

The Story of the Society of Mary

1. The Climb to Fourvière

July 23, 1816. Lyon, France. Twelve young men climb the steep hill up to the bluff overlooking the River Saone. The hill is called Fourvière. It is the site of the old Roman Forum in the days when the Caesars ruled this part of the world.

It did not escape these men that they numbered twelve, the number of the Twelve Apostles. They felt that they were setting out on an exciting adventure, not to start a new church, but to help give their beloved Catholic Church a fresh, new start.

A year earlier the Battle of Waterloo had ended the reign of Napoleon and the French Revolution that had preceded it. The Catholic Church in France was in disarray. Many Catholics, including priests, had sided with the Revolution and cherished its values of liberty and equality and the universal education it had ushered in. Others had opposed the Revolution. Some of these latter were hoping for a restoration of the old monarchy and the so-called “union of throne and altar” whereby the Catholic Church wielded influence and power and relied on the monarchy to further its interests.

But our young men, some ordained priests the day before, the rest awaiting their ordinations in the coming years, were not interested in turning back the clock. People had changed. The world had changed. And for the Church it was a golden opportunity to make a fresh start, to disencumber itself of things that were not essential to the Gospel and that hindered the truth of the Gospel from shining forth in the modern world that was coming into being. They did not want to crush the hopes of those, especially the poorer echelons of society, who had benefited from some of the Revolution’s reforms. Rather they believed they could respect people’s opinions and preferences and that they could work within this new world of liberty and equality, and bring the people of this modern world to Christ.

In this their inspiration was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had inspired and encouraged the apostles at the birth of the Church.

To be continued...

