

EXTREME SWEETNESS

The experience of decision in vocation, Fourviere, was followed by a deeper experience, a mystical experience for Fr. Colin which is symbolized for us by his years at Cerdon.

His first appointment after ordination in 1816, was with his brother Pierre at this village of Cerdon. Peter Colin was the pastor and Jean Claude was his assistant.

For six years, while he was there, he experienced a time of great consolation in his relations with God and he was moved to jot down the first numbers of a Rule for the Society of Mary. We don't know why he took on this responsibility, whether he was commissioned to do so, but certainly that's what he did.

In 1838 he described these years in this way, "Over a period of six years I experienced extreme sweetness when thinking of this Society with a clear feeling that it was the work of God" (KEEL, 196.)

Colin was probably thinking of this experience of these years when he spoke of tasting God. "You have to learn to taste God, yes, to taste God and that is to feel your heart wounded" (FS. 65:3.)

This is obviously the time in which we should be reflecting on prayer. When I first gave this retreat, I was given the luxury of six days to do so. Unfortunately, we have to make choices and I merely invite you though, to reflect on prayer and the importance of that in our Marist life and vocation.

Just note the strong experiential connotations of that word tasting God. It's much more than seeing God, or hearing God. Our sense of taste has an immediacy about it which our other senses don't have, apart from the sense of touch. You can only see things at a distance from you. You can only hear noises which are apart from you. But you can only taste something which you come in immediate contact with. There's something very experiential about tasting God. It's not enough to know about God. It's not enough as it were to be simply listening in prayer. Colin had an experience which was, for him, like a savoring, a tasting of God.

That image also reminds us that our sense of taste gives us sweet taste and sour taste. In our experience of God, there is often an experience of the sweet and the sour.

Tasting God. For six years he had an experience of the sweet taste of God. What did this sweetness, what form did it take? It seemed to be in two ways. He had a sense of certainty that the Society was willed by God and that it would succeed. That was a great reassurance for him. One of the remarkable things about Colin, no matter how great the setback and how often the disappointment, he never wavered in his certainty that the Society was willed by God. God wanted it and therefore it would succeed. He never seemed to have any doubts, even though he had many setbacks and disappointments.

The other aspect of this experience of God was a sort of an inspiration he received concerning the spirit of Mary. His enduring legacy to us has been his intimate knowledge of Mary and her spirit. It wasn't something he learned from books, it wasn't something he even learned from Mary of Agreda. It was something which came from his own personal relationship with Mary. He as it were, instinctively understood how she would act, what she would do. Of course, it

wasn't purely instinct. It came from this intimate relationship, the intimate knowledge he had of the person of Mary.

Her spirit and the manifestation of it, came out in the way he started to write the Rule for the Society of Mary. He said, "He was interiorly filled with a lively confidence amounting to a kind of certainty that the project came from God and that it would eventually succeed. He used whatever free moments the sacred ministry allowed him to prepare for this success by jotting down the first thoughts that were to serve as a basis for the Constitutions" (OM 815)

Now these first thoughts weren't things he just thought up himself. They came to him always in prayer and he was constant in his testimony that the key elements of our Rule were received, not invented. They came from beyond himself. It's true he admitted he gave them expression but nevertheless, he didn't think them up originally.

This certainty that the Society would succeed, Colin himself said, "In the beginning, when I thought of the Society, for six years I felt a palpable consolation at the mere thought of it; when I heard some bit of news, I glowed all over, my face lit up and became radiant" (OM 519.7).

It was a consuming interest for him and so at any little tidbit or snippet of news, his face would break out into smiles and he would get excited.

This wasn't a mere natural enthusiasm though, it was a reflection of his relationship with God at that time. He was in the exceedingly fortunate situation that his own ardent desires, his own consuming passions fitted in with what God was wanting. What God was asking of him and what he wanted to do anyway, coincided and he was indeed blessed. So often, so much of the anxiety in our life is when God is clearly asking something but we are wanting to do the other. But not for Colin in these years anyway. There was no conflict for him between the desire that God's will be done and his own desire to belong to Mary's family. So, he was radiantly happy. They were good years and he'd nostalgically look back on his years at Cerdon as the great years of extreme sweetness.

This challenges us to look on our own reaction and relation to the Society. Is it something that makes us glow all over at the mere thought of. Do we break out into smiles when we hear a snippet of news about the Society or is it merely a little snippet of gossip? Does the mere thought of the Society and its work give us a thrill?

