

Chapter one: *How it all began*

The Opening Move

It all began on 4 July 1835, not quite a year after the first Picpus missionaries had sailed from Valparaiso, Chile, for the Gambier Islands in the South-East Pacific. Cardinal Frasoni, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome, usually referred to as *Propaganda*, wrote to Jean-Louis Pastre, a titular canon of St.-John's cathedral in Lyon, inviting him to consider an appointment as head of a new mission to be started in the South-West Pacific. Pastre was known to Propaganda as the former prefect apostolic of the island of Réunion (at the time: *Île Bourbon*) in the Indian Ocean. Rome had reasons to think that he had not given up the idea of working as a missionary. Also, asked Frasoni, would you think it possible, in case you accept, to find, especially in the archdiocese of Lyon, good priests to join you in the venture?¹ Although Frasoni had been a member of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars in 1833/1834 when it dealt with (and turned down) the application of Jean-Claude Colin for approbation of the Society of Mary, and although he even may have met Colin at that time, nothing in the letter suggests that he now had the Marists specifically in mind.² Lyon was known for its numerous vocations and for a widespread interest in the foreign missions.

Pastre spoke with the Apostolic Administrator of Lyon, Archbishop Gaston de Pins³, and regretfully answered the cardinal he would have loved nothing more than to accept the offer, but that, given his age and his health, he was quite unable to take on so awesome a task: 'It would take another Francis Xavier!' He felt sure he would have gotten the support of several bishops, especially that of the administrator of Lyon, 'but at my age...'. The archbishop forwarded the answer to Frasoni and in his covering letter he confirmed that Pastre would gladly have accepted, but that, given his age and his health, he was indeed unable to take on so arduous a responsibility. He also confirmed that he would have done his best to support Pastre, *de tout mon pouvoir*.⁴ And he left it at that.

Twelve years later, Gabriel-Claude Mayet, the faithful chronicler of things Marist⁵, recorded what happened next. Two days after writing to Frasoni, Pastre, distressed by his inability to accept the offer of Propaganda, ran into one of the vicars general of Lyon, Jean Cholleton⁶, at the cathedral after Mass. He told Cholleton about Frasoni's request and about the negative answer he unfortunately had been forced to give. Would the vicar general not know a priest whom Pastre could propose to Propaganda? Yes, Cholleton is said to have answered, I know a zealous priest who wants to devote his life to the missions: *Monsieur Pompallier*, and he belongs to a new Society. This is what Mayet wrote

¹ OM I, doc. 337. Wiltgen, *The Founding of the Roman Catholic Church in Oceania, 1825 – 1850*, p. 54f.

² If that had been the case, Frasoni would probably have approached Colin directly (or his bishop) as he had done in 1833 with Marin Ducrey, whom Frasoni knew to have even fewer possibilities than Colin. Cf. Kerr, *op. cit.* pp. 283, n. 15 & 16, and below, p. 10.

³ OM IV, pp. 333 ff.

⁴ OM I, docs 338 & 339.

⁵ On Mayet, cf. OM II, pp. 15 – 37.

⁶ OM II, p. 489, n. 1. On Cholleton cf. OM IV, pp. 230 – 233. In 1824 Fr. Terrailon called him *notre homme de confiance*, the man to whom we entrust confidential matters, OM I, doc. 115 [3]. Cf. also OM I, p. 826, n. 1.

in 1847 as something he had heard from Cholleton himself.⁷ However, that cannot be the whole story.

But first, who was this *Monsieur Pompallier*?

Jean-Baptiste-François Pompallier was born on the 1st of December, 1801, in an upper middle class family in Lyon. About six feet tall, handsome, gifted and charming, he moved with grace and self-assurance in the higher classes of society. He tried the novitiate of the Jesuits, but returned to the diocese and entered the major seminary of Lyon in 1826, where he was ordained a priest in June 1829. At that stage he already had expressed a desire to join the Marists and one of them, Étienne Séon, even took his place as a curate in the village where he was appointed, so as to allow him to join the community of Marcellin Champagnat and his Brother-candidates at the Hermitage, which he did in September 1829. He was with the Marist priests when they elected Jean-Claude Colin to be their central superior in September 1830. With Colin's approval he moved in 1832 to Val-benoîte, and in 1833 to Lyon, where he was director of the so-called *Frères Tertiaires* and became the rector of a boys' school at la Favorite. He moved with ease in and out of the archdiocesan offices and was particularly close to the vicar general, Jean Cholleton, to whom he had confided that he was interested in the foreign missions.⁸

Bypassing Colin

From the very beginning Cholleton had been a warm supporter of the Marist cause. As a professor at the seminary of Saint-Irénée, he had encouraged Courveille and the little group that Courveille gathered around him. As vicar general he looked for some years after the Marists' interests at the archdiocese. He shared their desire for the pontifical approbation that would make them free to develop as an autonomous congregation, independent from the bishops. He too must have been worried by the fact that more than a year after Colin's return from Rome (March 1834), no answer had come to the request for that approbation. As a seminarian he had volunteered for the missions in Kentucky, which explains his special interest in the foreign missions. He was held back for higher studies.⁹

When Pastre told him of the letter from Rome, Cholleton probably already knew from the archbishop. As an experienced administrator Cholleton would have seen a golden opportunity to get the papal approbation. He had no doubts that the energetic and able Pompallier was the right man to lead the venture and that the enthusiastic young Marists perfectly fitted Franson's description of the good priests needed for the mission. Cholleton was familiar enough with the Marists to know that in an eventual official election Colin would, in all probability, become their superior general. He could have referred Pastre to Colin, but he did not. Pastre had approached him as the vicar general and Cholleton went to see Archbishop de Pins.

Like Cholleton, de Pins was a warm supporter of the Marist project. No sooner had he taken over the administration of Lyon than he gave Champagnat's teaching Brothers the status of a diocesan congregation. He did what he could to obtain their approval by the civil authorities. For the priests too he had a warm heart, but only in the perspective of a diocesan institute under his authority. Cholleton proposed to the archbishop to mention

⁷ OM II, 657.

⁸ There is some doubt as to the year Pompallier was born, 1801 or 1802, cf. OM IV, pp. 337 – 339. L. Keys, *The Life and Times of Bishop Pompallier*, pp. 22f. E. Simmons, *Pompallier, Prince of Bishops*, pp. 23 & 29. On Pompallier and the Frères Tertiaires, cf. C. Girard (ed.), *Maristes laïcs* (ML), doc. 4.

⁹ M. Catet, *Vie abrégée de l'Abbé Cholleton*, p. 14.

Pompallier to Pastre as the man to put forward for the mission in Oceania. De Pins, who liked the gifted and charming Pompallier, enthusiastically agreed.¹⁰

At this stage at least, the obvious thing would have been to involve Colin. However, unlike his vicar general, de Pins did not want the Marists to become a pontifical congregation and the Marists had proceeded to elect Colin to be their central superior without his permission. As to Pompallier, he was a priest of the archdiocese of Lyon and Colin was a priest of the diocese of Belley without any official standing in the matter. One can understand that de Pins would not have wanted to involve Colin and Cholleton could not do so without the bishop's agreement.

Moreover, Cholleton had other good reasons to leave Colin out. He was possibly the only one to know that Colin had on one occasion (probably after his stay in Rome in 1833/1834) already been asked to accept a foreign mission, but had turned it down because the Society had not yet been approved: a good reason to fear that, left to himself, Colin might do the same thing again. As to Pompallier, Cholleton must have known that he would most likely not be Colin's first choice¹¹.

What did Colin have against Pompallier?

