

Why Are There Two “Societies of Mary”?: Notes on the Origins of Marianists and Marists

by Timothy Phillips, SM (Marianist) and Alois Greiler, SM (Marist)

[*Editor’s Note*: This material first appeared in *Marianist Soundings*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 3-12.]

Devotion to Mary, which in the designs of Providence is supposed to characterize the last times and to give those times the primitive fervour of Christianity, has inspired in a great number of pious people, from the beginning of this century, the idea of consecrating themselves as religious under the auspices of this august Virgin, Mother of God. Several families have been formed. The principal ones, those who have had the greatest growth in the first half of this century, are the Society of Mary of Lyons and the Society of Mary of Bordeaux. The members of the first are called Marists, those of the second Marianists, and in spite of this distinction, they are perpetually confused.

Father Jean Philippe Auguste Lalanne, Marianist, first companion of Chaminade, in 1858¹

The Founders

After 1813, France saw the (re-)establishment of many religious congregations. Prominent examples for a restart are the Jesuits (1814) and for the many new Marian congregations of priests, brothers, sisters and laity are the Marianist and the Marist families. Did they know each other?

William Joseph Chaminade (1761-1850) lived around Bordeaux, with a period of exile in Saragossa, Spain. The official foundation date of the Marianist brothers and priests is October 2, 1817. Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) and Marcellin Champagnat (1789-1840), the Marist founders, were born later but had contact with Chaminade. In between lies the French Revolution of 1789, a watershed for political and religious life. Chaminade represents the generation from before and during the Revolution, while the Marists represent the generation after the Revolution. The Marist brothers were founded January 2, 1817, and the Marist priests and lay brothers on April 29, 1836.

All founders shared a sense that there is a new era, needing new ideas. Their response was a religious family: priests, brothers, sisters, and laity. Their concept was “mission” in various forms: working with laity, schools, home missions, education, and foreign missions. “Mission” was intended to win back to the Catholic faith those who left it either for another denomination or who did not live it or deepen it. “Mission”

¹ Jean Philippe Auguste Lalanne, SM (Marianist), *Notice historique sur la Société de Marie de la congrégation de Bordeaux* [AGMAR 17.8. 1-4] (Collection “La Gerbe,” 3), edited by Ambrogio Albano, SM, 1995, p. 12.

abroad meant to win people for the true faith and to evangelize them before other Christian denominations would do so. “Mission” reached out to all, thus various branches were started: priests, brothers, sisters, and lay. Religious life, schools, and seminaries became places of formation in faith after the upheaval and dechristianization of the Revolution. Faith was to fight atheist philosophy; Mary inspired the manner of acting, the way of being Church, and represented God intervening “in this last age”; mission was the aim; and religious community guaranteed mutual support in this enterprise.

Different Background and Origins

The Marianists grew out of a sodality of mainly lay people, but also seminarians and priests. The vocation is to be religious and then to specify a ministry—as working brother, as teaching brother, as priest. There was only one Founder to accompany the male branch from origin to establishment. The emphasis was on religious life and teaching in primary schools, with the priests at the service of their community.

The Marists grew out of a group of seminarians that became diocesan priests but had a common vision, the Society of Mary, originally with all branches under one superior general. Being priests, they found themselves separated in various parishes and two dioceses. Champagnat quickly established a branch of teaching brothers and made profession as a Marist priest in 1836. Colin worked on the constitutions and Church approval, and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn started the Marist sisters. They accompanied lay people with an interest in Marist spirituality. In the course of time, various factors led to independent religious congregations: Roman interventions, diocesan interventions, very different developments of the individual branches, and different understandings of the precise role of each. The various groups did not merge with non-Marist congregations, as the founders wanted to keep common bonds. There were many forms of cooperation in France and in their mission in western Oceania. The second half of the nineteenth century only saw the Church and state approval of all Marist branches.

Why Are There Two “Societies of Mary”?

The term “age of Mary” (P. de Clorivière, SJ,² c. 1800) was in the air, and nineteenth century France was a “Marian” age. The postrevolutionary era had a strong eschatological overtone for many Catholics, and they believed Mary was to play an important role “in these last days.” Also, the strict Jansenist tradition and a weak Christology favored devotion to Mary, the mother of mercy, in the quest for salvation. Many congregations sprang up employing one or another

² On “de Clorivière” and this term, see J. Coste, SM (Marist), *Lectures on the Society of Mary History, 1786-1854* (Rome, 1965), pp. 14-23; on de Clorivière in general, see *Recherches autour de Pierre de Clorivière. Actes du Colloque* (18-19.10.91), S.I.P.S., Paris, 1993.