Well, we're not looking for emotional reaction, but there was a deeper disposition in Colin which I think we should have. A joy, a contentment, a sense of peace at our membership in the Society and the work we are called to do.

But there was more to Colin's joy at this time than the mere sense that God and his own will were working together, the mere sense of certainty that the Society would succeed. There is also that sense of joy that came from working on the Rule. And when he said he would spend whatever moments the sacred ministry would allow him, that usually meant late at night. Often he would be working through till two or three in the morning, praying and writing out the first numbers of the Rule. It's from those times that we'd get the great ideas of the Society. This is the time when the vision of Fr. Colin for the Society was first crystalized.

The whole world Marist. We must build a new Church. Hidden and unknown in the world. Tanquam tuam. All of these great ideas came to him, were given to him during the Cerdon years.

He said, “In the first years of my priestly ministry, I found myself committed to work for the Society of Marist Fathers and even to prepare its first constitutions. The impulse which led me to this work was less a voluntary and freely chosen impulse than an inner impulse I would almost say an almost irresistible one that the Society was in the designs of God, and that it would succeed, although I did not know how and by what means nor whether my work for it would be of any use some day” (Keel, 204).

So it wasn't just a bright idea on his part. In fact, he admitted that he would never have had the courage to have written a rule of his own accord. But there was an inner impulse, something driving him to do this. Convinced that the Society would succeed but not at all certain whether his own efforts at a rule would be of any use to anyone or not. Nevertheless, he did it.

It's at this time that he also said, “When God speaks to a soul, he says many things in few words, for example that phrase ‘hidden and unknown in the world.’” (OM 819:22) This is a phrase that goes back to the earliest years, the Cerdon years and as we know, it was a touchstone of our mission and our spirit. In a matter of three or four words, we capture our whole vocation.

Colin is more or less saying that God spoke those words to my soul. “But then, when one sees things as God presents them, one sees them as so beautiful, really as so beautiful that words cannot be found to express them – and then one is led to exaggerate.” He's obviously talking of his own experience of God, his own tasting of God.

This was the difference between Fr. Colin's conception of a Rule and Fr. Favre's conception. This is also the time we should be confronting the two visions of the Society – Fr. Colin's vision and Fr. Favre's.

In a famous phrase from Fr. Ryan's report to the chapter of 1985, he says, “It might be said that in the initial dispute between Fr. Colin and Fr. Favre over the nature of the Society, although the Founder won the battle for the Constitutions, he lost the war for the further direction of the congregation” (WHERE DOES CREATIVE FIDELITY CALL US? n.147, p.41)

One of the great disputes in our early history is the one over the Constitutions. After eighteen years as general, we know Fr. Colin resigned with the excuse that he needed time and space to write the Constitutions. And so, in 1854, he resigned as general and Fr. Favre was elected.

Now Fr. Favre was a good man, an excellent general, a good Marist, but he wasn't a founder. He was a good administrator, he was a fine theologian. He was a worthy successor to Fr. Colin. It is unfortunate that in our simplified way of trying to understand things, we characterize the Society as either caught in the grip of Favre or in the grip of Colin.

Fr. Favre asked Fr. Colin to write the Constitutions but we know that Fr. Colin had great difficulty in doing so, they weren't ready. He hadn't that sense that he had received fully from Mary what she wanted in her written Constitutions.

The Society was getting bigger, there were now hundred of members, they were spread around the world, there were about fifty missionaries in Oceania and there were schools throughout France and a foundation even in England. It was a big Society and it had no rules. So, in the end, Fr. Favre wrote his own Rule basing it on an earlier version of the Constitution, the 1842 Constitutions of Fr. Colin.

He thought that he was helping the Society but he struck a mortal blow at the heart of Fr. Colin who was so upset that he then burnt all his papers, including the Cerdon Rule and retired to La Neyliere, seemingly defeated, but not quite.

Eventually, some of his loyal disciples, Fr. Mayet was the leader of them, went to Fr. Colin and asked why he was sulking and we got the famous outburst. “You are mistaken if you think Fr. Favre requested my agreement to write the Rule. I only became aware of his draft of the Rule when he showed it to me in print” (which is pretty late!) “Fr. Favre is learned in theology but for a Rule he has no idea at all. He’s never reflected on these matters. This Rule has no foundation. Everything is totally changed. It’s another Society, it’s a work that takes the place of the original one. It’s a human work made in a human way.” (OM 803.1, 8, 10-12)

He couldn’t have been more scathing. We know of course that Mayet rallied the troops and eventually Fr. Colin in 1866 was told again, please write the rules and in 1872, we had his Constitutions.