When Pompallier joined the Marists after his ordination in 1829, all of them, including Colin, would have welcomed him as a great asset to their Society. He took part in preaching parish missions and was sincerely committed to the Marist project. However, it did not take long before he did things that irritated Jean-Claude Colin. Although the junior priest in the Hermitage community, he took it upon himself to write detailed rules and

¹⁰ Kerr, op. cit. p. 281, simply takes the account of what happened as written down by Mayet in 1847 (OM II, doc. 657), and leaves it at that. From the fact that de Pins took no action other than forwarding the letter, we can infer that it was not the archbishop who picked up the project or first thought of Pompallier. That leaves Cholleton. Colin repeatedly said he consulted Cholleton on all matters (OM I, doc. 358, 1 and footnotes). We can therefore safely assume that Cholleton knew of the earlier offer of a foreign mission, even if the other Marists did not. We only know it from Colin's later letter to Pompallier (OM I, doc. 340 [1]). Hence the conclusion that Cholleton bypassed Colin for fear that Colin might again let the opportunity slip by. This was not the only time people did this to Colin. Mother Saint Joseph is known to have done the same thing (Anon. *Recueil Mère Saint-Joseph* {RMJ}, p. 197, n. 7). Colin's pronounced supernaturalism (cf. Greiler, *Inspiriertes Leben* {Colin Studies I}, pp. 1 – 26) made him see the immediate hand of Providence in anything that happened or that others did, and making him reluctant to take the initiative himself, for fear of acting – as he often said – *humano modo* (cf. FS, doc. 14 [18] & doc. 175 [27]). We can also be sure that Cholleton did not propose Pompallier to Pastre without the consent of de Pins. Firstly because no vicar general would. Secondly, de Pins would not have given the mission project his warm support, had he not been properly involved from the beginning. Therefore only Cholleton can have been the first one to lay the link between the approval of the Society and the acceptance of the mission. Nothing else explains the emphasis given this linkage from the beginning. It could not have come from de Pins (who did not want it!) or from Pastre (who until then barely knew the Marists). And, at least in Mayet's account, Cholleton already hinted at it to Pastre before the latter had met with Pompallier. The latter's extraordinary emphasis on the link makes more sense if we assume that Cholleton was behind it. This reading of history comes nearest to the account of Benoît Lagniet, a contemporary of the events, in 1878-1881 (OM III, doc. 854 [37f] & final note on p. 768). Cf also Gobillot, *Vie du vénérable Jean Claude Colin*, I, p. 144, and F. Chovet in Maurey, *Physionomies maristes d'un premier siècle*, vol. *Cholleton*, p. 3). That is also how the origin of the mission was understood by the Picpus missionaries, cf. Lestra, *Le Père Coudrin*, III, pp. 425ff, and by Catet, op. cit. p. 20. Marist history has perhaps not sufficiently acknowledged the crucial role of Cholleton at this all-important moment in the Society's history. Interestingly, years later (1850), in his *Notice historique et statistique de la Mission de la Nouvelle Zélande*, p. 17, Pompallier himself ascribes the initiative entirely to Archbishop de Pins, without even mentioning Cholleton, who, in 1840, had joined the Society, with which Pompallier was then in conflict.

¹¹ A. Greiler & J. Taylor (*Peter Chanel*, p. 10) think that, given a chance, Colin would have presented Peter Chanel for the leadership position. Many things indeed point that way, e.g. the fact that Colin took him as a companion to Rome in 1833, and appointed him vice-superior of the minor seminary of Belley. Rozier (*S. Pierre Chanel d'après ceux qui l'ont connu*, Rome, 1991, p. 31, n. 3), concludes from a remark made by Colin, that he would not have considered Chanel the 'caractère ferme' needed for the position. We can only guess.

regulations.¹² When Pompallier and the other priests, against the wishes of Marcellin Champagnat, decided to leave the community of the Brothers and form a community of their own in Valbenoîte, near St. Étienne, Colin agreed¹³, but, again, Pompallier took it upon himself to write a rule.¹⁴ Colin was not happy. He felt they should live Marist religious life before codifying it, ‘running faster than Providence’ he called it.¹⁵ Also, composing a rule should not be done by one man, but by the whole group.¹⁶ Consulted about the choice of a superior, his confreres in Valbenoîte preferred Étienne Séon to Pompallier¹⁷, after which it did not take him long before he accepted, be it with Colin’s agreement, an appointment to chaplain of the *Tertiary Brothers of Mary* and of the school that some of them had founded in *La Favorite*. He went to live in the so-called *Tour*, near Fourvière, not far from the archdiocesan offices¹⁸ and immediately started writing rules for *The Tertiary Brothers of Mary*.¹⁹ Not long afterwards he got into conflict with one of the founders, who was also the director of the school, Jean-Claude-Xavier Colard, who was forced to hand over the institution, leaving Pompallier in charge.²⁰ No wonder Colin had his doubts about Pompallier’s abilities as a leader of men²¹, and about his endurance in the face of adversities, as surely would come his way in Oceania.

Eleven years later, when problems with Pompallier were mounting, Jean-Claude Colin, then superior general of the Society of Mary, in the confidentiality of his council, snapped that it was the administration of Lyon that had proposed Pompallier to become vicar apostolic. He, Colin, had had nothing to do with it, ‘*je n’y suis pour rien!*’²²

In any case, after seeing de Pins, Cholleton, without contacting Jean-Claude Colin, went ahead and told Pastre that he knew a zealous priest who was keen to go to the missions and whom he would be pleased with (*il vous conviendra bien*): it was *Monsieur Pompallier*, chaplain at the boarding school of *la Favorite*. And, not unimportantly, he belonged to a new Society. Cholleton arranged a meeting between the two, Pastre was very impressed with Pompallier (*fort content*), and, if we must believe Mayet’s notes of twelve years later, presented Pompallier to Cardinal Fransoni.²³ Here again, Mayet (or Cholleton in his oral account to Mayet) skipped a few things. Pastre may have been inclined to pass the good news immediately to Fransoni. Perhaps Cholleton and de Pins expected him to do so, but somebody convinced him to wait, and under the circumstances that can only have been Pompallier himself, wanting to assure himself of the support of his confreres.

¹² OM I, doc. 209 [1]. OM II, doc. 625 [23].

¹³ OM I, docs 242 [2] & 255 [1].

¹⁴ OM I, doc. 224 (cf. introductory note); also, OM II, doc. 625 [25].

¹⁵ OM I, doc. 227 [2]. OM II, doc. 625 [25].

¹⁶ OM I, docs 222 [4] & 225 [1].

¹⁷ OM I, doc. 255 [1]. OM II, doc. 625 [24 - 27].

¹⁸ OM I, doc. 857 [8].

¹⁹ OM I, docs. 392 & 393. OM II, doc. 625 [27]. OM III, doc. 878 [20]. cf. LM, docs. 14 & 15. It is worth noting that especially the texts submitted by Pompallier in Rome show a remarkable affinity to early Colinian spiritual themes; e.g., in doc. 392: *siècle présent* [1], *la Très-Sainte Vierge et St. Joseph, qui ont été si religieux, au milieu du monde, sans paroître ce qu’ils étoient* [17].

²⁰ Although written in the heat of later controversy: OM IV, doc. 909 [4].

²¹ Wiltgen, op. cit., p. 122 is of the opinion that ‘Colin was in favour of Pompallier, having encouraged him as early as 3 August 1835 to accept responsibility for heading the mission, because “at the present moment I can think of no one else but you who can fill the position that is offered to you”’. A rather glum recommendation that, in my opinion, taken in the total context, rather betrays Colin’s unease. Given that the prestigious position was already offered, what else could Colin do or say?

