

Witnesses from the Past, Hope for the Future: A History of the Marianist Family in Times of Persecution and Hardship

by Gabrielle Bibeau, nFMI

A cursory glance at the current state of the Church in our world would uncover a Catholic, Christian Church that is often lacking in hope. There are, after all, many problems for the Church to lament—fewer religious vocations, more young people who no longer practice their faith, the ever-present reality of global violence, greed, and corruption, continued mistrust of Church leaders in the wake of the abuse crisis...the list goes on. The Marianist Family is not exempt from being lukewarm in hope. We certainly do, at times, adopt a negative and cynical outlook on our present situation. I believe every generation has a tendency to think that their age is the most hopeless, the most lost, evermore sliding into chaos and uncertainty. Such a viewpoint causes one to look at the past with nostalgia, yearning for simpler, more peaceful days. However, a closer look at the history of the Church—and especially the history of the Marianist Family—shows that the past was not simpler or more peaceful. In fact, there were many more situations of great danger and persecution during which the Marianist Family, against all odds, showed amazing hope and faith.

My thesis in this paper is that, in light of our history of weathering religious persecution, strife, and martyrdom with tremendous trust and courage, the Marianist Family must take seriously our present call to be people of hope for the future and of faith in God's Providence. In this paper, I will examine different times in our history under which the Marianist Family—particularly the Daughters of Mary Immaculate—was forced to operate under dangerous and grave circumstances of religious suppression and violence, namely, the French secularization of the early twentieth century (which almost wiped out the Marianist Sisters), and the First and Second World Wars. By examining these different events, I hope to show how being people of hope and faith is part of the DNA of Marianist Sisters, not to mention the Marianist Family as a whole. Upon examining several of these events in the history of the Sisters, some of which almost destroyed the congregation entirely, we will be able to see how our existence for 200 years has been miraculous and not without great sacrifices and faith in God.

Daughters of Mary and Twentieth Century French Secularization

The hostile, anticlerical attitude that presented itself during the French Revolution never completely went away and eventually had a devastating impact on religious orders at the turn of the twentieth century. This began with the July 1, 1901, regulating associations (enacting state control of Catholic religious orders) and culminated in the 1904-05 laws that officially outlawed Catholic religious teaching orders. As Sister Lucia Ubbiali, FMI, explains in her book, *Suppression of Religious Orders in France*, the response of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in France at this time showed tremendous courage, especially on the part of congregational superiors, namely Mothers Mechtilde, Stanislas, and Therese de Saint Joseph.

After the French Revolution, in the Third Republic of France, Catholicism was still seen as part of the *ancien regime*, allied with the nobility and against all the ideals of a constitutional republic (Ubbiali, p. 2). Especially problematic for the anticlerical political leaders was the influence of Catholic religious orders in schools. As a result, the first major step in eliminating the influence of these orders came in 1901, with the law requiring all religious congregations in French schools to be authorized by the government. Those who were unauthorized were forced to vacate their schools and close up their communities. The Daughters of Mary already had received authorization from the government in 1825—however, six of their individual community institutions in France, which had been created since then, were not officially authorized (Ubbiali, p. 45). Although the Sisters appealed to the government for these six works to be authorized, their appeals failed—in 1903, these six communities were forced to close, and their assets were seized by the government. Then, on July 7, 1904, it became official—no religious teaching order may exist in France. Every teaching community would have to close, and their schools and community buildings were taken over by the government. Later that same month, the FMI motherhouse in Agen received notification that it had until October to close its doors (Ubbiali, pp. 58-59).

The secularization laws launched the Daughters of Mary and every teaching order into great turmoil over how to respond. While many priests and bishops encouraged women religious to return to their families and to continue working at the schools like they had before (indeed, some FMI did decide to return to their families), the FMI did not find such a response acceptable for two reasons, as Ubbiali writes: “the religious had given herself to God first of all, and not to the works; and such a position lost sight of the fact that it is the religious life which supports

necessary abnegation and cohesion of the community, which in turn supports the functioning of the works” (p. 95). Thus, completely abandoning the life of a religious, including her vows, in order to continue working in schools, was not an acceptable corporate response for the FMI.

Instead of encouraging their sisters to return to their families in order to keep teaching, the FMI embraced two other options. One was sending some Sisters to found communities in other countries where they could freely live their religious life and perform their works. During this time period, the FMI were able to send some of their Sisters to other countries ready to receive them, first to Spain and Denmark in 1901, Switzerland in 1903, Belgium in 1909, and Sardinia in 1904 (Ubbiali, p. 142). However, this was not the primary response of the FMI because it was not possible for all of the sisters to be sent abroad, nor was it desirable to completely abandon their schools in France. Instead, the primary response was to outwardly secularize in order to continue working in their schools, while living in community and maintaining their religious life as much as possible. This mainly meant giving up the religious habit, returning to their baptismal names, and giving up cloister (Ubbiali, pp. 98-100). In many situations, the Sisters continued to live together (typically in boarding houses or apartments) or near one another, secretly living the life of a religious community, trying their best to avoid public speculation that they were living a clandestine religious life.

