

A Marist reflects on St Peter Chanel



It seems that Peter Chanel was destined to be Marist even before he was born ...

The Chanel family lived in the little country hamlet of La Potière in France, not all that far from the mountains near Switzerland. Claude Chanel was a farmer. He had some sheep and a few cows and grew some crops as well. His wife, Marie-Anne, was not a well-educated woman. She couldn't read or write, but she had a very strong Catholic faith. They had three children before a fourth one died, so when she found herself pregnant a fifth time Madame Chanel dedicated the child in her womb to the Blessed Virgin Mary. A healthy baby boy was born, and they called him Peter.

Years later, when Peter heard about what his mother had done, he added the name, Mary, and became Peter Mary Chanel. Later still, he chose the confirmation name of a young Jesuit saint whom he admired very much: St Aloysius Gonzaga. And so we have Peter Aloysius Mary Chanel.

Peter was a fine young boy. Years later people would describe him as normal and well-balanced boy, bright and alert, a reliable and a hard worker. When he wasn't working on the family farm he would be taking classes at the village school and then from a neighbouring parish priest.

During these school days Peter had only one ambition: to become a priest and a missionary.

So, with the priest's encouragement and the blessing of his parents, off he went to seminary. He studied well and won awards for hard work and diligence and at age, 24, was ordained priest by a bishop who was to figure very much in the early life of the Marist project, Bishop Alexander Devie.

Peter Chanel had a strong place in his heart for the Blessed Virgin Mary. The young Fr Peter celebrated his first Mass at Our Lady's altar in the Church of Cras, dedicated to Our Lady of Perseverance.

His first appointment was as assistant priest in the parish Ambérieu, quite close to the Bugey mountains, where the first Marist missions were just beginning. The local school master was a young man named Claude Bret. He and Peter would become close friends and, as priests, would set out together for the missions not many years later.

Bishop Devie knew a quality person when he saw one, and appointed Fr Peter, barely a year ordained, in charge of a difficult parish in the high country overlooking Switzerland, the parish of Crozet. He was 25 years of age. The people soon came to experience his kindness his care, and the way he listened to them. He loved them, and they knew it. Today, beside the church of Crozet, there proudly stands a statue of Peter Chanel erected by the descendants of people who knew that he loved them.

From Crozet, Peter Chanel asked the Bishop's permission to join the Society of Mary and fulfil his dream of becoming a missionary. At the time Fr Jean-Claude Colin wrote to Fr Marcellin Champagnat, 'We have some excellent candidates'. One of them was Peter Chanel.

Like the Bishop, Fr Colin knew a good man when he saw one, and soon gave Peter responsibilities in the Marist school at Belley. He treated the students with kindness and care. They, too, soon came to know that he loved them.

When Fr Colin made his first trip to Rome to seek approval for the Marist project, he took Peter Chanel with him. In the months they spent together, Fr Colin would have shared his dream of doing the work of Mary on whatever distant shore. They visited Loreto together and its shrine where they would have talked about living as Mary did in the Holy House of Nazareth.

When the Society of Mary was approved, Peter Chanel was quick to offer himself for the first mission band to leave for Oceania. He was 33 years of age.

The missionaries spent months waiting for favourable winds for their ship, then a year at sea before reaching the south-west Pacific and the island of Futuna. During these months, and later on Futuna, Peter Chanel wrote many letters... to his family, his Marist confreres, his former students. He wrote with affection. He called each by name, asking about them and their concerns. He shared his own experiences, his yearning that his people would come to know Jesus and Mary better.

Early in the voyage to the Pacific Fr Claude Bret, Peter's friend since the days at Ambérieu, became seriously ill and was nursed in their tiny cabin by Peter. He died at sea, knowing the love of Peter Chanel.

On the island of Futuna, Peter Chanel faced huge challenges.. of language, of warring tribes, of suspicion, of theft and finally of violence. His companion, Br Marie Nizier, wrote of his unfailing gentleness and kindness towards one and all. Even his murderers knew that he loved them. It came as no surprise that soon after his death the people of Futuna all embraced the faith of Peter Chanel.

When I think today of Peter Chanel, I think of a man of quiet perseverance, of wanting the best for his people, a man of kindness and care, a man with the heart of Mary of Nazareth, a man of affection. A man whose people knew that he loved them.

It's a fine grace to ask for, through the intercession of St Peter Chanel himself: the grace of an affectionate love, loving as St Peter Chanel did, loving as Mary does.