²² OM II, doc. 641.

²³ OM II, doc. 657 [2].

Immediately after the interview with Pastre, Pompallier, also bypassing Colin, rushed to consult his fellow Marists.²⁴ He went to Valbenoîte, where he could meet with Pierre Colin, Claude Bret, Jean Forest and Claude-Marie Chavas. It is not excluded that he also went to Saint Chamond where his friend Terrailon was the parish priest and to the nearby Hermitage, where he could meet with Marcellin Champagnat and Catherin Servant. He received an enthusiastic response, but somebody must have reminded him that they also had a superior. In any case, he rushed back to Lyon to keep Pastre a bit longer from writing to Fransoni, and addressed a letter to Jean-Claude Colin. The fact that, at this crucial point, instead of going to Belley personally, he wrote an awkward letter, confirms that relations between the two were not easy.

Colin and Pompallier

Pompallier's letter to Colin has not been preserved, but this is how he quoted himself in a letter to Marcellin Champagnat a bit later:

You know what my purpose is in this important matter as I also made clear to *Monsieur Colin* in Belley. The mission itself, if I may put it this way, is in my mind of secondary importance. Obtaining the approbation of the Society, or at least permission to bring it under one central superior, is the main thing. If that happens, I shall be happy to leave for the ends of the earth, to those islands of the Pacific, and those poor savages who do not yet know Our Lord, but who, it is said, are well disposed towards the faith. Let us pray the Good Shepherd that everything develops according to his holy will. It is necessary that my superiors propose me for being one of those to be sent, so that I feel assured. I find it hard to understand why the Lord has chosen me for so great a grace.^{25?}

It defies one's sense of proportion that somebody would consider the opening of a vast new mission field less important than the approbation of a small society, something moreover that at the time they had not given up hope of obtaining anyhow.²⁶ How else is one to read this letter than as an inept attempt to win over Colin?

The letter reached Belley when Colin was out of town for a few days. When he came home, he was faced with a double *fait accompli*! Through the action of outsiders the Society was on the point of being committed to a foreign venture of frightening proportions. While Pastre simply wanted to present Rome with someone to take his place as ecclesiastical superior of the new mission, for Colin the stakes were very high. Was it a feasible proposition at all? Would the loose group of Marist candidates support the project? Would enough of them be ready to commit their lives to it?

Moreover, the man already asked to head that mission, Jean-Baptiste-François Pompallier, was someone who would not have been Colin's first choice. That accepting the mission could quickly lead to the Roman approval of the Society was of course welcome news. All of this Colin had to learn from Pompallier himself, in a letter that must have struck him as remarkable to say the least.

²⁴ This is exactly how Pompallier himself, many years later, described the proceedings: 'I approached my confreres of the Society of Mary', *mes confrères de la Société de Marie* cf. Pompallier, p. 6f.

²⁵ OM, I, doc. 347 [5]. The letter is of 13 November 1835.

²⁶ In spite of the fact that, apart from the granting of some indulgences, they had heard nothing from Rome since Colin's return on the 21st of February, 1834 (cf. OM I, doc. 306), they still expected to receive at any moment at least the official permission to elect a central superior. Cf. OM I, p. 777 n. 1 & doc. 367 [2 & 4]: *le bref que nous osons toujours solliciter*.

He lost no time answering. The answer is from 3 August 1835. Gracefully apologizing for the delay, he does not waste a word on the unworthy suggestion that approval of the Society would be more important than the salvation of souls in the Pacific,²⁷ nor a hint of peevishness at the way things had been done. Without further ado Colin goes magnanimously to the heart of the matter: 'I would be delighted to see you undertake that foreign mission. Don't refuse what the Lord himself offers you. Be full of courage'. Pompallier must have mentioned the contacts he already had made with his confreres. Hence Colin's remark: 'The same Providence will give you associates'. And, just to restore the proper order of things: 'You will be of great service to the Society by devoting yourself to the salvation of those poor heathens. This committal is what God seems to ask of the Society'.²⁸ This was leadership at its best, and with a finely balanced judgment. He encourages Pompallier to accept what is offered to him, and to do it as a Marist. He gives him the green light to seek associates, but, he is not yet ready to commit the Society. At the same time he acknowledges that the course of events could indicate what God's will for the Society might be. In fact, he lets the membership decide, by volunteering!

Colin then takes Pompallier into his confidence by telling him that his agent in Rome (Trinchant) had not long before asked him to release men for a foreign mission venture. His answer had been that he was not in a position to accept as long as the Society had not yet been approved.²⁹

Only then does Colin come to the interests of the Society, and in a nearly casual way: 'If Mr. Pastre offers members of the Society to the Prefect of Propaganda to take his place in that mission, the offer will surely be well received, and can only be of advantage for the Society'.

Two points of advice for Pastre's answer: make sure he mentions the problem that you (Pompallier) have brought up (i.e., the matter of the pontifical approbation), and that he mentions the Brothers as well as the priests. 'Both (*les uns et les autres*) can devote themselves to that mission'. Colin broadens the perspective. Franson, and consequently Pastre and Pompallier, were looking for priests. Colin is looking at the Society that for him and for Champagnat comprises the Brothers as well as the priests. He wants to involve the Brothers, also to avoid priests being put on their own at isolated posts.

Then, cleverly trying to get a grip on developments, he adds: in case Pastre decides to go ahead and presents you as a member of the Society to take his place, let me know, so that I can get our agent in Rome to deal with Propaganda directly. Unfortunately, before contact could be made, the trusted Trinchant, who had acted as Colin's agent, died in Rome on 24 August 1835.³⁰

At the end, Colin's misgivings about Pompallier still get the better of him: 'I must however say to you, don't pull out as things move on. We would do ourselves a bad service at the Roman court. I trust that the good Lord will strengthen you in this calling. For the moment I do not really see anybody but yourself to take up the position that is offered to you. Thus, be attentive. Have courage and trust in God!'.³¹

²⁷ The hint was too gentle for Pompallier to pick up. He repeats it on several occasions: to Champagnat in February 1836, OM I, doc. 370 [3] and in a letter to Colin from Le Havre, LRO, doc. 4 [3].

²⁸ OM I, 340.

²⁹ This is the only mention in the available documents of such an offer. Nothing indicates that it was connected with Oceania, cf. OM I, p. 775, n. 1. The text suggests that Colin had not mentioned it to anyone (except, probably, his personal counsellor Cholleton, cf. above, p. 5).

³⁰ OM II, pp. 148 – 149

³¹ Wiltgen, op. cit. p. 107. Amazingly, Wiltgen reads what is clearly meant to be a monition, as Colin 'heaping praise on Pompallier's head'.

From Lyons to Rome

Pompallier gave Colin's letter to Pastre and also told him of the positive reactions of the confreres. There must have been at least four promising responses. Pastre judged that five men was just right for the first group. Anything bigger could provoke Protestant resistance.³²

Pastre or Pompallier must have informed Archbishop de Pins at this point and been given the impression that de Pins was prepared further to support the project. Hereupon Pastre, on 7 August, wrote again to Frasoni to tell him that after his letter of refusal he had spoken in confidence of the new mission with a priest of a certain Society of Marists that is expecting Roman approval, and that in many ways differs little from the Society of Jesus. That priest had spoken to his colleagues and had received the written support of his superior. Pastre decided that for the sake of the other matters mentioned by Colin to Pompallier, it was best simply to enclose Colin's letter. A clumsy move that Colin had not intended at all!

