on in Latin, but he became confused; then, Father Colin started talking French and he did better. However, the Pope showed a bit of surprise when he heard him speak

French. Still, an exchange was initiated, with Latin being spoken on one side and replies being given in French on the other. The time came to leave, and they undertook to withdraw without turning their backs to the Pope, as etiquette requires, but as they walked backwards, they got entangled in the train of their cassocks; rather than going toward the door, they wandered in the hall. The Pope told them: A dextra! As they kept wandering, the Pope rang for the chamberlain. When Father Colin saw that the comedy was to become public, he turned quickly toward the door, the others did likewise, and they missed being seen by the one who was called to their rescue. (OM, doc. 752, _ 37)

What Colin had anticipated as an encounter between the pastor of the universal church and the Marist plan to renew the church began as an encounter between three French priests and the Roman court. The real dialogue about the Marist plan took place after St. Martin's day, in a series of meetings between Colin and Cardinal Castracane. Castracane had not been very long with the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. He only became cardinal on April 15, 1833, and was appointed to Bishops and Regulars at the beginning of September following, just three weeks before Colin arrived in Rome. However, he already had a substantial career in the curia behind him: he was fifty four, and had spent about five years as secretary of Propaganda.

Two things gradually developed in the course of the numerous encounters between Colin and Castracane. On the one hand, Castracane's opposition to Colin's plan became very clear. On the other hand, the two men came to have high esteem for each other.

Castracane's reaction to Colin's plan expressed the clash between two approaches to the world. Castracane represented the reasonable, the organized, the "everything under control" approach. In the Marist plan, he was faced with a challenge to precisely that view of the world: here was a group that saw itself entrusted with a mission to change things.

Castracane's report was severe. Everything was wrong with the Marist plan. It did not conform to the essential elements of the religious state, and yet it wanted to be approved as a religious order. Who had ever heard of three congregations under one superior general? Besides, it included some sort of association of lay people who would spread over the whole world. Here was something that governments feared above all else, and the Holy See had enough trouble keeping on reasonably good terms with governments without going out of its way to make them suspicious.

The decision of January 31, 1834, fell like an ax: it was no to the Marist plan. The two bishops who had allowed it to begin in their dioceses and who had recommended Colin to the Holy See would be informed of the decision; some indulgences would be granted to the priests as a consolation prize for Colin who had spent all that time in Rome. And Castracane felt that he could bid Colin goodbye.

Well, not long after Colin left Rome, things began to go awry. Only two weeks after the meeting, Castracane had already prepared the letter that the prefect of the congregation, Cardinal Odescalchi, was to send to the two bishops. Normally, the secretary of the congregation would have seen to that, but Castracane did not trust others to have a clear idea of the decision, so he had drafted the letter himself. No approval. At the same time, no blame to the bishops for allowing this monster to grow in their diocese, because French bishops need to be treated delicately. Also, indulgences for the priests to be sent to the bishops, and even permission for the priests to elect a superior for themselves. A series of circumstances (changes in the staff of the congregations, Colin continuing to change the nature of his requests, so that a definitive no would not bury the Marist plan forever) converged to make the decision of the congregation inoperative. The Marist project got lost in a bureaucratic swamp, but it did not drown in it.

3. The brief of April 29, 1836

So far, we have been in the presence of two kinds of reality: the plans and hopes of the early Marists, and the resistance of the Roman congregations to innovation. There now comes into play an entirely new reality: the needs of the people of Western Oceania, as perceived by pope Gregory XVI.

In July 1835, Canon Pastre, in Lyon, received from Cardinal Fransoni, prefect of Propaganda, a request to accept the mission of Western Oceania. On July 17, the canon wrote back to say no, and was prudent enough to send his letter through the archbishop of Lyon, who wrote an accompanying note to confirm that the canon was indeed too old and sick to accept such a mission. The two letters were already on the way when the following incident took place:

Mr Cholleton, the vicar general, had just finished celebrating the holy sacrifice in the primatial church of St. John. Mr Pastre, a canon in that church, formerly prefect apostolic of Bourbon Island, came up to him and said: 'I have just received a letter which bothers me considerably. Cardinal Fransoni, prefect of Propaganda, writes from Rome to offer me the mission of Western Oceania. I would have been willing to go back to Bourbon Island (now Reunion, near Mauritius), because I know the country, the people, and the language; but at my age, with my

infirmities, I don't think I can accept Western Oceania; I find it very hard to refuse. At least I wish I had someone to present to His Eminence; would you happen to know a priest who could fulfill his plans?' Mr Cholleton said: 'I know a zealous cleric; I am aware of his plans, and he wants to devote himself to the missions. I think you will find him quite suitable. It is Mr Pompallier, the chaplain at La Favorite boarding school, who belongs to a newborn Society.' (OM, doc. 657, _0201).

