

The Story of the Society of Mary

29. Providence Steps In

Father Jean-Louis Pastre was a priest of the Archdiocese in Lyon. He was ordained in 1808, and nine years later was able to fulfill a desire to serve in the foreign missions. He set out for the Île de Bourbon (we know it as Reunion Island) off the east coast of Africa. Eventually he became the prefect apostolic in charge of the mission. He returned to France in 1829 to raise funds for his mission, but became ill and could not return to his missionary work.

In 1835, as we saw in our last episode, Rome was looking for missionaries for their newly created Vicariate of Western Oceania. Propaganda Fidei wrote to Fr. Pastre, asking him to lead the mission. Because of age and infirmity, Pastre could not accede to this request, but to avoid giving Propaganda a refusal pure and simple; he looked around to see if there was anyone else he could propose in his place. He consulted with Fr. Cholleton, one of the Vicars General of the Archdiocese and friend of the Marists (who would one day become a Marist). Fr. Cholleton recommended Fr. Jean-Baptiste Pompallier, one of the Marist aspirants, who was living in Lyon, and who had once expressed a desire to work in the foreign missions. Pastre spoke to Pompallier who then wrote to Fr. Colin, currently the “central superior” of the Marist group. The possibility of foreign mission work was always part of the Marist plan, and the possibility that this missionary opportunity could help further the Marist cause did not escape Colin’s purview. Sensing the hand of Divine Providence in these events, Fr. Colin wrote to Fr. Pompallier, urging him to accept. Here is part of Colin’s letter:

“It would be the greatest pleasure for me to see you depart for that foreign mission; don’t refuse what the Lord himself is offering you; the same Providence will find associates for you. Be, then, full of courage; by devoting yourself to the salvation of those poor unbelievers you will also provide useful service to the Society of Mary. It seems that God is asking this devotion of the Society of Mary. Just recently our chargé d’affaires in Rome was himself asking me for men who could serve in foreign missions...The offer that Fr. Pastre will make to the Prefect of Propaganda, that the members of the Society of Mary take his place in that mission, cannot but be well-received, and be of great advantage to the Society as well. But in his letter, it is necessary that Fr. Pastre present the difficulty that we Marists are still diocesan priests under obedience to our bishops; and he should mention both the branch of the priests and that of the brothers, for both could devote themselves to that mission...I hope that the good God will strengthen you in this vocation.”





A beautiful letter, replete with a spirit of faith and dedication, but not lacking in a perception of the practical possibilities that the gracious providence of God had opened up for the Society of Mary. And as we shall see, it did, indeed, launch the final successful endeavor to win Rome's approval for the Society of Mary.

To be continued...

Prayer for Vocations to the Society of Mary (Marists)

Lord Jesus

You gave the Church St Peter Chanel as an example to Marists and the people of Oceania of gentleness, compassion and love in action. Welcome many young men and women into the Marist Family, to work as Priests, Brothers and Sisters. Help us too, to share our charism with lay people throughout the world and to work in partnership with them in Mission for the good of your Church and our world. This prayer we make to the Father in your name and through the Holy Spirit. Amen

*Mary Mother of the Church and our mother, choose more young people to follow Jesus your Son in religious life and priesthood and to bear your name as members of your Society.
(Please pray this prayer often.)*



Bishop Pompallier was born in Lyons, France, in 1801. He was consecrated bishop with responsibility for Western Oceania (including New Zealand) in 1836.

All articles can be found on St. Louis's website "About Us" in the Marist Tradition section