Strangely, Pastre did not mention Pompallier by name and he removed the covering sheet of Colin's letter, the only place with Pompallier's name on it. Proposing a replacement was so important for Pastre that this cannot have been an oversight. Whatever the reason, it meant that Frasoni for some months did not know whom Pastre had in mind to propose.³³ Before this second letter could reach Rome, Frasoni, on 15 August, answered Pastre's first letter (of 17 July) and asked him to help Propaganda by at least looking around for suitable workers for the new mission. The answer was already on the way. He could not have been served more promptly.³⁴

In answer to Frasoni's letter of 15 August, Pastre wrote on 2 September, outlining the different possible ways to travel to the Pacific, each with its advantages and disadvantages. He expressed a clear preference for the Eastern route, i.e. around the Cape of Good Hope, preferably by French naval vessels, but if necessary by English ships, that further on one will need anyhow. The British may not be very keen on helping Roman Catholic missionaries, but with letters of recommendation of the English ambassador one can get reasonable conditions. Unfortunately, as we shall see, neither Rome nor Pompallier listened to this experienced man.

'As to the missionaries, I thought that five would suffice for the first party. A larger number might complicate the first contact with people, which because of the language will be difficult enough as it is. Heaven forbid that the English Methodists arouse persecutions. This small number I could get together without even going outside of the diocese.'

Pastre got carried away to the point of forgetting to mention the Marists, so he added in a footnote: 'He (= the bishop) approves the offer of the Marists for the mission under consideration'.³⁵

Then something odd happened. Having received Pastre's second letter with the enclosed letter of Colin to Pompallier, Frasoni broke off the correspondence. Was there something in Pastre's or Colin's letter (that he should never have had in the first place), that

³² That Bret and Servant already showed a readiness we can guess from the fact that shortly later they were considered firm candidates. Forest was kept back by Colin, so he too would have shown interest (FS, doc. 172 [14]). Chavas was a very close friend of Bret, *son très intime ami* (LRO, doc. 19 [1]).

³³ OM I, doc. 341. The editors of *Origines Maristes* (doc. 340, introduction) suggest that it was by accident that Pompallier's name was left out, and the covering sheet with the letter removed. As Pastre was very keen to propose a replacement for himself, that does not seem very probable. More likely Pompallier, having sensed something of Colin's reticence, was becoming less sure of himself, and had asked Pastre to withhold his name for the time being.

³⁴ OM I, doc. 342.

³⁵ OM I, doc. 343.

put him off? Was it that the name was withheld? Did he get a whiff of Colin's misgivings about the unnamed person to whom the letter was addressed? Whatever it was, on 12 September Cardinal Frasoni approached Marin Ducrey, whom he already had contacted for Oceania in 1833.³⁶

On 22 September Cardinal Frasoni just as suddenly came back to the Lyon option, probably because he had in the meantime found out that Ducrey had died already in 1834. As if still a little uneasy about the Marists, he bypassed Pastre and ignored the Marists. He wrote to de Pins as if the whole affair was something between the Holy See and the Archdiocese of Lyon, which canonically speaking was the case anyhow. He thanked de Pins for his readiness to support the new mission and, with an implicit referral to Pastre's letter, adding that this could be done from that diocese alone (*ex sola ista Diocesi*). He promised to bring the archbishop's good intentions to the knowledge of the Sacred Congregation, 'which surely will be very pleased and grateful'.³⁷ Frasoni's letter was mislaid in the archdiocesan office. When, six weeks later, it turned up, Cholleton notified Pompallier who informed Champagnat³⁸.

On 20 November de Pins wrote to Frasoni that he would do his utmost to furnish very good workers (*d'excellens ouvriers*) for the Western Pacific. Having noticed that Frasoni ignored the Marists, and seemed to think that the diocese of Lyon alone could carry the full load, he now took it upon himself to involve them, adding that 'the Society of the priests of Mary that works with so much success in the dioceses of Lyon and Belley, and has applied for pontifical approval, could supply five or six good men immediately' and would ensure continuity. The Association for the Propagation of the Faith would give financial support. De Pins had evidently come to see that taking on the missions of Oceania was too big an undertaking for the archdiocese itself. It would take a religious congregation, and one of pontifical right. The mention of 'five or six' indicates that the news was spreading and that by then other names were circulating, also from outside the archdiocese. The mention of Belley, where at least Chanel had earlier on shown an interest in the foreign missions, points in that direction.

In spite of this explicit mention of the Marists, the clerk at Propaganda, in the usual summary, underlined the assurance of the bishop and left the Marists out.³⁹

Belley and Lyon

Nearly twenty years have passed now since the soul-stirring promise at Fourvière. Of the twelve or so who in 1816 had committed themselves to found a Society of Mary, only four were left: two in Belley, Jean-Claude Colin and Étienne Déclas, and two in Lyon, Marcellin Champagnat and Étienne Terrailon. Sixteen new ones had joined after 1816, all diocesan priests, nine from the diocese of Belley, seven from the archdiocese of Lyon. Both bishops were in favour of the Marist project, but both wanted the Society to remain a diocesan institute, under their personal sway, and for the benefit of their own dioceses. The request to obtain pontifical approval (and escape from diocesan control) had not been well received in Rome. In fact it had been turned down, but, without telling Colin (or

³⁶ Wiltgen op. cit. (p. 107) thinks that Frasoni may have been displeased with the way acceptance of the mission was linked to approval of the Society. As Frasoni himself would a little later offer approval to get Colin to accept the mission, that is not very likely. Kerr (p. 283) cannot think of any reason why Frasoni would have changed course so suddenly in a matter that was very important to him. *Origines Maristes I*, p. 777, n.2, thinks that Colin's letter '*ne fit pas mauvaise impression à la S.C. de la Propagande*'. *Mauvaise* may indeed be too much, but something must have put Frasoni off. On Ducrey, cf. Kerr, op. cit. pp. 282ff.

³⁷ OM I, doc. 344.

³⁸ OM I, doc. 347.

³⁹ OM I, doc. 349.

anyone else), Trinchant, his agent in Rome, had cleverly withdrawn the application before the refusal could be formalized into an official, and thus a practically irreversible, decree. As a consequence, the Marists in France had never received an answer from the Holy See, and had been left wondering why.⁴⁰

Some of them had reached the point of abandoning the dream of a pontifically approved religious congregation and were ready to settle for the diocesan bands of parish missionaries that their bishops had in mind. Colin himself wondered if he should not buy a house in Belley and bring all the men together there. Colin's preference may have reinforced the desire of a few men in Lyon to buy a house there. The Society of Mary was on the point of breaking up. Only Rome could solve the problem.

As he always did, Colin consulted Cholleton, who dissuaded him from throwing in his lot with Belley. In a passionate letter to Marcellin Champagnat, 19 January 1836, Colin expressed his appreciation for the loyalty of Champagnat and Pompallier, who, in the Lyon group, had opposed the local solution. They were the only ones with a truly religious spirit, he added; meaning evidently the only ones to appreciate what it meant to be a religious, something that did not come easily to men living for years the life of diocesan priests. Colin's reservations about Pompallier as the eventual head of the new mission did not make him less appreciative of the man's sincere commitment to the Society.⁴¹

After the letter of Archbishop de Pins of 20 November 1835 to Cardinal Frasoni, history seemed to repeat itself. As had been the case when Jean-Claude Colin returned from Rome in February 1834, the Marists in France expected action from Rome and nothing happened. As Pompallier wrote to Champagnat on 29 December: 'Rome is silent'.⁴²

By the end of January 1836, apart from the granting of some indulgences, Frasoni's letter of 22 September 1835 was still the last thing they had heard from Rome. We can safely assume that Pompallier had given vent to his impatience also to Cholleton and the Archbishop. The exciting prospects of a new large mission had become widely known. The lack of further news was unsettling for Pompallier, for Cholleton and Pastre, and for all those who had expressed a willingness to commit themselves. No wonder that the Archbishop found it necessary to put their minds at rest. In the diocesan council meeting of 3 February he declared that he intended to go ahead with the mission to Polynesia, but that, contrary to Frasoni's suggestion, and as he already had made clear to Rome, the men would have to come from Belley as well as from Lyon.⁴³ He might as well have waited a little longer. Within a couple of days, two letters from Frasoni reached Lyon.

