

REFLECTION

by François Drouilly sm

July 23, 1816: On that day twelve young men, fresh out of the seminary, some of them priests since the day before, decided to go up to the chapel of Fourvière. They had all been witnesses to, and sometimes the victims of, the revolutionary havoc in their country, in the Church. They could not be satisfied with simply observing, much less passing judgment on, the misfortunes of their time and then sinking into despondency - and yet, there were reasons! But God was there, as present on the day, as before and after the Revolution. And they could not or would not leave a place where God is present. Their minds were made up. The time had come to roll up the sleeves, to get to work, to invent, to do things differently, to go forward. This was the challenge. They took the decision to devote themselves "irrevocably", "seriously", "maturely", ready for all eventualities, including "torture", to "save souls" in Mary's name.

No assurance of success. This is a getting under way. One needs to go to where God stands. They dare the adventure, with Mary.

It was two hundred years ago, at Fourvière.

The text and the gesture move us. Even more so when one knows the difficulties of all kinds they had to face later on to 'keep the promise'.

What shall we make of this anniversary? A commemoration of the founders? A historical evocation? A 'beautiful page' from the Marist epic?

Does their promise commit us today? For us - men, women, religious, laity, - we who say that we are and want to be Marist: can the commitment they took two centuries ago, still be our own? And if so, how? Today, what are they, the young men of Fourvière, telling us?

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The initial feeling is that of the gap between the event and ourselves. So many things have changed: It has been a while since the Society of Mary has counted on the "Government of the very Christian King, the friend of peace and religion", to accomplish its mission! One may even wonder about the appropriateness of such an act. Certainly, the approach is moving; it affects us, as would the photograph of a family reunion. But then comes the time to close the yellowed photo album and to return to more serious business, to the "problems" of our own time. We look around and we see that the Church in the world of the 21st century is a far cry from the Church and the world of our elders!

And yet...

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"We solemnly promise "... what audacity! Or what naivety? "Saving souls... in every way"? But how?... The commitment is simple: "we irrevocably dedicate ourselves and all our goods ... that we shall spend ourselves and all we have" - to the extent of our possibilities.

Are we capable today of making such a promise? And they, the pioneers, were they?

For them, as for us, the only guarantee for the promise is the gift they make of themselves, without being assured of what they will become and what they will be able to accomplish. A very strong affirmation for the present; an uncertainty just as strong for the future - only that it will not be like the present.

From the outset, our elders have shown us a way: open to what may come but without knowing what that might be, with no other assurance than their personal and collective fidelity - and a boundless confidence. They can't assure anything. They do not know what tomorrow may bring. They don't even know what they themselves will become tomorrow. What they make at Fourvière is a leap into the unknown: the unknown of what they are letting themselves in for, the unknown of what will become of them. They promise that over which they have no control. It is a far cry from a "career plan"! More like a bet on the unknown... they invite us take the same approach, with the same risks.

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"How shall this be?" How can one make this bet? And yet avoid irresponsibility? How is it possible to take such a leap into an uncontrolled future – to jump without a parachute!

What makes these pioneers hold on, the foundation that justifies the gift they make of themselves, is love, and the trust that love gives. Love of God, love of life... There's a great similarity between this commitment and the commitment a man and a woman make to each other, without knowing what they will become. There is the same madness, when we give, we give to one another that which we do not yet have, that which it is not yet, for the present and the future; no money-back guarantee, in trust alone. "The glory of God and the honour of Mary" seem to these pioneers a sufficient guarantee for risking their lives. After all, they know, as we do, these words of Jesus "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10: 10). They love life and believe in life: apparently this was sufficient for them to dare the adventure.

Perhaps what makes their gamble possible is the certainty of a strong relationship with the God in whom they believe. They can do all things in Him who makes them strong.

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"We, us, our ..." This wave of plural statements catches our attention! The terms of the promise rest on the solid foundation of the group. No difference between them: a group which speaks with one voice and where each one finds the source and the confidence for his own personal word. A philosopher said this in a beautiful way: "it is in the continuous encounter with others that the person becomes and remains a person. The place for this process is the community" (Paul Tillich, *The courage to be*, p.119 - 120).

What has been promised together must be held together. From the outset, we know all the difficulties linked with their meetings, the geographic dispersion, the withdrawal of two-thirds of the signatories, the difficult relations in the dioceses and communities, the differences of opinion on the project and the efforts they made to get together again... not to mention the sometimes difficult personal relations. And we know well, from experience, how much this "being together" is important to keeping the promise. It binds us across continents, commitments, beyond the members of 'the family'. It connects us to our brothers and sisters from the past: we remember those men and women who told us, most often without words, just by their life, what a Marist life was, who taught us to taste it: we know what we owe them. It links us to the youngest who join us. "Religious truth is not amassed. It can only be shared. It shares," wrote Michel de Certeau SJ (*Weakness to believe*, p.10). Apparently the first Marist religious lived it by *interpreting* the promise, by ascribing to every word their achievements, their way of living that seemed to them in

accordance with their commitment. They discovered, deepened, invented and formulated a way of living and commitment. They were bound by their gesture and their promise. They have not done it in our stead. They have proposed it to others: freely. Apparently, they were sufficiently compelling to convince more than one to join them. It is now our turn to continue the journey. And of course, we assess, as the days go by, the importance of mutual trust in our communities for holding together, for advancing in Marist life, for accomplishing our mission, for inventing today the modalities for today, for encouraging us in faith.

