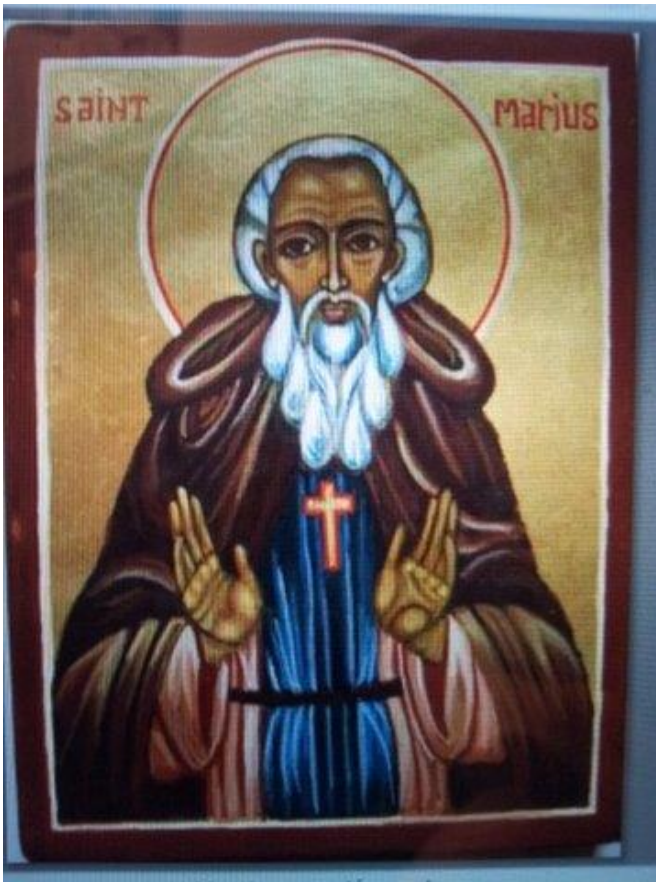


# MARIUS, THE SAINT OF AVENCHES



ICON OF SAINT MARIUS

**Marius of Avenches is also known as Saint Maire. He is celebrated on December 31 by the Catholic Church, as well as on January 4 in the diocese of Lausanne, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Fribourg. He is considered the last bishop of Avenches and the first bishop of Lausanne.**

Marius was born around 530 in Autun in Burgundy, at a time troubled by numerous invasions. To protect him, but also to give him a good education, his parents entrusted him at a very young age to the Saint Symphorien monastery in his native town, and he remained there voluntarily as a monk until the age of 43. Marius began to study the Holy Scriptures and patiently

copied them out to make them known.

In the year 567, he was ordained a priest at the Saint-Symphorien monastery, the monastery which gave so many bishops to Merovingian Gaul. In May 573, it was the Burgundian King Gontran who came to fetch him and had him consecrated bishop of Avenches.

The family of Marius had links with the city of Avenches and owned land in Payerne, no doubt by inheritance, land that Marius would bequeath to the Church.

Marius took an active part in the first council of Mâcon in the year 585, where he signs as "Marius Aventicae". He is also found in texts under the following names: Marius Aventicum, Saint Marius, Saint Maure, or Saint Maire.

In this troubled and confused period, when the Church alone is capable of preserving the Greco-Roman heritage, the presence of a bishop in Avenches is a blessing for the city. Having practically the monopoly of culture, the clergy played the role of educator in all areas of social life. It trains executives in its clerical schools, participates in public life, attracts to its many religious ceremonies the crowd of believers who can be educated only on these occasions.

Marius also makes sacred vessels with his own hands. He decorates churches. It was at the monastery of Autun that he had received training in sacred art and he had a remarkable talent.

Marius has gone down in history as a great builder of churches:

- The first chapel of Payerne, dedicated to Notre-Dame, built on his family estate and consecrated on June 24, 587, was erected on a Roman construction, on the hill, where the temple and the abbey church are today.
- The construction of the church of Saint-Symphorien d'Avenches, built on the old Gallo-Roman temple of the "Grange des Dîmes", is attributed to him by some authors.
- The Churches of Saint-Saphorin-sur-Morges and of Saint-Saphorin in Lavaux, but these attributions are not certain.
- On the other hand, it is very probable that he founded the Church of Saint-Thyrse in Lausanne.



STATUE OF SAINT MAIRE,  
CATHOLIC CHURCH, AVENCHES.  
SCULPTURE BY MARC HENARD

Only one Latin text from Marius has come down to us, the "Chronicle of Marius" which, after many travels, ended up in the British Museum in London. It is a very precious document for all Merovingian History. From it we learn, among other things, of the great catastrophe of the Rhone in 556: "This year, the great mountain of Tauredunum in the diocese of Valais collapsed so suddenly that it crushed a nearby small town, with some villages and all their inhabitants. Its fall also set in motion the whole lake, 60 miles long and 20 miles wide, which, overflowing its two banks, destroyed very ancient villages with men and cattle. The lake even demolished many churches, along with those who served them. Finally, it violently swept away the bridge of Geneva, the mills and the men and, entering the city of Geneva, killed many people".

Towards the end of his life, Marius transferred the seat of his bishopric from Avenches to Lausanne. He thus became the last bishop of Avenches and the first bishop of Lausanne, where he died on December 31, 593, at the age of 63.