The encounter between Pastre and Cholleton cannot have taken place more than a few days after Pastre's letter of July 17 to Frasoni, because by August 3 Pastre had met Pompallier, Pompallier had written to Colin, and on August 3 Colin wrote to Pompallier:

Because I was away for a few days, your letter was delivered to me with some delay, hence the delay of my reply.

Colin then continued:

It is with the greatest pleasure that I will see you leave for that foreign mission; do not refuse what the Lord himself offers you; the same Providence will find you associates. Be full of courage, therefore; you will serve usefully the Society of Mary by devoting yourself to the salvation of these poor unbelievers.

One of the interesting aspects of this story is how quickly things moved from this point on. Taking into account the delays of correspondence (it took at least two weeks for letters to travel from Rome to Lyon) and the confusions that take place on encumbered desks (one letter of Cardinal Frasoni to Archbishop de Pins remained unopened for one whole month on the desk of the archbishop's secretary), the decision to entrust the vicariate of Western Oceania to the Marists was taken in record time: less than six months between the first opening to Canon Pastre on July 4 and Propaganda's decree on Western Oceania, which was rendered on December 23 and ratified by the pope on January 10, 1836.

For the approval of the priests of the Society of Mary, things went even faster. By March 11, 1836, the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars issued its decree approving as a religious congregation the priests of the Society of Mary, and empowering them to elect a superior general and to take simple vows. It is moving to see the bureaucratic machinery of the Congregation caught up in the urgency of the mission to Western Oceania. On the following day, March 12, Cardinal Castracane wrote a short, but formal, memo to the secretary of the Congregation:

Most revered Monsignor,

The poor islanders of Austral Polynesia are called by divine Providence to the light of the Gospel. In order that this priceless benefit should suffer no delay, I hasten to send you the report I gave yesterday together with the text of the resolution issued by the Congregation, and I entrust to your zeal, most revered Monsignor, the task of requesting the approval of His Holiness [...] (OM, doc. 374).

Castracane had not been fast enough. The approval of the pope had been given the previous day. Such miraculous expeditiousness did not last. It took a further six weeks for the pope's decision to be put into the form of the brief *Omnium gentium*, the act of April 29, 1836, which gave official existence to the Society of Mary in the church.

These are the opening words of the brief:

The salvation of all nations, whose care we received from the prince of pastors and the bishop of souls, impels us to be constantly on the alert so that we leave nothing untried in order that the name of the Lord be praised from east to west... (OM, doc. 384)

Fourteen years earlier, in their letter to Pius VII, the early Marists had declared that the aim of the Society was to work for the salvation of souls "on whatever shore of the world it will please the Apostolic See to send us" (OM, doc. 69). In preparing the pope's response, Monsignor Sala had written: "The offer is magnificent, and it will be well to keep it in mind." (OM, doc. 72, _ 2) At long last, the offer was accepted, and the Society was almost ready to begin its work at the service of evangelization. One more step was necessary: that it set itself up through the election of a superior general and the taking of vows. We shall consider those events tomorrow. Let us conclude now with a brief reflection on the story of the brief of approval.

Conclusion:

That story concerns us. Whether we are members of one or another Marist congregation or are members of God's people who have an interest in the Marists, we always need to ask ourselves: How does the Marist tradition help promote the Kingdom of God?

The story unfolds in three stages: in their attempt to live out their baptism, young men and women experienced the action of the Spirit; they became convinced that they held a treasure for the renewal of the church. When they presented their ideas and plans to the authorities in Rome, they were told that these ideas and plans were delirious

and monstrous and could absolutely not be approved as the basis for a religious congregation. Finally, when the Roman authorities looked for people to evangelize Western Oceania, they were quite happy to grant approval to the Marist priests alone.

We see here three aspects of the life of the church interacting with each other: the first is the living experience of baptised men and women who claim the action of the Spirit in their lives; the second is tradition, the accepted and instituted ways of doing things, which wants to regulate the exuberant and extravagant manifestations of the Spirit; the third is the urgent need of men and women to hear the good news preached to them.

As we weigh the importance of these three realities in the life of our congregations and of the church, we may be tempted to privilege one or two over the rest. I find it enlightening to compare the set of events I have evoked before you to another set that Luke places before us in the Acts of the Apostles. You remember how the Spirit fell upon the pagans while Peter was speaking in the house of Cornelius and how Peter ordered them to be baptised (Acts 10, 44-48). But the converted Jews felt these new believers could not be dispensed from observing the law of Moses (Acts 15, 5), and finally a practical solution was found which enabled the Jews to eat with the pagans and the church to exist as church (Acts 15, 19-20).

As we work to make the Society of Mary exist now in this world, we need to give full weight to the three aspects: the lived experience of people who are touched by the Spirit of God and who are called to create new life; the resistance of what exists already and which cannot simply be swept aside; the overriding concern for the coming of the kingdom, which will find ways to enroll into the service of the church all the generosity and the talents of those for whom Marist reality is the work of God's Spirit.

Sydney, August 25, 1986

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