

The Story of the Society of Mary

33. An End and a Beginning

We have traced thus far the history of the Society of Mary from the original inspiration at the Cathedral of Le Puy in about 1812, to the commitment made by a group of 12 seminarians and newly ordained diocesan priests at the shrine of Our Lady at Fourvière in Lyon in 1816, through twenty long and often frustrating years of efforts to obtain ecclesiastical approval. As we have seen, that approval was finally granted by Pope Gregory XVI on April 29, 1836, largely because of the Marists readiness to take on the missions in the Western Pacific, that part of the world most distant from the center of the Church in Rome.

If we were to draw an analogy to the founding of the United States, the Fourvière Pledge was like the Declaration of Independence; the twenty year effort for approval, like the Revolutionary War; and the Papal approval like the Treaty of Paris. And just as there still remained for the Americans the task, perhaps the most difficult and critical of all, of setting up a workable form of government through a Constitutional Convention, a ratification process, and the actual launching of the government by elections and legislative activity, so the Marists needed now to roll up their sleeves and set about the task of forming themselves into a functioning religious congregation and launching their missions at home and especially abroad in Oceania.

The first step had to be to elect a Superior General and for the members to profess the three religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. To do this, they had to decide when and where they could meet together. Since many of them were engaged in education, it could not be during the school year. Besides, the missionaries needed time to make some of their preparations for the long journey to Oceania. September was part of the summer vacation and had been the usual time for the group to gather for retreats, so they decided to meet for retreat September 20-24, 1836, and hold the election and profession their vows most appropriately on the 24th, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy. The bigger problem was, where? Since the group was located in two dioceses, Lyon and Belley how choose between them? Prayerful consideration led Fr. Colin to decide on Belley for the meeting, while at the same time agreeing to set up the headquarters in Lyon. (It would not be until 1925 that the Marist headquarters, the General House, would be relocated to Rome.)

One of the preparations for the Oceania mission was for Fr. Pompallier, whom Rome had appointed to be the Vicar Apostolic of the Western Pacific, to be consecrated as





Bishop. For this Cardinal Frasoni called him to Rome. Pope Gregory himself presided at the consecration. It took place at the church of the Immaculate Conception, a Capuchin church on the via Veneto. That church was selected because a Capuchin Friar was being consecrated bishop for a mission to Tehran in Persia (today's Iran). (For any of my readers who may have visited Rome and went to see the strange decorative display of the skeletal remains of Franciscan Friars in the crypts below a church, that church was the site of this first Marist episcopal consecration.)

To be continued...



Marist headquarters, the General House in Rome



Capuchin Catacomb of Rome

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.)

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