

2. FOURVIERE: July 23, 1816 – Responding to a Deep Attraction

By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

A Prayer:

Holy God, you are so full of surprises! Not only do you call mere little ones to a degree of relationship with you that could never be earned, you then send us out confidently as your trusted co-workers.

Mary, as one “lifted up” by the Lord, nurture within us a profound love for the Church and for our world in its unbelief.

Responding to a deep attraction

During the academic year of 1815-16, at the St. Irenaeus seminary in Lyons France, some students began meeting to discuss an inspiration received by one of them at the cathedral of Le Puy in 1812. At the time, these first ‘Marist’ seminarians were diocesan-oriented and close to major orders – diaconate or priesthood. They were quite ordinary young men with a sense of being drawn closer to Christ and a growing desire to serve the Church. Their goal was so close but now quite a change of direction, potentially a significant complication, was being asked of them – to begin a “Society” of religious.

Each was quite taken by the deep attraction of Mary as an inspiration and model for being with others, especially the ‘unchurched.’ So great was this attraction for the individuals and the group that twelve of them decided to pledge themselves to fulfilling the inspiration. This they did on July 23, 1816 in the “Chapel of the Virgin” on the hill of Fourvière overlooking Lyon. Several of these first Marists would go on to make the substance of this inspiration the chief work of their lives. In essence, the recipient of the inspiration, Jean-Claude Courveille, had been cured of near total blindness at the Cathedral of Le Puy in 1809. At the time, he attributed his cure to Mary the blessed Mother and it was only because of the restoration of his sight that Courveille was then able to enter the seminary in Lyons.

On his annual pilgrimage back to the cathedral in 1812, Courveille heard interiorly, but distinctly: *This is what I want... I follow my Son in the work he does for his church on earth... In this age of unbelief... it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be a Society consecrated to me, which bears my name and calls itself the Society of Mary and its members Marists.*

What struck the seminarians with whom Courveille shared his story was the fact that in the long history of the Church, no congregation had ever chosen the name ‘Society of Mary’ until then. It was as if the name had been held in reserve for them and precisely for this turbulent “age of unbelief!” Indeed, they were acutely aware that they in fact had not chosen the name at all but had been given it, had been chosen as it were to bear it.

What stayed most with them, however, was the image of Mary intervening, drawing them into doing her work of being a ‘support of the Church.’ With this inspiration then, Mary as it were, emerged from the background in one person’s story to reveal a mission for anyone who similarly came to have a deep attraction to Mary and the work of outreach at a time when faith was being undermined, lost.

Early in their seminary discussions, the first Marists realized that a tree with several branches was needed to encompass laity, religious brothers and sisters, as well as priests because so urgent and diverse was the work. Mary indeed, wanted something – through them! And that still remains the case today.

An Insight

“We have the firm purpose of consecrating ourselves at the first opportunity to founding a congregation of Mary... and we solemnly promise to spend ourselves and all that we possess in saving souls by every kind of apostolate under the sacred name of the Virgin Mary, with her protection and help” (From “The Fourvière Pledge”).

The Practice

“For the first time in history a Religious Congregation appears in the Church, drawing its inspiration not from Mary in herself, seen as the embodiment of all the great virtues, but Mary seen always in relationship: to Jesus, to the Church, and to the contemporary world. It was a very simple and clear idea: what would happen if a group of people built their way of thinking and acting round the model of Mary’s presence in the Church?” (Craig Larkin, SM, *A Certain Way*, p.40a).

Possible Questions

1. For Jean-Claude Colin, part of our Marist founding story is that Mary wanted men and women, “to be her own.” How does that belief, concept, sit with you?
2. The signatories of Fourvière were deeply attracted and touched by what they saw as Mary’s concern for the Church of their time. Where and how does that resonate with you?
3. From your own experience, how do people ‘in the world’ see the church today and what is it like to be a person of faith in our times?