Rome on the move

Rome may have been silent, it had not been inactive. De Pins' letter of 20 November had allowed Frasoni to take formal steps. A lengthy report on the Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts (Picpus) in the Eastern Pacific had already been drawn up for the meeting of the Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* that was held on 23 December 1835. Using

⁴⁰ OM IV, p. 175f. Kerr, op. cit. pp 270 – 278.

⁴¹ OM I, doc. 358, [2] & [4]: *c'est en vous et en Mr. Pompallier que j'ai le plus de confiance.*

⁴² OM I, doc. 353 [3].

⁴³ OM I, doc. 366. The editors of *Origines Maristes* assume that the council decision in Lyon refers to the letter of Frasoni of 23 January. If so, the decision of the archbishop is very odd indeed. If on the contrary we assume that this letter had not yet arrived (only ten days!), then the council was referring to Frasoni's letter of 22 September. The council had good reason to react to the growing unrest among the men concerned, of which Pompallier's letter of 19 December is an indication. The archbishop wants to reassure the men that the mission will somehow go ahead and he reacts to the fact that Frasoni (in his letter of 22 September) only spoke of priests from Lyon: a point he rebutted in the same way in his letter of 20 November. Not knowing that the mission had in the meantime been entrusted to the Society of Mary, the archbishop would understandably think that he was to direct the mission, provided he could draw on Marists from both dioceses.

letters from those missionaries of as recently as April 1835 the report went into great detail on what had been achieved, on the enormous problems of distance and travelling and on the resistance the missionaries had encountered. That resistance, the report said, is mostly instigated by the Methodists, who were already well established on the main islands. The report gives high praise to the courageous missionaries.⁴⁴

The document mentioned that the Picpus missionaries and their Vicar Apostolic, Mgr. Rouchouze, wanted their mission territory to be extended, so that they could move to islands further to the West in case they were forced to abandon the islands on which they were holding only a precarious foothold. This is what Rouchouze had already asked for before he left for the Pacific. Propaganda had turned the request down at that time, and it was not likely to come back on its decision now. Father Coudrin, their founder and superior general, opposed it as well. He feared to become overextended.⁴⁵

At the end of the report two paragraphs were added, evidently in haste, and badly researched.

The paragraphs mention the Society of Mary (*una Società detta dei Maristi*) as being able and willing to take up the new mission and to ensure continuity.

The report recommends the Society by saying it already had received a *Breve Laudatorio*, which technically was not correct.⁴⁶

The superior is said to be a *Signor Colai!*

The Society is said to differ little from the Jesuits whose organization and rules they follow (a simple quote from Pastre's letter).

An application for pontifical approval of the Society is said to be pending in Rome, waiting to be acted upon. Again a quote, this time from Archbishop de Pins. Documents from the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Religious would have shown that in fact the application for approval had been turned down the year before but had then been withdrawn before the refusal was executed in an official document. Evidently, communications between Roman departments was not always of the best.

Finally, not knowing that Trinchant in the meantime had died, the report recommends that the agent of the Society in Rome (mentioned in Colin's letter) take up the matter of the approval with the appropriate Congregation.

The report also notes that the name of the key figure among the Marists whom Pastre had dealt with, had so far been withheld.

As customary, the *Relator* then formulates the questions upon which the Sacred Congregation is expected to come to a decision.

The first question to the Congregation was, should the vicariate of Eastern Oceania be extended or should a new vicariate be established for Western Oceania? The Congregation opted for a new vicariate.

The next question was to whom the new vicariate should be entrusted. The cardinals decided to entrust this vicariate to 'the priests of the *Congregatio Mariana* of Lyon and Belley'.

To encourage the superior of the said *Congregatio Mariana* to accept, he would be given good hope to obtain the pontifical approbation that, it is said, the archbishop in Lyon as well as Pastre had recommended (which de Pins had not, at least not yet!).

Cardinal Castracane, who presented the case of the new mission, apparently recalled now that this was the same group he had dealt with in 1833 and 1834 in the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. It had then asked for the approval of a society

⁴⁴ OM I, doc. 352

⁴⁵ Jaspers, *Die Missionarische Erschliessung Ozeaniens*, p. 184; Wiltgen, op. cit. pp. 95 – 97.

⁴⁶ OM I, doc. 352. The reference to the *Breve Laudatorio* must refer to the letter of Pius VII of 9 March 1822, although this was technically not a *Breve*. Cf. OM I, 74, and OM IV, p. 500, note ad p. 809.

with four branches under a single superior. ‘Madness’, *un delirio*, he had called it. Colin’s letter to Pompallier that Pastre had added to the documentation, and that wanted to include the Brothers, probably alerted him. But nothing would change his mind: approval would be for the priests only.⁴⁷

On 2 January 1836 Castracane informed Mgr. Mai, the secretary of Propaganda, of the decisions taken. This time the staff had done their homework. Castracane now explicitly referred to the *Summarium Regularum Societatis Mariae* presented for approbation in December 1833, recalling that approbation at that time had been asked for a Society comprising priests, teaching brothers and sisters, all under one superior. He again specified that the prospect of approbation be proposed only for the congregation of priests.⁴⁸

One other matter to be defined were the boundaries of the new vicariate. The eastern boundary was where the Picpus mandate, including what today are the Cook Islands, ended. To the west it had to cover all the islands as far as, and including, New Zealand. To the north the new vicariate included the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides (today Vanuatu) and was supposed to go as far as what today are the Marshall Islands, ‘until they meet up with the few Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish missionaries who could be in the Marianas, the Caroline Islands and the Moluccan Islands’. At that point, and not for the first time, Propaganda was getting lost on the oceans, creating a confusion that was to last for years as to the exact boundaries of this huge vicariate of ‘approximately 8.000 kilometers long from east to west and just as long from north to south’.⁴⁹

Roma locuta...

The decisions of Propaganda were presented to Pope Gregory XVI. The official *relatio* would have the Pope believe that Propaganda had been dealing all the way with the Society of Mary and that it had subsequently thought it useful also to approach the Apostolic Administrator of Lyon. Fortunately, it added, the bishop has graciously promised his support in obtaining personnel as well as financial means.

The report ended: ‘The only question now is whether the superior *Colai* definitively accepts the mission’. And thereby the highest level in the Church acknowledged that Jean-Claude Colin, the man unofficially elected by his Marist confreres to lead the new Society, but left on the sidelines so far, was to have the final word.

Only then, the report concluded, would the question arise who was to become the Vicar Apostolic of the new mission. Rome at least takes things in good order.

On 10 January 1836 Pope Gregory XVI approved the decisions of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.⁵⁰

A momentous step

On 23 January 1836 Cardinal Frasoni informed Archbishop de Pins of the decision to erect a new apostolic vicariate (an ecclesiastical territory headed by a bishop) in the

⁴⁷ OM I, doc. 352.