He is buried in Lausanne, in the Church of Saint-Thyrse which he founded. His episcopate lasted more than twenty years.

On the tomb of Saint Marius, we find the following epitaph, composed by a talented and anonymous poet, rather rapidly identified as the poet monk Fortunat, epitaph which summarized the life of our bishop:

“His youth was spent entirely in contemplative retreat, in the shadow of the Church. He received holy orders one after another. Having become the head of a vast diocese, he gives an example of an austere life. He devotes part of his time to study and prayer. He cultivates his fields with his own hands.

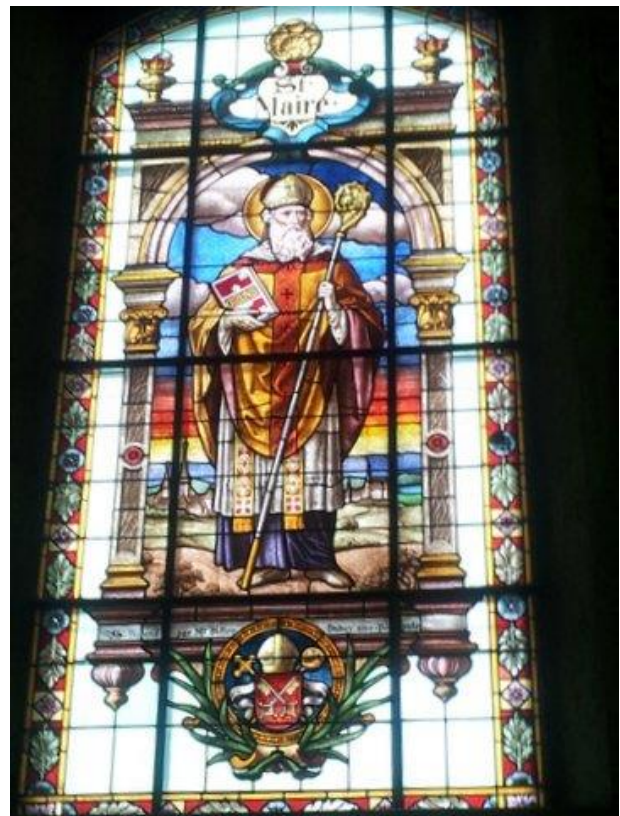
He makes sacred vessels for his churches. He willingly takes the defense of his diocese, of which he is the most solid support. He deprives himself in order to be able to help the poor, by feeding them with the fruits of his savings.

Marius lived in an ascetic and humble way, carrying out the tasks incumbent on the bishop, such as dispensing justice, helping the needy, directing the clerics of his Church, celebrating divine services, etc. He is a model of charity, a minister of Christ, attentive to the condition of the poor, while he himself was born rich.”

At the time, it was not yet Rome, but the local population and clergy who canonized people deemed to be out of the ordinary. Marius is considered "holy" because of his humility, his great piety and his charity. Marius is THE SAINT OF AVENCHES.

In the time of Marius, the bishops all came from good families. So there were two categories of bishops: those who wanted to get even richer, and those who were honest. Marius was certainly part of the second category, if we are to believe what is written on his tombstone.

The city of Avenches remained the property of the bishops of Lausanne. Around the year 1200, the town of Avenches, which since the beginning of the Middle Ages had been located in the plain towards the current cemetery, moved up the hill, around the Benedictine priory built in the year 1134 by the monks of Saint-Bénigne from Dijon.



STAINED GLASS IN THE CHURCH DOMDIDIER

The Bishop of Lausanne then decided to acquire the building from Pierre Mayor. It would become the Castle of Avenches, after the arrival of the Berneses in 1536, who occupied the Pays de Vaud until 1798. The Berneses took possession of the bishop's residence and transformed it into the current castle.

On December 5, 1994, the parish of Avenches celebrated the 1400th anniversary of the death of St. Marius. The 150 guests attended a mass celebrated by the bishop of the diocese, Monsignor Pierre Mamie, in the Catholic church of Avenches. The Bishop of Autun was represented by his general vicar. The mayor and senator of Autun was also present. After the mass, a festive meal brought together all the guests in the theatre hall of the Castle of Avenches, with many speeches by the cantonal and communal authorities, as well as by Catholic and Reformed religious authorities.

The day ended with a conference at the castle theatre, given by historian Justin Favrod from Lausanne, who had written his historian's dissertation on St. Marius in 1991.



In the church of Domdidier there is a large stained-glass window dedicated to St. Marius. A second window of St. Marius existed also in the old church of Villarepos, which was destroyed in 1984. This window is now in the funeral chapel of this parish. These are probably the only places where there is a stained-glass window of St. Marius, the Saint of Avenches.

Avenches, February 29, 2020

Bernard Godel<sup>1</sup>  
(Translation<sup>2</sup>)

STAINED GLASS OF ST. MARIUS IN  
VILLAREPOS

<sup>1</sup> With the kind collaboration of Justin Favrod (La Chronique de Marius d'Avenches (455-581), Cahiers lausannois d'histoire médiévale, n° 4, Lausanne, 1991.)

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Godel, made in Avenches on March 19, 2023, on the occasion of the commemoration on June 17, 2023, of the 75th anniversary of the construction of the church dedicated to Saint Marius.