

Marist Iconography

Investigating the Marist Crest: 1 Precursors

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Organisations express their identity through symbols. They need to distinguish themselves from other similar bodies. The name of the group is a key identifier and often this will be associated with a “logo” – a pictorial device used to mark or stamp official paperwork. The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of symbolism and an elaborate bureaucracy that demands letters and documents be appropriately validated. A well-chosen symbol that is evocative of the group it identifies can have a great impact, most especially on the members themselves.

Jean-Claude Courveille, recounting his 1812 vision, forty or so years after the event, described the Virgin Mary as saying:

“Here ... is what I want. I have always imitated my Divine Son in everything. I followed Him to Calvary itself, standing at the foot of the Cross when He gave His life for man’s salvation. Now in heaven, sharing His glory, I follow His path still, in the work He does for His church on earth. Of this Church, I am the Protectress. I am like a powerful army, defending and saving souls. When a fearful heresy threatened to convulse the whole of Europe, my Son raised up His servant, Ignatius, to form a Society under His name, calling itself the Society of Jesus, with members called Jesuits, to fight against the hell unleashed against His Church. In the same way in this last age of impiety and unbelief, it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be another Society, one consecrated to me, one which will bear my name, which will call itself the Society of Mary and whose members will call themselves Marists, to battle against hell...”¹

Thus, right from the beginning, Marists understood themselves to be somehow in parallel with the Society of Jesus, but operating under the banner of Mary rather than that of Jesus. The monogram of the Jesuits was widely known, then and now. It consists of the first three letters of the Holy Name of Jesus in Greek (iota, eta, sigma) in



¹ December 1853. Mayet/Courveille. Narrative on the origins of the Society of Mary, based on letters of Dom Courveille of 1852. [Mayet C4, 2649-2661 = OM 718, 1-21]

their medieval Latin form (IHS). The IHS and devotion to the name of Jesus in that form preceded the foundation of the Jesuits. They have picked up and used a well-known Catholic symbol. In their monogram the IHS is surrounded by a “glory”, a “sunburst” reflecting the unofficial motto of the Society of Jesus: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – To the Greater Glory of God. In their monogram the Jesuits are giving glory to the holy name of Jesus. Above the IHS is the cross – in the jargon of heraldry the example shown has the “*crux patée fitchy*” (Arms taper wider, the base is sharpened to a point) but the style of cross is not constant in different examples of the monogram. Below the IHS are the three nails of the crucifixion.

The Jesuit monogram is a powerful symbol of the spirit and purpose of the Society of Jesus. It alludes to their motto, their name, the person and name of Jesus and to his crucifixion. Perhaps its highest artistic embodiment is in their mother-church, the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in Rome (the *Gesù*). In an extraordinary ceiling fresco (c.1680 AD) by Giovanni Battisti Gaulli in cooperation with Gianlorenzo Bernini – *The Triumph of the Sacred Name of Jesus* – the monogram is displayed above all powers spiritual and temporal.

Gabriel Mayet, the great chronicler of Fr Colin, collected the Founder’s sayings in a series of books originally entitled *Quelques Souvenirs* which later became the *Memoirs*. These volumes are conserved in the general archives. The photo shows the cover page of the first volume. About 1840 he decorated



the title-page. He heads it with a monogram.

It is an elegantly cursive intertwined MA topped with a small equal-armed cross. Mayet is collecting material about the spirit and the purpose of the Society of Mary, a work he takes enormously seriously. The MA (or AM) is a familiar Catholic monogram of the name of Mary. Read as MA it is the first two letters of **M**aria. Read as AM it is the initial letters of the Angel Gabriel’s greeting “**A**ve **M**aria”. Placing it beneath a cross may be novel. It clearly parallels the Jesuit monogram with the name of Mary substituting for that of Jesus. It

suggests the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross, something John Paul II expressed in his coat of arms.



The parallelism is strengthened when the handwritten monogram is replaced by a rubber stamp – a seal. According to Jean Coste in *Origines Maristes*² from 1842 to 1867 the official seal of the Society of Mary was as illustrated to the left: A circular seal topped with a banderol containing the words SOCIETAS MARIÆ, above the monogram MA beneath a Latin cross, below which is the phrase A.M.D.G. ET D.G.H. (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam et Dei genetricis honorem* – to the greater glory of God and to the honour of the Mother of God). That this seal was influential and imitated can be shown by among others this example from an 1867 document of the Marist house in Riom, in the province of Auvergne, France. That community was using exactly the same seal as the General with merely the addition of the location of their house.