Such a response to these circumstances is marked by heroic actions on the part of FMI leaders, especially Mother Mechtilde, who took it upon herself to act as spiritual guide for these “secularized” sisters, facilitating communications between their communities and even hosting secret retreats (Ubbiali, p. 112). Looking at her activities, one can see how the Sisters did their best to maintain their faith in God during such difficulty by living the best religious life the circumstances allowed. A new rule was drafted that conformed to their new situation of external secularization, and this rule gives keen insight into this mindset:

At all costs, we must preserve the religious life... Those who believe it is necessary to sacrifice the religious life in order to save the works suffer an illusion. Sacred commitments bind us to God, and no power whatever can suppress them... Our enemies would like to destroy the congregation and thus strike at the Church. Without our help, they cannot succeed. (Ubbiali, p. 100)

The sisters continued to live their religious life in the worst of circumstances, largely without close contact with each other or with their superiors. During this time, the Superior General, Mother Stanislas, was forced into exile in Spain. She would never again return to her French homeland, as she would die in exile in 1908 (Ubbiali p. 124). In 1909, the novitiate and General Administration (led by newly-elected Mother General Therese de Saint Joseph) moved to Nivelles, Belgium, due to the greater freedom that they would have operating the congregation from there. However, the congregation was plunged into even greater uncertainty when there was a great lapse in communication between the motherhouse in Nivelles and the rest of the congregation, caused by World War I. In fact, for a period of four years, the rest of the Sisters in France had very infrequent indications of the status of their motherhouse. In the years 1916-1917, word reached the sisters in France that three members of the General Administration in Nivelles, including the Mother General, had passed away (Ubbiali, p. 139). Because no General Chapter was possible during the war, the Sisters continued doing their work and living their religious life without any direction or guidance from their General Superiors.

Despite these bleak circumstances, these women were filled with a tremendous hope and faith in God that allowed them to continue living their religious life. For one thing, despite the many location changes of the novitiate, formation of postulants and novices continued as usual, though in secret. One incredible story is from the clandestine novitiate in Antony, France, during the years before the novitiate and motherhouse moved to Nivelles in 1909. Because there was no chapel space in Antony that the sisters could use, the secularized sisters used a large room in the nearby school to conduct ceremonies such as investiture of the habit for novices; however, when using this room, the sisters always made sure that the windows were covered and the keyholes stuffed with cloth in order to avoid peering eyes (Ubbiali, p. 157).

Throughout this time period, these horrible circumstances inspired great confidence in God. As an anonymous chronicler noted in her annals, regarding the passing of the centenary of the FMI, "The situation is a sad one, but it is not desperate. We are living this May 25, 1916, in an invaded city, occupied by the enemy. Providence...envelops its care the least of the beings it has called into existence. It watches with great love over our little family" (Ubbiali, p. 139).

Indeed, the existence of the FMI 100 years later is a great testament to the working of the Holy Spirit and to the protection of Mary. In 1901, at the time the secularization began in France, there were 258 Daughters of Mary Immaculate, not including 28 novices (Ubbiali, p. 40). At the

time, all of these Sisters were in France and most of them were teaching. During the secularization, more than a few sisters left the congregation to return to their families. Although some sisters escaped to other countries to begin new foundations, all of those foundations failed—none of them existed past 1922. In hindsight, the French secularization should have wiped out the Marianist Sisters; it would have been easily done. The FMI was a small congregation that only existed in one country, which was deeply anti-Catholic. However, largely due to the heroic actions of sisters like Mother Mechtilde, and to the 1921 merger of the FMI with the Third Order of the Daughters of Mary in Auch (who, because of their work in hospitals, lost fewer sisters and institutions in the secularization), the Marianist Sisters are still here, 100 years later.

Daughters of Mary During World War II

Even after World War I, the Marianist Sisters once again had to exhibit tremendous bravery and faith to continue living religious life during the horrors of the Second World War. When the Germans occupied Northern France in 1940, all the sisters north of the armistice line fled to the unoccupied territory of Southern France, including the novitiate and General Administration. However, around 1942, some sisters began crossing over the line to return to their community homes. Getting permission to cross the line was very difficult, so Mother Adèle Guy, the Superior General, often would cross the armistice line in disguise—such as by dressing as a grape harvester or other farmworker—in order to visit the communities in the North (Baillet, p. 159).

The Sisters returned the novitiate to Sucy-en-Brie in 1943, only to flee again six months later when the Allied bombings of Paris threatened their community. One sister, a novice at the time, recalls her experience of the novitiate moving from Sucy to a rural family home that would be more protected from the bombs. There, eleven novices and six postulants, accompanied by their novice director, Mother Marie Elisabeth Bouvert, attempted to have a relatively normal novitiate experience—communal prayer, work, class, and daily Mass (which meant a 3 kilometer/1.8 mile walk to the nearest parish). Meanwhile, the sisters lived under the constant threat of starvation and of bombings, which they so greatly feared that the sound of a plane overhead would cause them to take shelter in a nearby ditch. As for food, one of the sisters would travel on bicycle each day to obtain milk and bread for everyone. The sisters also foraged

for mushrooms, grew potatoes, and scraped up semolina pudding, which would offer something to ease the pain of hungry stomachs. After four months of this novitiate in the woods, the Allies reached Paris, liberating France from German occupation and allowing the novitiate to return to Sucy-en-Brie (“Un novitiat dans un Château”).

This experience of novitiate is an incredible witness to the desire of these young novices to pursue their vocation, even if it meant hiding in the woods and enduring starvation. It also demonstrates the ingenuity and willingness of sisters to care and provide for these young vocations, so confident they were in the future of the FMI. Somehow, by God’s grace, these women were able to maintain faith, hope, and good humor as they suffered many hardships.

Works Cited

Baillet, Marie Luce. "La Congrégation Des Filles De Marie Immaculée 1816-2016: Sur Les Routes Du Monde En Alliance Avec Marie." N.p.: n.p., n.d. PDF.

Ubbiali, Lucia. *Suppression of Religious Orders in France*. Trans. Joseph Stefanelli. Dayton, OH: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 2004. Print

Virion, Marie De L'Eucharistie. Un Noviciat Dans Un Château. N.p.: n.p., n.d. DOCX.