Marian attribute. From 1773 to 1814, the Society of Jesus was officially forbidden in France and most other countries. This created a gap in view of lay sodalities, and also in view of a name “Society of” In fact, the Marists modeled themselves to some degree on the Society of Jesus, with “Mary” indicating a different spirit. Marianists and Marists took on much of the apostolic work of Jesuits: home missions, education, working with laity, and foreign missions. For Joseph Simler, biographer of Chaminade, it was coincidence and difference in aim:

By a singular coincidence another Society of Mary was founded on almost the same date in Lyons by a zealous priest, Father Colin. It was not until much later that the two founders and the two orders came to know each other. There seems to have been talk of a possible merger of the two, but apparently their purposes were sufficiently different to justify the separate existence of the two societies.³

Simler could accept that various groups, though similar, could fight for the same good cause:

Other congregations of men, like the Oblates of Mary Immaculate of Bishop de Mazenod, the Little Brothers of Mary of Father Champagnat, and the Sons of Mary Immaculate of Father Baudouin, were founded simultaneously at the dawn of the century. Although these societies were guided by different inspirations, they all merit their existence as so many distinct phalanxes under the one standard of her who will preside over the new struggles and the new triumphs of the Church.⁴

The landscape of new religious congregations in France shows many new foundations, often with similar pastoral aims and spirituality. The factual isolation of villages or regions and the lack of modern communication favored similar initiatives in various places. Gradually, some groups merged, but others continued because they felt they had a distinct charism. Many groups struggled to get state and church approval, which again sometimes favored a merger.

Did the Marianist and Marist Founders Have Contact with Each Other?

The founders had some contact, not in person, but via letters. Our first document is a letter from Colin to Champagnat from November 13, 1832. There may have been earlier communications, but we have no proof. Contacts are documented in both congregations.

³ Joseph Simler, SM (Marianist), *William Joseph Chaminade: Founder of the Marianists* (Dayton, Ohio: Marianist Resources Commission, 1986), p. 268, with fn. 22.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 268. For references to the letters by Chaminade: MRC (ed.), *Letters of Father Chaminade*, 8 vols., 1976-93.

The first contact was on a possible union between the Society of Mary of Lyons and that of Bordeaux, or Marist Brothers of the Hermitage in the diocese of Lyons and the Marianists. Chaminade had written to Colin and described the aims of his Society of Mary (Bordeaux).⁵ It seems that Colin thought their aims were different, and he did not think about a possible union between the two Societies of Mary, with Colin thinking about the priest's branch. There are further indications of contact via letter and of possible unions:

Our venerated Father testifies himself that he had been "very closely connected" with Venerable Father Colin,⁶ and in 1832, the latter wrote to Venerable Father Champagnat, founder of the Marist Brothers or Little Brothers of Mary: "I cannot make the voyage. . . ."⁷ It seems there was even the question between the founders on different occasions, of joining the two religious families together.⁸

Such unions were not uncommon, but they did not work out between Champagnat, Colin, and Chaminade. Simler felt, for bigger groups, such mergers were not necessary, not for Chaminade. "The Founder had to display all his firmness when proposals for a merger came from various teaching societies. A great number of them were created under the Restoration to procure for the country villages the benefit of a Christian education. In addition to the Brothers of Ploërmel and the Little Brothers of Mary, founded by men not only of great virtue but also of experience and talent, other less favored congregations were seeking more solid foundations."⁹

Colin was prepared to meet Chaminade in 1832. As he had no time then, he advised Champagnat to go to Agen, where Chaminade stayed.

⁵ *Origines Maristes* (= OM and volume) I, doc. 255, especially the footnote: Letter Colin to Champagnat, 13.11.1832. The letter from Chaminade has not survived. Presentation for example in Stephen Farrell, FMS, *Achievement from the Depths. A Critical Historical Survey of the Life of Marcellin Champagnat, 1789-1840*, Drummoyno, N.S.W., FMS, 1984, 158-59. See also OM IV, p. 498: Poincelot, Marianist (1807-92), remembered Chaminade contacting Colin about a union after learning about this foundation and after some of his men left. The contact was made but no union resulted, and Chaminade promised to stay with his men.

⁶ Letter to M. Caillet, February 1844.

⁷ Cf., above Nov. 13, 1832. . . . "From the documents in question we can see that Father Chaminade knew as well Venerable Father Champagnat, Founder of the Little Brothers of Mary or Marist Brothers."