My narrative of a smooth evolution of the Marist Crest from this seal is perturbed by Coste having located a pre-cursor seal that was in use *before* 1842.³ In the outer band the name SOCIETAS • MARIÆ; a fleuron/separator/space-filler; a vine with grapes; a lune (crescent moon shape); a branch (probably a wheat stalk). In the inner circle a crown (or headscarf?) with three five-pointed stars; and intertwined MA; two crossed branches – a lily and a rose. The crowning with stars and the moon shape allude to Revelation 12:1 “A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” This is an apocalyptic vision linked to the end-times, in a Marist context it brings to mind Colin’s frequent references to the revelation from the Virgin: “The blessed Virgin has said: ‘I was the support of the newborn Church; I shall be so as well at the end of time. My bosom will be open

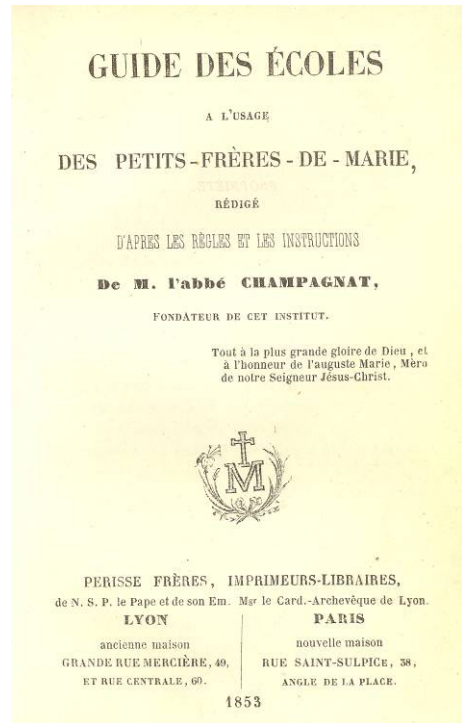
² *Origines Maristes* vol. 3 illustration 87 « Le Sceau Officiel »

³ *Origines Maristes* vol. 3 illustration 86 « Le Sceau Primitif »

to all who would enter there.”⁴ The lily, by contrast, evokes the annunciation at Nazareth and the conception of Jesus. The vine and wheat are Eucharistic symbols. Lily and rose are often found together in Marian symbols because of the verse from the Song of Songs “I am the Rose of Sharon, and the Lily of the valleys” (2:1) The rose symbolizes devotion to Mary as “Mystic Rose”, e.g. via the rosary. None of these symbols are unique to the Society, they are bringing together elements from French Catholic culture.

A seal or stamp is relatively inexpensive in comparison to the engraved or cast metal piece required for commercial printing. If the symbol can be put together out of existing type pieces it is significantly cheaper. In an 1843 letter to Fr Victor Poupinel the layman, Jean François Yvert, who was the printer in the New Zealand mission wrote requesting both “A selection of pretty illustrations (*vignettes*), 150 francs worth, a variety of them, so few of each sort” and “*fleurons de piété*”, so printers had a limited set of “religious clip-art”. In 1853 this book was published. A *School Guide for the Little-Brothers-of-Mary*, written according to the rules and instructions of Fr Champagnat, the founder of that institute (who had died in 1840).

The decoration on this page is an M (*not* an MA) topped by a cross and with two crossed boughs tied with a ribbon. The bough to the left is a lily, that to the right reeds or leaves. The vernacular form of the motto given is “Everything for the greater glory of God, and to the honour of the great Mary, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Coste asserts that “from



⁴ Colin, speaking about the end of December 1837. Mayet does not indicate a context. [Coste text A = Mayet 1, 11 = OM 422 = FS 4, 1]

1877 onwards the Marists used paper with an M and a cross on the top line.”⁵



14 novembre 1864.

J. FAVRE,

Fr Julien Favre, who took over from Fr Colin as Superior General in 1854 used a different seal from that of Colin on his 1864 circular letter to the Society. The Virgin with arms crossed across her chest, standing on a crescent moon and a snake, within an architectural framework topped by a cross; within an almond shape bordered by the text “PRAEPOSITUS :