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"And the Virgin's name was Mary".

The signatories of the formulary did not skimp on the name of Mary, the honour of Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus, the very august name of the Virgin Mary and finally... the name of "mariists" with this incongruous insistence on spelling: they need to "dot the i's and cross the t's", as it is said in English, when it comes to insist and not hesitate on membership!

It is easy to assign this explosive fervour to "the spirit of the time". And at the same time to relativize it. There were in France at this time dozens of male and female congregations which bore the name of Mary. Was then the name of Mary a religious 'stamp' fashionable to the point of making this century "the century of Mary"? Was it really that simple?

This persistent reference is very closely linked to the project of the founders. This is not the place to mention the works and activities of the future group. The time has not come to talk about education or catechism or missions to the end of the world or service to the sick. No, for the moment it is only a question of a family that bears the name of Mary, which will work for her honour, under her protection.

This text, which we may find maladroit, somewhat ponderous, simply indicates to us the only way to follow: that of Mary; the sole patronage to invoke: that of Mary; the only way to act, Mary's way.

Since 1816, so many things have been written on this.

This work of resembling Mary is not that of one particular moment, of the period of initial formation or ongoing formation, the yearly retreat, let alone an initial declaration. It is a work that is inscribed in daily life, in the community, in the pastoral and professional commitments of each one. We need to "embrace wholeheartedly our Marist identity". (*Statements and decrees of the 2009 General Chapter of the Marist Fathers.*)

The companions of Fourvière chose to take the name of Mary and to pass it on to us: It is for us to see how we have understood this choice and how we make it our priority and how we implement it. The name one bears says something essential about the person and the group to which it relates. We perceive well what lies behind the name of the Poverello of Assisi: a Franciscan religious says something about poverty, about the proximity and the respect for nature. Similarly, from the followers of Vincent de Paul, true charity is expected. These names save us the trouble of asking for an explanation of the commitments made by those who bear them. To bear the name of Mary is both a reference to an origin and a personal and collective responsibility to justify this choice by our manner of living.

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And now...?

... What shall we do with this evocation?

Admire the generosity of these young founders?

Fall into depression? *Where is the enthusiasm today? What remains of this beautiful project?*

To look back, is taking the risk of clinging to a bygone era.

Make gloomy comparisons? *Look what they did, what audacity, what successes, what adventures! See how they attracted young people, in large numbers, all the works, all the missions they founded... and what about us? Where are we? Closing houses... aging... gloom... we are dwarfs next to these giants!* Let us beware of these visions in black and white.

We should not take the first Marists for what they are not: supermen. They are simple people and their spontaneity makes even stronger the message they left us. Let us cease these comparisons that always put the present down, in comparison with the time of the origins which we imagine more perfect, more accomplished than ours. All in all we would only be pale copies of these true Marists from 1816!

And let us hold on to that which is more precious of what they have bequeathed us: the beginning. Their inheritance, their promise, their determination to make their own the plan of God, and their trust in God: all this keeps us. We cannot act as if nothing had happened. You can never do away with the origin because it is what makes us. But let us rather look at this word: *the beginning!* Everything else is past, venerable past, but past nonetheless. To truly honour these first confreres, means to dare after them, to start the society of Mary. Knowing where we come from, we can better orient ourselves and decide where we want to go. These first Marists have not traced us the path ahead: they invite us to invent, to continue the story they started.

We need to begin. Not just repeat, not only refresh, update to the taste of the day. There is freshness in the beginning. But we, we rather see around us fatigue, uncertainty, weariness.

This is not about a start or beginning anew, but about a beginning. We never finish beginning, as we never finish loving. Our forerunners have not given us, let alone forced, a program on us. They gave us a direction. It is not enough to hang the formulary of Fourvière on the wall of our bedroom or community room. To begin is not to draw a balance sheet, rather it is to do as Abraham did, of whom a Christian author said he left not knowing where he was going, and that is why he was going in the right direction!

Somehow the promise of Fourvière is before us, not behind. We need to make this promise with our own words. It is up to us to discover the truth, the fruitfulness it holds for us today.

We do not know what the future holds: Neither did they.

We do not know what each one of us will become in the coming years. Neither did they. What we do know, what we do believe is that we must - like them – let ourselves be configured by Mary. That we need to reach out to others in loving them, in loving Life. Our commitment together, in body and soul, will be the best way to honour the promise of Fourvière.

This is not about arriving, but rather about setting out!