⁸ See *Apôtre de Marie*, XIII, 137 (April 1922), pp. 373-75. Simler, *Chaminade*, p. 270, fn. 22: "Both orders have proof of the relations of Colin with Chaminade. Chaminade wrote to Father Caillet in 1844 that in the past he had been closely associated with the General of the Marists. Father Gautheron affirms (Nov. 7, 1899) that Colin had spoken to him about a merger of the two Societies of Mary, but that the respective ends of each appeared too different to permit this fusion." (Cf., Letters of Caillet to Chaminade, Aug. 2, 1838; from Father Colin to Father Lagniet, Feb. 7 and Dec. 17, 1844; from Chaminade to Caillet, end of 1844; from Father Gautheron to Father Plazenet, reporting a conversation with Venerable Father Colin, Nov. 7, 1899.)

⁹ Simler, *Chaminade*, p. 392.

For Champagnat, some form of union with the Marianists, who had state approval from 1825, would have been helpful in his search for state approval for his teaching brothers. The Lyons diocesan administration was not in favor of a union between the Hermitage brothers and the brothers of Bordeaux.¹⁰ They hoped that state approval for the Little Brothers of Mary would come soon. Also, they preferred not to lose this flourishing institute to another diocese. Chaminade and Champagnat shared the emphasis on teaching.¹¹ They were “little brothers” in primary schools in smaller villages. The “grands frères,” the de la Salle brothers, taught in bigger schools, in secondary education, in towns and cities. Later the Marianists moved more into secondary education and into cities. Then they were called the “Society of Mary of Paris.”

The Marist priests took over the shrine at Verdélais, in the diocese of Bordeaux, the diocese of origin of the Marianists, in 1838. In a letter to Archbishop Donnet of Bordeaux written on August 14, 1838, Father Chaminade writes: “I have learned, Your Excellency, that the Society of Mary of Lyons is seeking to establish itself in Bordeaux and in the diocese. I am really delighted over the fact and at the thought that it will be realizing the good I was unable to accomplish.”¹²

The note on this letter states (on the Marists’ coming to Verdélais): “This is the first time that there is question in the correspondence of Father Chaminade of the Society of Mary of Lyons or of the Marist Fathers, but the relations between the two Societies and their Founders were of longer duration, and there was even question, several times, it seems, of uniting the two religious families.”

Chaminade often reflected on their spirit, different from other religious, but did not mention the Society of Mary of Lyons . . . for example in the famous letter to the retreat masters of the Marianists.¹³

Marist Father Lagniet lived at Verdélais for some years. He must have asked Colin how to handle the fact of two different “societies of Mary.”¹⁴ On February 7, 1845, Colin wrote to him and mentioned that he did not mind if Lagniet would see Chaminade. However, no mention of a fusion of the two congregations should be made. In 1851 the press announced the “Society of Mary” was granted permission by the Vatican to wear a ring. Some thought this was about the Marists, but it concerned the Marianists. Colin was aware of this confusion because of the same name.¹⁵

¹⁰ OM, I, doc. 256, especially the introduction: Letter Cattet to Champagnat, 30.11.1832.

¹¹ For the general background and details on both, as well as other congregations, see Pierre Zind, FMS, *Les Nouvelles Congrégations de Frères Enseignants 1800-1830*, St Genis-Laval, 1969.

¹² See Letter 1064, and *Apôtre de Marie*, XIII, p. 373.

¹³ Letter 1163, Chaminade to the Marianist preachers of retreats, Aug. 24, 1839.

¹⁴ Letters written by Colin during his generalate (CGC); G.Cl. Mayet, SM (Marist), *Mémoires*, vol. 10, 289-93.

¹⁵ DS, p. 512.

In 1863, Colin was referring to Chaminade.¹⁶ Chaminade was made to resign as Superior General of the Marianists in 1841 but claimed this was not a simple resignation and that he remained the Founder.¹⁷ Around 1863 Colin faced similar problems, and he referred in 1863 to the “affaire Chaminade” as a warning example, which was a sentiment echoed by Marist Father Maîtrepierre in 1870.

The Double Name “Society of Mary”

The Marianists won state approval via the ordinance of November 16, 1825.¹⁸ Therefore they bore the name “Society of Mary.” The canonical proceedings for approval of a new religious congregation changed in the first half of the nineteenth century. The pope would give letters of praise and indulgences first. The Marianists received letters in 1819 (Pius VII)¹⁹ and in 1839 (Gregory XVI).²⁰ Chaminade did not see final Church approval during his lifetime. Interesting to note is that the name “Society of Mary” was used for the Marianists, for example, in 1839 (Cardinal Lambruschini to Chaminade), three years after the canonical approval of the Marists, with no reference to such a society at Bordeaux as well as at Lyons. Thus, Rome used the title for both congregations without making distinctions. When they received final church approval in 1891, it seems that Rome accepted to approve a congregation with a name another approved congregation already had. Thus, both bear the same name and the same initials—something unique in the Church.