⁴⁸ OM I, doc. 355

⁴⁹ These details are known from the *relatio* by Mgr. Mai for the Pope, OM I, 356 [3]. Propaganda had just invested in a huge new six-volume atlas, published in Brussels in 1827 (cf. Wiltgen, op. cit. p. 46). All the same, the writers of the different reports and decrees do not always seem to be well informed of the geography of those distant regions nor of what was happening out there. The same thing had happened in the late twenties when fantastic plans were worked out by de Solages and Peter Dillon to start a mission from *Réunion* in the Western Indian Ocean to Easter Island in the Eastern Pacific! Cf. Jaspers, op. cit. pp. 161 – 176, esp. p. 169 and further p. 181, n. 32; Wiltgen, op. cit. p. 126 & OM I, doc. 387 with note 1.

⁵⁰ OM I, doc. 356.

Western Pacific, and to entrust it to the priests of the Society of Mary, in the hope that they not only make a beginning with the mission but will in future continue to supply it with the necessary personnel. Frasoni asked the archbishop to exhort the superior not to turn down the offer (*hortandum ... ne detrectet*) and to let the superior know that he can expect in this way (*hac ratione*) papal approval of the congregation of the priests.⁵¹ The same day Frasoni also wrote to Pastre with the same information.⁵² He too was asked to persuade the superior to accept the mission, and was authorized to promise pontifical approval. The letters must have arrived very shortly after the council meeting of 3 February.⁵³ De Pins asked Pompallier to make a copy for Colin.

Now, Colin moved fast. On receiving the copy of Frasoni's letter he took the coach to Lyon where he met with Pompallier, Cholleton, Pastre and, probably, de Pins.⁵⁴

There was no doubt now of the support for the mission among the Marists. So, on 10 February 1836 Colin wrote, from Lyon, the momentous letter that determined the future of the Society of Mary and of the Catholic Church in the South-West Pacific. In answer to the request that the Sacred Congregation had addressed to the Society of Mary, and in accordance with the purposes of their Society, so he wrote, the superior and the priests of the Society gladly accept the responsibility offered to them by the Holy See, namely to open and maintain a mission in the Western Pacific.⁵⁵

Frasoni's letter had not mentioned Colin by name, but had referred to the 'superior of the said Society'. Colin still had no more than a provisional and ambiguous status. By signing the letter humbly as *Colin, priest*, but by referring to 'the superior and the priests', he ingenuously introduces himself as the one whom the Cardinal from now on will do business with. Gracefully stepping aside, Colin tells Frasoni that His Grace will soon have the honour of letting Propaganda know how many and which 'priests of the Society' were preparing themselves for the mission. In other words, whatever the diplomatic niceties, it is the Society of Mary that is sending them. But, not a word about the leadership position!

Frasoni had written of 'the congregation of the priests', the *congregatio presbyterorum*, but Colin deftly parried the innuendo by speaking of 'the priests of the Society', *les prêtres de la Société*. He stood his ground and held to his vision of what the Society of Mary wanted to be, i.e., a community of more than priests alone. Colin was a man of principle and a past master in letter writing.

Not having heard as yet from the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, the only instance competent to actually issue the pontifical approval of the Society, Colin appeals to Frasoni to use his good services to obtain the possibility of 'strengthening the ties that have united them (i.e. the Marists) in the pursuit of the same end'. He avoids being too specific, and flatteringly adds that His Eminence would thereby gain another right on 'our eternal gratitude'. Having said this, he tightens the screws by saying that approval would hasten the departure of the missionaries, which was what Frasoni wanted. The Society was now committed to Oceania, but its approval was so far only promised, and not by the department competent to grant it. Colin did not relish the prospect of running a mission in permanent negotiation with two bishops!

⁵¹ OM I, doc. 359.

⁵² OM I, 360.

⁵³ OM I, 366. Cf. above, p. 11.

⁵⁴ OM I, p. 843, n. 1.

⁵⁵ OM I, 368. On Colin writing letters, cf. P. Bearsley, *Father Colin on the Spirit of Faith, Spirit of Prayer, Humility and Self-denial*, in *Forum Novum*, vol. 4, nr. 2, p. 186 n. 1.

The clerk at Propaganda got the point. In the usual summary he noted the action required: 'The Superior of the Marists asks for the approval of the congregation, so as to expedite the sending of the men'.⁵⁶

Paying a visit to Canon Jean Pastre

The same day Colin went with Cholleton to see Pastre who showed him the letter he had received from the Cardinal. Together they drafted the answer that Pastre wrote and signed.⁵⁷

The Marist superior, writes Pastre, is determined to continue along the direction taken (*in sua propositione constans*). He will give full support to what has been agreed between Propaganda and the archbishop. In other words, Colin understands and accepts that so far dealings were between Frasoni and de Pins, but also intimates that he now takes over: the superior will let the Bishop know of five priests and two brothers for the mission.

In a few days, he has Pastre write, the Bishop will let you know which of the priests should, in his judgment (!), be in charge of the mission in Western Oceania. Once Cholleton had proposed Pompallier to Pastre, and Pastre had judged him eminently suitable, the appointment of Pompallier was a foregone conclusion. Naturally de Pins would also want to actually propose him. Colin steps back to let the archbishop take the honours. He thereby skilfully evades taking responsibility for something he does not support but can do nothing to stop. By having Pastre insert it, but not mentioning it in his own letter, he also carefully avoids waiving his right to propose a candidate.⁵⁸

From the day, in July 1835, that Pastre had approached Cholleton outside the cathedral, he had been anxious to propose to Propaganda someone to take his place as head of the mission in the Western Pacific. For seven months he had been kept back. This was his hour. Colin had no reason to stop him from doing what in fact was stealing a march on the archbishop. Cholleton may have tried. In vain. In any case, Pastre writes: 'Monsieur Pompallier is the man I have in confidence spoken to from the beginning'. Colin will have held his breath at the eulogy that followed: 'a man of godly science, prudence and zeal for the salvation of souls' (*hominem Dei scientia, prudentia et zelo animarum*). Science and zeal, certainly. But prudence?

Forging the iron while it was hot, Colin had Pastre add that Pompallier would not desire anything more than that the priests of the congregation be approved and allowed to elect a superior general before departing, which, as we know, indeed was very much in Pompallier's mind.

Vicar General Cholleton, Pastre adds, is looking after the expenses and I am getting further information about the route around Cape Horn. It must somehow have become clear to him that this was the route that Propaganda wanted.

⁵⁶ OM I, 368, [4]. Cf. OM I, p. 840, n. 4.

⁵⁷ OM I, 369. Apart from the style and the presentation of Pompallier, we can recognise Colin's hand in the wording 'the priests of the Congregation' instead of the 'congregation of the priests' as Frasoni put it to Pastre: *erectionem Congregationis Presbyterorum*.

⁵⁸ According to the editors of *Origines Maristes* (OM I, p. 844, n.2) it was up to Archbishop de Pins to propose to Propaganda a candidate for the leadership position, in fact for the person to become the vicar apostolic. This is a misunderstanding. Admittedly, it was Frasoni's own unusual approach that had aggravated the ambiguous situation in which not only Colin, but also de Pins and Pastre found themselves. By asking Pastre to propose someone for the mission, he had indirectly given him (and hence de Pins) the opportunity to propose a vicar apostolic, thereby infringing upon the privileged position of the superior general. The mission was entrusted to the Society of Mary on 10 January, conditional on Colin's acceptance. Cf. below, excursus A: 'The *ius commissionis* and the diarchy', p. 43f.

Pushing his own role in the proceedings he adds - in a footnote that looks as if it is thrown in after the two visitors left: 'I hope to send the chosen one (*electum*) to Rome': Pastre still feels he is running the show.

