

### 3. CERDON, RURAL FRANCE 1816 – 1822

By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

#### **A Prayer:**

Companion God, always there on our unfolding journey, it is especially in moments of silence and stillness that you reveal yourself most to us. Call us and prod us to enter often into such times so that we might honour your presence with us and learn from you.

Mary, so great a ponderer, help us to recognize the obstacles to God within us. With your help, may we always seek to keep growing in your ways.

#### **Pondering the Call**

The Marist story, and hence our spirituality, began at one level with what a small group of seminarians saw as the exciting prospect that Mary herself was taking an initiative in calling for a diverse group to do ‘her work.’ It would seem from their fervent talks together that they had concluded that high amongst the things Mary wanted were missionary catechists, she could call her own. This was a role that could be interpreted rather broadly, but it was also one that could be undertaken collaboratively with quite a mixture of other people.

Following their ordinations, the superiors of the young men of the Fourvière Pledge, deliberately scattered them far and wide throughout the diocese of Lyon to frustrate their efforts to connect and so fulfil the commitment they had made to Mary on their last day together. In short they met with many difficulties and obstacles, so much so that it wasn’t long before only five of the original twelve signatories remained intent on the project. For these though, Mary and ‘her work’ remained a driving force.

And so it was that Marcellin Champagnat in 1817, began recruiting teaching brothers. Jean Claude Courveille had also quickly gathered together a group of lay people. In Cerdon, Jean-Claude Colin soon told his parish priest, Pierre Colin his older brother about the project, and he too enthusiastically entered into it, even inviting a young woman called Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, the future founder of the Marist Sisters, to come to Cerdon to see if it was for her.

Laity and priests met regularly around the kitchen table in the Cerdon presbytery, praying and sharing ideas together. These were highly encouraging and supportive and the numbers grew. Something was happening with these people and their faith, laity and priests alike.

Late at night, Jean Claude Colin then began to commit to paper “the early ideas” of a spirituality and a Religious Rule for the group, envisaging them living and working together under Mary’s inspiration, sometime in the future. The central motif became nuanced as “Mary in the early Church.” Mary present in a most unifying and effective way at the birth of the Church and continuing to be so until the end of time. That is, including our days!

Given the ‘allergies’ and ‘hyper-sensitivity’ of people now towards the Church, Marist ministry was to assume a ‘hidden and unknown’, self-emptying approach to people. Nothing within us is to be an obstacle to ‘winning-over’ people to Christ. Marists are to be especially ‘instruments of mercy’ to those most struggling and in need.

To do all this effectively, Marists need to create space within themselves for God by saying NO to pride, greed and power. In this way too, their lives alone are to be a real witness to Christ and to the power of the Gospel.

For the shy young Colin, living out what he felt he was inspired to write, led to personal transformation. Mary's way of living the Gospel also saw him tasting God's presence and action in what he later described as six years of extreme sweetness – the proposed Society of Mary, “her work,” was meant by God and was more than capable of producing real fruit in the lives of ordinary people.

### **An Insight**

“At the start of our enterprise, things were very hazy. The whole of creation was against us, we lacked everything. We had to rely on God alone; there was only Him. On the other hand, I felt impelled to this work, not by the ardour of youth, but by an impulse that I felt came from above. It was that which gave me the habit of praying always and for everything” (Fr. Jean Claude Colin).

### **The Practice**

“These first Marists were young and inexperienced when they started. They lacked information, finance or contacts in high places. Colin was always stressing the importance of inner, spiritual life, but he also said, ‘We did not build the Society on our knees.’ Champagnat, recalling the grinding labour of the early days declared: ‘We built the Society, literally with our hands!’ The Sisters had sometimes to eke out a living by what was simply sweated labour. Yet all were buoyed up by an immense confidence, the mad trust of the saints they were becoming, in a call to further ‘the work of Mary’, as they called it” (Denis Green, A SPECIAL PRESENCE, p.5)

### **Possible Questions**

1. What particular qualities of Mary emerge in our Marist founding story?
2. How well does this Mary resonate with you now, and can you see yourself taking on certain of these aspects, living them out to become more like Mary?
3. ‘To taste God’. What do you make of that phrase? Where and how might it appeal to people?



*The young Fr. Colin prayed often before this statue of the Blessed Virgin and Child in the church of St John the Baptist, Cerdon, seeking inspiration as he drew up the first rules of the Society of Mary.*