The generation after, the founders faced this confusing situation. The Marists, for example, on different occasions stressed the difference in spite of the same name. In 1880, after a state law against religious congregations, the Marists published a brochure for the public on who they were. “This Society started in 1816. From its beginning it took the name

¹⁶ OM III, p. 114: Colin to Dupont, August 1863, declaration on his role as founder; OM III, p. 488, Maîtrepierre.

¹⁷ On Colin’s difficulties see OM III; on Chaminade’s last years: Vincent Vasey, SM (Marianist), *Dernières années du Père Chaminade 1841-1850*, Rome, 1969.

¹⁸ *Letters Chaminade*, vol. 2, p. 163.

¹⁹ Pius VII, Brief of praise in 1819, granting indulgences to the various institutes of Chaminade: Simler, *Chaminade*, p. 283; Reference in Letter 1074, dated September 1838. The applications are in *Letters*, vol. 1, L. 109-11, where the name “Society of Mary” is not used. The papal brief of 1819, AGMAR, does not use “Society of Mary.”

²⁰ Simler, *Chaminade*, pp. 496-500: In September 1838 he sent the outline and asked for approval, together with letters of recommendations from bishops. On Apr. 27, 1839, a decree of praise was issued, followed by indulgences and other signs of benevolence: See, Chaminade, *Letters*, 1074-76 to Pope Gregory XVI, Bordeaux, Sept. 16, 1838: no. 1074, Pius VII has granted a brief for the Marianists, May 25, 1819; nos. 1075-76, presents the Constitutions of the two institutes, women and men, “in the spirit of St Benedict, adapted to the needs of our times,” and asks for approval; no. 1171, Apostolic Benediction by Gregory XVI, Aug. 8, 1839, with a letter from Cardinal Lambruschini, Aug. 29, 1839, using the name “Society of Mary” for this institute. A similar case dates from 1849.

Society of Mary, later confirmed by the Holy See. . . . It is completely different from the Society founded at Bordeaux by Chaminade.”²¹

Sometimes this took on a polemical tone. Father Mayet, chronicler of Colin, added a note to a text by Marist Maîtreperrière on the origins of the Society. “The name Society of Mary is found in all letters and the papal brief. Now, since it is the Holy See that baptizes congregations and not human governments, no other congregation can dispute us having this name, even so civil authority may have approved them under this title.”²²

For the Marists, it was the Church “baptism” that counted, not a name approved by a government.

In 1949, Marist Paul Roman (1883-1969) reflected on the two founders and their work.²³ He underpins the contemporariness of Chaminade and Colin, and that both shared a focus on Christ and Mary. The difference in personality and a different emphasis in their view of Mary make clear that we deal with two different Societies of Mary. While Chaminade postulates *ad Mariam per Jesum*, Colin puts it the other way round, *ad Jesum per Mariam*. This formula reflects the Marian character of the time of the founders as well as of the year Roman was writing. He says their aim was the same, but the means to reach this aim were different. Both wanted to support Mary in her apostolate in “these last times.” Seeing other congregations doing the same is not a reason to be jealous or in rivalry, rather a challenge to be more zealous in one’s Marian consecration. Besides common elements both in spirituality (Marian) and apostolate (teaching), already the founders perceived differences.

Summary

The existence of two societies of Mary reflects the many initiatives of apostolic religious in France with a Marian character, springing up in different places and yet somehow similar in spirituality and apostolate. There were various contacts among the founders. However, they felt the charisms of the two congregations were distinct enough and opted against a union. It also would have become difficult because of the attached branches of teaching brothers and sisters. The problem of two congregations existing under the same name was felt and commented on. The situation was accepted for how it was, even by Rome. Rome created something unique in the Catholic Church: two different congregations, but with the same name and initials. Both Societies grew and contributed greatly to the renewal of the Church in France, to the foreign missions, and to a Marian Church. Lalanne was prophetic in his statement that they will be “perpetually confused.” This, however, should not prove a problem, but rather a call to zeal and witness for the respective vocation.

²¹ OM III, p. 706.

²² OM II, pp. 722-23, Maîtreperrière’s notes from 1850, Mayet’s addition from after 1854.

²³ Paul Roman (Marist), *Marianistes et Maristes*. Guillaume Chaminade (1761-1850) et Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875), in *Acta SM* 1 (1951) pp. 9-14.