

SOMETHING THAT SUITS YOU.

I wouldn't like any of you to be under the impression that these constitutions we have were written just by the preparatory committee of Gaston Lessard, José Rodroquez and myself. At the 1985 chapter, the constitutions were completely rewritten by the chapter itself. The preliminary work did not have an easy passage through the chapter and every number was revised and rewritten. So these constitutions are really the work of the 1985 chapter.

There are five chapters, and I have roughly divided the work of each day of this retreat according to each chapter. Of course, we cannot exhaust the riches of each chapter just in one day, but perhaps we can do some of the highlights.

The second chapter of the Constitutions has to do with formation. But in case you think, "Well my novitiate was a long time ago and I don't need to worry about that," I still think we should pause today and consider some of the things that are said about formation because they're still relevant for us today.

When we were doing the preparatory work, I clearly remember Gaston one day wondering how Fr. Colin and the early Marists became Marists. None of them made a novitiate. All of a sudden, in 1836, bingo, they are professed. They made a profession all right, but what lead up to that? What changed them from being good baptized Christians to being good baptized Marist Christians?

He said there was a process and for him, it was symbolized in three significant moments you might say, and he called them Fourviere, Cerdon and Bugey. Fourviere: vocation; Cerdon: tasting God; Bugey: mission. Going through that process, they gradually became Marists until in 1836 they were able to make their profession as Marists.

In chapter three of the Constitutions, right at the beginning, there's a paragraph which merely summarizes what's going to be dealt with in that chapter. But then the very next paragraph, n. 92, there's a very important principle that applies to all of us and it's worth starting today by reflecting on that.

"Marists are called, above all, to make their own a Marian vision of the Church." They're very important words, "To make their own a Marian vision of the Church." To see the Church as Mary sees the Church. We dwelt a little on this yesterday. It's very important that we somehow or other try to look out on the world, look out on the Church as Mary would, with eyes of compassion, with the eye always alert to the neglected, the unhappy, to the one in danger of being lost.

We've also been told that we should make our own a Marian version of the Church. It is part of our vocation to enable the Church to bear the features of Mary and that is its deepest essence.

"To achieve this, nothing will be as effective as a reliving of the founding experience of the Society." That is how we get a Marian vision of the Church, by reliving for ourselves, in our time and in our way, that experience that Colin and the pioneers went through.

"Like the twelve young men at Fourviere they respond to a special call, something over and above the call God gave us at our baptism. By 'tasting God' as Father Colin did at Cerdon, they realize the radical opposition between the spirit of Mary and the spirit of ambition, covetousness,

and the lust for power. Like the first missionaries in Bugey they proclaim the Good News of God's mercy to those most in need. Thus in continuity with the experience of the first Marists, the Society of Mary, generation by generation, becomes a reality in the word and its members know the joy that comes from a whole-hearted response to their vocation."

So this is not just a novitiate experience. It is an ongoing experience for all of us as we daily seek to renew our Maristness.

If you reflect on your novitiate, you should be able to discern that indeed, you did have a Fourviere, Cerdon, Bugey experience. That's how you became Marists and that's what links us back to our early pioneers. That's the program for every novitiate.

This idea did not have an easy passage through the Chapter. There was quite a bit of spirited opposition, particularly from our French confreres. They felt it was impossible to reproduce in the twentieth century, experiences of so far ago. Moreover, what was so special about Fourviere, Cerdon and Bugey? Why not Le Puy, Belley, Oceania for example?

Well, we just shrugged our shoulders. You can't answer those questions, but of course there's no question of trying to reproduce exactly the experience the pioneers had. We're not so much talking about historical events as rather symbolic moments. It's what is meant by these three places that is so significant. It's the meaning of the experience which we have to, as it were reproduce in our lives, not copy, not slavishly imitate, but each one of us, and each new novice, should have an experience of his own which is analogous to the experience of our forebears.

That's the program of a novitiate. To create an atmosphere, to as it were facilitate for each novice, the chance to recognize his vocation, to discern what God is asking of him - Fourviere. To make sure that each novice has the space and the opportunity genuinely to taste God - that's Cerdon. Also, to come to grips with the sense of mission, of being sent by Mary to do her work - Bugey.

There's nothing very radical about that, that has always been the programme of every novitiate. It's not particularly original to the Marists to seek to reproduce the founding experience of each new member. For example, the Jesuits do the same, that's why they insist that their novices make the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the fruit of his own experience of God and sense of vocation and mission.