A personal appeal

Not satisfied with the appeal to Franson, Colin sent a letter, always on the same 10 February, also to Cardinal Castracane, who was a member of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars as well as of Propaganda. In spite of his rude rejection of Colin's project of a Society consisting of priests, men and women religious and laity, the two had become friends and Colin had a lot of confidence in him. Colin probably did not know that Castracane had been the *relator* at the meeting of the *Propaganda*. He tried a personal appeal.

Referring to the letter of Franson he tells Castracane that the priests of the Society are ready to accept the offer of Oceania with joy and gratitude. It is one of the aims of their Society.

Their joy would be incomplete, he writes, if they did not receive from the Holy See the brief they were still expecting (*que nous osons toujours solliciter*) allowing them to be united by religious vows. He refers the Cardinal to the statutes he had presented two years before, which the Cardinal can amend as he sees fit. This time, remembering the negative reactions he had received in Rome two years earlier, he adds, we ask for a brief of approval for the priests of the Society alone. For the good of the mission, says Colin, and before missionaries can depart, their Society that today is still subject to two bishops, and has only a provisional superior, urgently needs a superior general recognised by both bishops. And this, he says, cannot be achieved without an answer from the Holy See.⁵⁹

The appeal was no longer necessary. The crucial letter of Cardinal Sala arrived shortly after Colin's return to Belley.

Getting into action

Colin's day with Cholleton, the chance to talk with Pompallier, the visit to Pastre and, probably the visit to Archbishop de Pins, allowed them all to compare notes and to become clear about the steps to be taken next. Colin left it mostly to Cholleton and Pompallier to finalize the selection and the assignment of the priests in Lyon.⁶⁰

No sooner had Colin's letter, accepting the mission on behalf of the Society, and Pastre's letter mentioning him for the leadership position, been dispatched to Rome, than Pompallier openly began acting as the *chef de mission*. He again rushed to visit the Marists at Valbenoîte. There he saw to his great satisfaction that with the prospects of the new mission and the promise of speedy pontifical approval, the doubts about the future of the Society had melted away. All eyes were now on things to come.⁶¹

Back in Lyon, at the urging of Cholleton, Pompallier could write to Champagnat that feelings in Valbenoîte had improved and that doubts about the future of the Society had disappeared. He expected two or at least one man to volunteer for Oceania. He asked Fr. Catherin Servant (in the Hermitage), who must have made his intentions known earlier, to put in a formal application to the vicar general, Cholleton.

⁵⁹ OM I, doc. 367.

⁶⁰ As is clear from the fact that Pompallier asked Servant to apply formally to Cholleton, OM I, doc. 370 [4].

⁶¹ Cf. above, p. 11. OM I, doc. 370 [2].

Taking over the broader perspective introduced by Colin, Pompallier asked Champagnat to think of three or four Brothers from whom two could be selected for the first group to leave for Oceania.

In the same letter Pompallier informed Champagnat that a letter of Cardinal Sala, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, and competent to deal with the approval of religious orders, had reached Archbishop de Pins. Not unwilling to get the credit for a success, Pompallier is elated, that he had taken the challenge right from the beginning and drawn the Society into this mission, knowing all the time it would assure the approbation everyone had been anxious about for so long.⁶²

The Society approved

In the letter that Pompallier referred to, dated 28 January, Cardinal Sala writes he is sure the Archbishop knows that the earlier applications for approval of the Society had come to nothing (*vota in irritum cessere*) because of the intention of bringing several groups with diverse purposes together under one superior. In fact this was the first time anyone in France had heard!

As long as the Society is made up of ecclesiastics only, pontifical approval will not be a problem, the letter says. He waives the usual linkage between the approbation of a Society and the approval of its Constitutions that Castracane had insisted upon in 1833, by adding that the constitutions could be approved at a later date.

The Holy Father, concludes the letter, has given his approval to the plan to send the Marists to those far shores and the archbishop is urged to persuade the Marists with this pledge of approval, to go ahead with the mission.⁶³

On 4 March Archbishop de Pins wrote to Cardinal Fransoni. He confirmed what the Cardinal would have known already from Colin and Pastre, i.e., that the Marists were prepared to send five priests with two Brothers to Oceania and that they would assure continuity. The Marists ardently desire to see their institute approved by the Holy See, and they limit their request to the Society of the priests. For the first time he graciously gives his full support to a pontifical approbation: 'I have the pleasure to add my warm support to their request'. Shortly later he wrote a more formal letter of recommendation.⁶⁴

The departing missionaries will be led, he adds, by '*Monsieur* Pompallier, a priest of great merit and piety, whom I warmly recommend, and who can come to Rome if required'. On receipt of Colin's and Pastre's letters, but before de Pins' letter can have reached Rome, the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars met on 11 March - probably in a special meeting for this purpose - and formally asked the Pope to grant approbation to the *Congregation of the Priests of the Society of Mary*. The other branches of the Society, i.e., the Brothers, the Sisters, the Third Order and other groups of laity get an honourable mention, but are explicitly not included in this particular approval. The priests can make simple vows and elect a superior general. The approval is given in view of the mission in Oceania. Colin as superior of the Society of Mary, wants the Society approved before he can agree to let the five missionaries depart. Referring implicitly to the earlier refusal, the Congregation is asked to agree this time, especially since the request has been reduced to the approval of the priests only. The Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, under the presidency of Cardinal Sala, accepted the request.

⁶² OM I, doc. 370 [3].

⁶³ OM I, doc. 365.

⁶⁴ OM I, 373 [7], n. 3.

The very same day an official of the Congregation submitted the decision to the Pope and with the signature of Gregory XVI the Society of Mary became a religious institute of pontifical right.⁶⁵

The next day already, Cardinal Castracane wrote directly to Colin to tell him that the Sacred Congregation had granted the official approbation of the priests of the Society of Mary. This time Colin was the first to know.⁶⁶

The centre of decision shifting

Colin was happy enough not to disturb the existing pattern of management that Archbishop de Pins, Vicar General Cholleton, Pastre and Pompallier had been following in Lyon. On 24 March he passed Castracane's letter (of 12 March) to Cholleton with a few gentle suggestions of things the Archbishop might like to mention to the Cardinal, so that it would not differ from what he himself would write. He even added some other correspondence with Rome (today lost) on minor details, and asked that this be made known in Rome so that no-one would think that he did things on his own.⁶⁷

On 28 March de Pins wrote to the Cardinals Frasoni and Sala. He now more formally recommends *l'abbé Pompallier*, a priest of the diocese of Lyons and most worthy (*du plus grand mérite*), for higher office if this is what the Holy Father judges appropriate.

Initial costs of the mission, the Bishop adds, are estimated at 40.000 francs. The Propagation of the Faith has promised 15.000 francs. How much can Rome contribute?

Then de Pins gets the messages mixed up. He promises a rapid presentation of the rules, although, knowing that Cardinal Sala had not insisted on it, Colin was happy enough to take his time, as he had written to Cholleton. De Pins adds that the Marists were in no hurry to elect a superior general. Here too he was mistaken. If there was one thing Colin had learned from bitter experience, it was that nothing could be done without a clear chain of command.⁶⁸

Acknowledging now that the Society of Mary is in charge, the archbishop writes (in the same letter): the Marists are ready to send five priests and two Brothers. This indicates that the consultations and negotiations in Lyon, Belley and in the Hermitage were well advanced. On 11 April, Colin wrote to Champagnat to share with him all the good news. He reminds Marcellin to get on with the selection of the Brothers. 'They must be selected with the utmost care: good men, of assured virtue, well instructed in the faith and able to do all sorts of *petits travaux*. The departure could be sooner than we think.'⁶⁹

On 13 April Colin thanked Cardinal Sala for the approbation of the Society and told him that he is so busy preparing the departure for Polynesia that the final redaction of the rules will take a little longer.⁷⁰ Knowing that there was no longer a deadline, Colin was in no hurry at all. The Colinian Constitutions would in fact not be approved until 1872!

