

The Historical Growth Of The Institute, 1840-1960

The historical growth of the Institute since the death of the Blessed Founder has been phenomenal despite the many persecutions which the Congregation has suffered in France, Spain, Mexico, China, the Balkan States and other countries. Similar congregations of brothers that were founded about the same time in the Loire district of France failed to prosper. In fact two of these, fearing extinction were united with the Marist Brothers in 1842 and 1844 respectively.

The addition of these congregations naturally helped the expansion of the Marist Institute. As a result of these mergers the brothers were grouped into provinces in order to secure better administration. Therefore, Father Mazelier of St. Paul Trois Chateaux united his forty brothers and twelve postulants to the Institute.(22.) All their schools were united with the Marist schools for the organization of the Province of St. Paul Trois Chateaux. Simultaneously another province, known as the Province of Beaucamps, was organized in the northern part of France. Two years later Bishop Guibert of Viviers united to the Marists the sixty Brothers of Christian Instruction founded by Father Vernet in 1803. The Marist schools of that area and the fourteen schools of the brothers from Viviers were organized into the Province of Aubenas, France.

Twenty years after the death of Blessed Champagnat, another province was organized in the St. Genis Laval area. This particular province later housed the Mother House, which was transferred from Notre Dame de l'Hermitage in 1856. From St. Genis Laval the administration of the Institute guided the growth of the Marist Brothers from 1856-1903 and from 1939-1961.

During the one hundred and twenty years since the death of the founder, the administration of the Institute has been entrusted to eight superior generals. These were elected by various General Chapters called for that purpose. The first superior general was elected for life. But in 1903 Canon Law ruled that the term of office be limited to a specific number of years. The Marist Constitutions, promulgated by the General Chapter of 1903, stated that the Superior General's term was to last for twelve years. In 1958 the Fifteenth General Chapter reduced the term to nine years.

Throughout its history the Institute has met with serious interference from various governments. Blessed Champagnat's trials with the Department of Public Instruction, and the persecutions of the brothers in various countries have already been mentioned. But the greatest hardship suffered by the congregation was the anti-clerical legislation passed by the French government at the turn of the century. In 1891 the education law of 1886 secularized eighty-three schools taught by the brothers in France.(23.) Ten years later the infamous law of Associations of 1901 withdrew the legal status of all Roman Catholic teaching congregations in France. Two years later every school, private as well as public, was secularized and all religious teachers were expelled from the schools. Brother Albert Hamel in his dissertation states:

The French Sectarian laws of 1903 struck a heavy blow to the Marist family, as the major portion of the 700 and more schools that the congregation had in that country were forcibly closed. However, a number of brothers ardently devoted to the cause of religious instruction, remained in the country and strove to carry on the work of Christian education. These Brothers were forced to adopt the mode of life of the people among whom they labored. They had to abandon their religious costume and sacrificed most of the consolations of community life. (24.)

Thousands of brothers left France for the mission territories while others returned to secular status.(25.) Government confiscations caused the transfer of the Mother House and houses of studies to Grugliasco, Italy, and other places outside of France.

What was a terrible blow to the teaching apostolate of the Institute in France proved to be very advantageous to the Marist schools outside that country. This exodus of teachers to foreign lands inspired numerous native vocations. Today, a few generations later, the Institute counts 9,153 brothers, half of whom come from the New World. Thirty-nine provinces are presently training 5,506 novice brothers, and other aspirants for the Marist teaching profession.