So let us spend today by contemplating and considering that first moment, Fourviere. What did Fourviere represent for Fr. Colin? First of all, for Fr. Colin, Fourviere represents a solution to a problem that he had, a dilemma. We know that as a young man he was a timid, shy individual whose first ambition was to hide out in the forest where he could be alone with God alone. That was his youthful, teenage dream, to be a sort of a hermit living in the forest.

He wasn't good with people, in fact I doubt that he was ever particularly good with people if you read between the lines at times, although people grew to love him very greatly and we do too.

He didn't particularly want to be a priest, he found going to the seminary as a way to escape the realities of having to live in the world, but as he went through the seminary, and ordination drew near, there was his problem. Once he got ordained, he was going to have to leave the safe haven of the seminary and go out into the world again.

An early account tells us that when Fr. Courveille first talked about the Society to his friends “the good father (Colin) was want to admire the impulse of the Holy Spirit which moved Fr. Courveille to make known the project of a Society of Mary. He said, ‘I would never have had the courage to noise this idea abroad. Later when it had become known, I could busy myself with it without seeming to be the originator.’” He also said, “This idea of forming the Society of Mary seemed very practicable to me, very useful.” (OM. 3:819.8)

We mustn’t think of those days in the seminary that the little Society of Mary was the only club being formed. There were groups of students forming to do all sorts of apostolic works. We know that there was great pressure put on our early Marists by the Vicar General of the diocese to join his pet project.

“Very often, someone wanted me to join this work or another, but right from the moment when Fr. Courveille made the project of the Society of Mary known, I said to myself, ‘There’s something that suits you and so I joined them.’” (OM.3:819.9) Thus when Fr. Colin heard Courveille talk of the Marist project, his heart leapt, “There’s something that suits you,” which fits for you.

The words about Mary being the support of the Church provided the space he was looking for, the desert in the midst of the city. So it was a solution to his problem. Somehow or other, he saw that the Society of Mary was going to be the place where he fitted most comfortably. He was uncomfortable with the idea of being a parish priest, an ordinary diocesan man in charge of the care of souls. No, this little Society in which he could hide but nevertheless, which would do great work in the name of Mary, as it were hiding behind her, was just what he wanted. He felt comfortable with it, it was his place.

Now this reaction of Fr. Colin should evoke in each one of our hearts a similar sort of feeling, response. For that’s the essence of our vocation. The Society of Mary is something which suits us, which suits me, it fits. I can’t really see myself being a Jesuit, or a Dominican, even though they’ve got a lovely place here! It just sort of not right. But being a Marist, yes, it’s like a comfortable pair of jeans, they sort of hang on right, they suit. That’s important, that sense of a rightness for me. It doesn’t have to be right for everyone else. I don’t think that everyone should be a Marist in the same way that I am.

So, each one of us today, should be reflecting on the story of his own vocation and how he came to realize that the Society suits me, it fits; we were made for each other, as it were.

That sense of comfortableness, not in our lives, we’re not meant to be comfortable, I know that. - it’s meant to be a tough life! Nevertheless, it’s meant to be right for me, that’s the idea. Each one of us should have that sense because that is the reassurance that indeed God is calling and I am responding.

So, the Society of Mary is that place, that space where I work out my salvation, that path along which I make my journey to God. It’s the context within which my own pilgrimage is made.

So, a call, a vocation from God is not, at least in my experience, isn’t a voice from on high saying, “Come, follow me.” Some of you may well have had that, there may well have been a dramatic change in your life like St. Paul being knocked off a horse. But that’s relatively rare.

What's much more likely to happen, at least on a psychological level, is that our vocation is a sort of attraction, prompted by the Holy Spirit. The Society of Mary attracts me, it seems right for me. That for most of us is the psychological basis of our vocation. That is so much the work of novitiate, enabling a novice to discern whether or not the Society is the right place for him. Whether or not this where God wants him to be. The Society of Mary is where my destiny lies, so where can I join as we journey together to God?

So for Fr. Colin, first of all, Fourviere symbolized a solution to the dilemma, the problem, "What shall I do with my life."

But Fourviere also represents not only a solution, but also a resolution. Unlike us, Fr. Colin was in a different situation: the Society of Mary didn't exist. At least for you and I, there was a going concern to join. For him, it was merely an idea in the mind of the rather excitable Fr. Courveille. So, he also had to resolve to do something, to make sure that the Society of Mary existed, that there was a place in which he could be comfortable, that there was a space which suited him.