A Bishop for Oceania

On 17 April Propaganda asked Pope Gregory XVI to appoint Jean-Baptiste Pompallier to be the Vicar Apostolic of the newly erected vicariate of Western Oceania, entrusted to the "Society of the Marists" of Lyon. While calling him a member of the same Society, it states, very carefully, that Pompallier has been proposed and highly recommended for this

⁶⁵ OM I, 373.

⁶⁶ OM I, 376.

⁶⁷ OM I, 377.

⁶⁸ OM I, 378 & 379.

⁶⁹ OM I, 372.

⁷⁰ OM I, 380.

position by the Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Lyon and by Pastre. Both recommendations are quoted in full: ‘a man of exceptional piety and merit, a man of godly science, prudence and apostolic zeal, highly regarded by the clergy in Lyon.’⁷¹

When shortly afterwards Frasoni notified de Pins he described the appointment carefully as an approval by the Holy Father of the archbishop’s proposal. The absence of any recommendation by Colin had evidently not escaped the attention of Propaganda! Frasoni asks de Pins to send Pompallier as soon as possible to Rome for his episcopal consecration. He wants to know how much money is available, and promises to contribute whatever is needed to reach the 40.000 francs de Pins had considered necessary.⁷²

On 29 April 1836 Pope Gregory XVI signed the official document *Omnium Gentium* by which the Congregation of the Priests of the Society of Mary became a religious institute of pontifical right, and thus withdrawn from the authority of the bishops of Lyon and Belley.⁷³ The document reached Belley on 20 May and was received with great joy and solemnity.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The beginning of the missions in Oceania and the pontifical approval of the Society of Mary were by themselves two unrelated events. They could have taken place independently of each other. But, in actual fact, the two processes were closely intertwined. How the Marist missions in Oceania began cannot be told without the story of the approval of the Society, and the latter not without the former. This creates a special bond between the Society of Mary and the Church in Oceania.

Foreign missions were not what the originator of the Society of Mary, Jean-Claude Courveille, or the other members of the founding group in 1816, including Jean-Claude Colin, had foremost in mind. There is no mention of them in the Fourvière promise of 1816.⁷⁵ Only six years later, in the letter addressed to Pius VII from Cerdon, foreign missions were explicitly mentioned: they would go wherever the Holy See would send them, to whatever distant shore (*in quavis mundi plaga*), and to non-Christians (*sive ad infideles*).⁷⁶ This wording is a quote taken from Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, which does not make it a mere rhetorical phrase.

Jean-Claude Colin did not take the initiative to involve the Society of Mary in the new mission fields of the South-West Pacific. The one who took that crucial step was Jean Cholleton. He saw the possibility of linking the acceptance of the mission with the pontifical approbation of the Society that the Marists were still waiting for. On purpose, he did not involve Colin. He had good reasons to fear that Colin might let the opportunity slip by. Nothing indicates that Colin resented Cholleton having acted the way he had. It was the hand of Providence. Colin was convinced anyhow that Cholleton was the right man to lead the Society.⁷⁷

When in August 1835 Pompallier suggested that the approval of the Society was his primary objective, and the mission rather a means to that end, Colin ignored it as an unworthy remark. Nothing can be more important than the *salvation of souls*, he rebutted,

⁷¹ OM I, 382.

⁷² OM I, doc. 383.

⁷³ OM I, doc. 384. Cf. Jean Coste, *The Brief Omnium Gentium*, in *Forum Novum*, vol.2, 1, pp. 29 – 53.

⁷⁴ OM I, p. 900, n.2. Jeantin, op. cit. I, p. 289. On the date, cf. Gaston Lessard (ed.), « *Colin sup* » *Documents pour l’étude du généralat de Jean-Claude Colin 1836 – 1854* (CS), doc. 2, n.1.

⁷⁵ OM I, doc. 50.

⁷⁶ OM I, doc. 69 [3].

⁷⁷ Colin already thought so in 1824. Cf. OM I, 100 [9]. Further indications, cf. OM IV, p. 594: SH 367.5.

which, with the sanctification of its members, is what the Society is founded for.⁷⁸ If Oceania is one place where Providence wants the Society to pursue her goals, then Colin accepts it wholeheartedly. To Cardinal Fransoni he can truthfully write that the Marists ‘gladly take this favourable opportunity to fulfill one of the goals they have set themselves’. And if in that way the Society gets pontifical approval, so much the better.

All the time Jean-Claude Colin was in an ambiguous position. The two bishops in whose dioceses Marist priests worked, knew very well that he had – unofficially – been elected the central superior. Bishop Devie in Belley more or less acknowledged his position, Archbishop de Pins in Lyon mostly ignored him. His own men usually deferred to him, but also went their own way if it suited them. Nowhere do we see a sign of hurt feelings when other people bypassed him or ignored his position as superior. Mostly he let things happen. Even his own acceptance of the mission he let depend on whether the Marists volunteered. His pronounced supernaturalism and his determination to respect episcopal authority made him see the hand of Providence in what people around him did, but that did therefore not lead him to take responsibility for things he could not agree with (such as the promotion of Pompallier). On one point he was quite adamant: no missionaries were to leave until the Society of Mary was freed of the bishops’ authority and governed by a central superior of its own. The good of the mission and of the Society demanded it.

Even when the missions of Western Oceania were entrusted to the Society, and the Society was officially withdrawn from episcopal jurisdiction, he did not mind the archbishop and his vicar general together with Pompallier arranging things connected with the first departure. Colin’s presence was unobtrusive but real enough. His discreet style of leadership assured a smooth and gradual shifting of authority without losing the support of any of them. His main concern was the spiritual readiness of his men.

The main objective of the Holy See was to get missionaries for the Western Pacific. The opening words of the decree of approbation, *Omnium gentium salus* (the salvation of all peoples) are a reminder that among all the possible ministries and apostolates the Society may undertake, and that all get due recognition in this founding document, it was its universal missionary commitment that obtained for the Society the official status it holds within the Catholic Church.

⁷⁸ It goes a bit far to say, as does M. Filippucci (*Missionaries by Charism or by Convenience*, FN, vol. 2.1, p. 81) that ‘they accepted it on the promise of juridical recognition’. Kerr, op. cit. p. 314 f suggests the same where he writes: ‘When, with the quest for missionaries for Oceania, the possibility of a breakthrough emerged, he acted decisively, committing his tiny group to a mission encompassing an enormous swathe of the globe’. Roach, *Venerable Jean Claude Colin and the Mission in New Zealand, 1838 – 1848*, p. 6, quoted in the same sense by Jaspers (op. cit. p. 187, n.7), goes even further by saying of Colin: ‘To accept the mission on condition of approval of the Society, that was the plan’. Larracy makes it worse when he says (*Saint-Making. The case of Pierre Chanel of Futuna*, FN, vol. 5.4, p. 447): ‘...when the Vatican (sic!) offered the Marists the islands of the Western Pacific as a field of operation, Colin readily agreed in order to expedite approbation of his society’. These descriptions fit Jean Cholleton. They fail to do justice to Colin’s restrained approach that always gave priority to the mission itself, and that saw the approval of the Society as a welcome, even necessary adjunct.