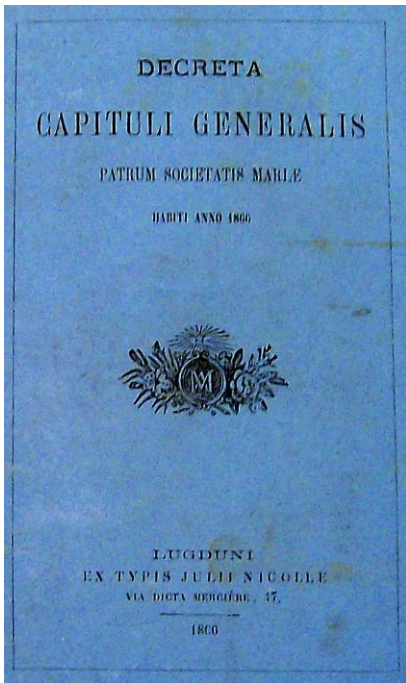
GENERALIS : SOCIETATIS : MARIAE:” = Superior General of the Society of Mary. The formal Latin, *Praepositus Generalis*, is the same title used by the Jesuit General. Favre’s seal is reminiscent of the statues of Mary that are found outside the door of the superior’s room in the congregation. Since she is depicted on the crescent moon it is again an “End-time Mary”. The snake emerging from beneath her feet is an allusion to Genesis 3:15 “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; She⁶ will strike at your head while you strike at his heel.” I do not consider there are as many resonances in Marist Spirituality to Mary as the New Eve, but there are frequent references to Mary battling the devil, not least Courveille’s account of the Society being formed to “battle against hell.”

The influence of the General’s stamp can be seen as far afield from Lyon as Meanee in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. The community that, after 1910, became Greenmeadows Seminary stamp their library books with a very exact imitation of the General’s seal – down to using the same font for their different wording.



⁵ Gaston Lessard & Wilhelm Tangen, “Our Coat of Arms”, 1999.

⁶ “She” according to the Vulgate. “He” according to the Hebrew.

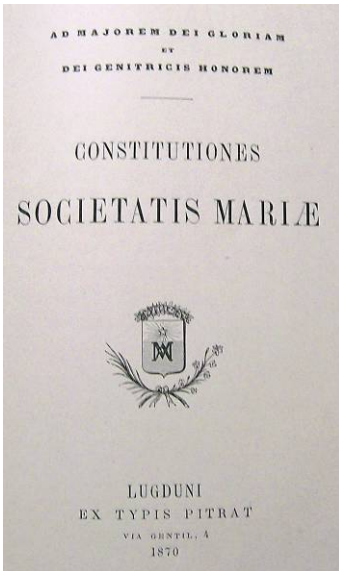


In 1866 there was a General Chapter of the Fathers of the Society of Mary and the chapter decrees were published in Lyon. The cover decoration is a five-pointed hollow star with rays atop a medallion with an M over an A on a dark background; lilies to the left, roses to the right. This is the first of the designs being considered to show the single rayed star. From the time of our oldest surviving image of Mary, that in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, she has been shown with a star above her; an allusion to Balaam's messianic prophecy in Numbers 24:17a "I see him—but not in the present. I perceive him—but not close at hand: a star is emerging from Jacob, a sceptre is rising from Israel."

It also suggests a Marian title used in litanies: "Star of the Sea" which dates back to Eusebius of Caesarea (266-339 AD).

In 1867, under pressure from the members of the congregation for guidance, Fr Favre published a basis for the Rule of life in Marist communities – *Regulae Fundamentales*. This time there was no image on the title page but the back page is occupied by an image of the crowned Virgin and Child standing on a globe bracketed by clouds with rays emanating from behind the figures. Favre seems more concrete in his choice of imagery, preferring the pictorial over the symbolic monograms. Again, it is presumably a pious image from the printer's collection. This is the first time the child Jesus has been with his Mother on the images surveyed.





Spurred on by Favre's action Colin published the Constitutions in 1870. The title page is decorated by a crest very close to that which became the standard Marist crest. The most obvious difference is the laurel crown above the shield. The shield is parted in two by a horizontal line. The upper part has a five-pointed star with rays on a white field; below, the MA monogram on horizontal shading. Beneath are two crossed boughs tied with a bow of ribbon; leaves to the left and lily to the right. The motto of the Society is printed at the top of the page. The Marian associations of the symbol are the Virgin of the Annunciation (the lily), the Star of the Sea (strengthened by the star being put

above a horizon) and the Victorious Virgin (the laurel crown).

It would seem that our process of development is almost complete, yet when the constitutions are approved and re-published our imagery goes full circle. A different printer is used and he may not have had the *vignettes* used in 1870 so instead the title page is decorated with an intertwined script MA monogram with some botanic features on an equal-armed bottony cross (shaded with a white border) all with a background of rays.

This brings our study up to the approbation of the society, the (as yet unwritten) second part of this work will continue the investigation into the 1900s. The author would be delighted to receive photos or scans of datable primary historic documents containing the Marist crest or its precursors and high resolution examples of the digital forms of the crest that are in use in the different parts of the Society of Mary.

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