As we know, that's the resolution he took and the rest of his life was devoted to realizing that idea; making the Society of Mary exist. This project was now to unify the rest of his life. It gave him purpose and direction. It gave him great courage and as we know, he dedicated all his energy to the founding and direction of the Society of Mary.

What gave Fr. Colin the power to carry this decision through was not simply the fact that it corresponded to his personal wishes. It ran much deeper than that. It flowed from his belief that in trying to carry this project through and making it a reality, he was responding to Mary's desire. That's what gave him the energy. Mary wanted her Society. She wanted a Society bearing her name, prepared to do her work of which she would be the superior and others would be merely the facilitators of her will.

Now something similar or analogous though has to happen with us. We too cannot be content with merely seeing the Society as the place which suits me.

That brings a corresponding obligation to make sure that the Society of Mary continues to exist. There's no Society of Mary without us, just as there's no Church without the people of God. We are the Church here in this part of the world. We make up the Society of Mary, and the Society of Mary is not really a received. It's something that we have to fashion and make. If we don't, it's going to disappear. It demands an active response from us.

We make the Society of Mary and if the Society of Mary is healthy and a going concern today, it's because we have made it so, in response to Mary of course. If it's a bit sick and tired and ailing, it's because we are sick, tired and ailing. There's no greater Society of Mary floating out over there in New Zealand, Australia or in Rome, here in Boston!

The Marist project cannot be something outside of me which I join. It's something which I join together with others to make. That has to be done generation after generation. We can no longer rely simply on the energies of Fr. Colin and the pioneers. We've been living off their legacy too long. Generation after generation, the Society of Mary has to be refashioned anew, drawing its energy from the old roots that are Fr. Colin and the pioneers but the new shoots are alive today.

For each of us, Fourviere represents our call from God and our response in terms of the decision to refashion, refound the Society in our generation. It's the place which suits us but it is also our responsibility to create for today.

This was well presented for us by those early pioneers who made the promise of Fourviere. Those twelve young men, a mixture of newly ordained priests (ordained the previous day) and seminarians. The twelve of them who were so enthused at the prospect of being Mary's sons and doing her work that they wanted to fulfil her wish and found the Society that she wanted. They promised to do so at the shrine of Our Lady of Fourviere in Lyons up the hill.

Unfortunately, we don't know the names of those twelve pioneers. We can only be certain of six of them (although Coste thinks he might know a seventh). In fact, of those twelve, we also know that only five persevered through to make profession. They are glorious names: Colin, Champagant, Declas, Terrailon, Jallon and Courveille himself. They are the six we know of. Those first five made profession and persevered through. The other seven may or may not of. We just don't know who they were.

Fortunately, we still have this earliest document from our foundation, the Fourviere Pledge, and it's worth looking at again today. The language is early nineteenth century. If we were doing it today, we wouldn't write it quite like that, but it's rather significant that even from these early time, there are very key ideas which persevered right through to the end and by which we live by today.

Our motto is there, "All for the glory of God and for the honour of the Mother of God." That's our motto, that's what we're here for. Our motto is not "hidden and unknown."

They declared their sincere intention and firm will to consecrate themselves at the first opportunity to founding "the holy congregation of Maryists."

They don't do it foolishly or lightly, or for hope of material benefits but seriously and maturely and having taken advice, (they were good seminarians!) and having weighed the issue with God solely for the greater glory of God and the honour of Mary.

"We pledge ourselves to endure sufferings, hard work, difficulties and if need be torture" – youthful enthusiasm there.

"Because we can do all things in Christ Jesus who strengthens us."

We promise fidelity to the pope – our third end of the Society. But also notice "to the local bishops, the ordinary" – the *tanquam suam* is making its appearance" and that's what keeps our feet on the ground because it is the bishop rather than the pope who gives us the concrete, the local church. That's why it's so important that we have this attitude towards the local bishop because that's the church, the concrete reality in which we work.

Finally "we solemnly promise that we and all that we have will be spent in the salvation of souls by every kind of apostolate in the most august name of the Virgin Mary and with her help."

A simple program, simply said but yet we probably couldn't describe our mission better today. "We solemnly promise that we and all that we have will be spent in the salvation of souls."

There are other ways of saying it today, but all our energies, all that we are, all that we have is spent in God's work for the kingdom.

“By every kind of apostolate” – we're not specialists in just this or that, but wherever there's a need.

We do it in the name of Mary because it's her work and we can do it only with her help.

That's Fourviere still very important for us and it calls us to reflect on the story of our own vocation and our own relationship to the Society of Mary.

Source: Fr. Pat Bearsley, Video Conference 3, Boston Province Retreat, 1994