But that was the important thing. Fr. Favre had made it up himself. Colin was insisting that if we are to have a Rule, it has to be inspired by God, it has to come from the spirit of Mary.

As I said earlier, you can compare the Favre Rule with the 1842 Constitutions of Colin and it’s not much different. It’s difficult to see what Colin was taking so much exception to. When he was asked to pinpoint the differences, the only one he could come up with was that Favre had insisted that at the General Chapter, the only members there, were those who had taken the vow of stability. Colin said it had now become a Society of the elite. All right, but it’s not a big deal.

No, there was something else. The spirit was missing, where it had come from, the whole backdrop, the vision against which Colin was writing the Rule was lacking in Favre. We’ve got the great testimony of Jeantin. “They, Favre, Maitrpiere and Terrailon (that is, the general and two of his councillors) didn’t have a sufficiently clear idea of the Founder. Worse: they had no sufficiently correct idea of the Society of Mary... She comes on the scene in this century of pride, luxury, materialism, sensuality, human and worldly progress, religious indifference, even godlessness. She is to counteract these lamentable trends through humility, unpretentiousness, mortification, simplicity and all the other virtues that formed the character and spirit of Mary.”

In other words, the Society is to be counter-cultural, it is to be diametrically opposed to the spirit of the world. In Fr. Founders mind, the Society of Mary is to play a considerable and important, albeit hidden role for the glory of God and salvation of souls. Hence the high and lofty idea he has of the sanctity which members of the Society are to have.

But Fr. Favre didn’t have this view and had less lofty ideas and feelings about the destiny of the Society. He saw it as a “congregation of pious priests, living under a broad and easy Rule who give missions, run schools, do apostolic works” within a limited scope and within a very unimportant capacity. Fr. Ryan’s challenge to the Society was, Isn’t that a very good description of who we are. A congregation of pious priests (more or less) living under a broad and easy Rule and doing good work. Doesn’t that describe us to a tee?

That’s what Fr. Ryan meant when he said that Colin might have won the battle for the Constitutions but he lost the war for the future direction of the Society. That is a sobering thought. That’s what Fr. Coste was getting, which I mentioned yesterday evening, “What went wrong?” They were pious, they were good men, they did good work but there wasn’t much

connection between the two. The being holy, the doing good work didn't come from that inspiration, that sense that they were taking Mary's place, they were doing her work, bearing her name.

Fr. Favre had a great idea of humility and he was loyal to Fr. Colin when he insisted that Marists should be humble. He believed in the 'hidden and unknown' but took it very literally. He wouldn't allow any work which would be noticed, so he did little tiny things. Whereas, somehow or other, Colin could see that the hidden and unknown was to liberate us to do big things.

Sure, we are to be humble but in a way that we are so forgetful of self that all our energy doesn't go into self-preservation or self-advertisement but solely to conduct the interests of Jesus and Mary. For him, it was a very liberating thing to be humble, not crawling around in corners, but so forgetful of self that all the energies can be at the disposal of God.

These are the big ideas, these are the energetic things which impelled Marists. But by taking it too literally, by not putting it against the backdrop of the idea that our vocation is to make the whole world like Mary, the perfect disciple. If you lose that idea, if you don't see it in that context, that we are to build a new Church and that's as big as the Church, as big as the world. If we don't see what we do in that context, then indeed, it does become little, insignificant and small minded.

That's what happened to the Society. Now sociologists can tell us that that happens to every Society. The founding enthusiasm is the time of great expansion, great work, then things settle down, routine sets in and they all become Favre's. But that's not our vocation. That's not what we're called to. That's not what the world is calling us to today.

I think that's the big challenge for us. To look again at what the vision of Colin, that vision which came to him in the Cerdon years, and which he strived to hand on to his followers and what has happened if we don't grasp the big ideas, the big enthusiasm.

The Society has indeed fallen under the spell of Favre, whereas indeed, we're called to be under the spell of Colin. What do we do about it? Once again the solution is to go back to our sources, back to our roots and see if we can again be enthused by what animated and galvanized Colin and the pioneers into action.

It is unfortunate that we've lost the Cerdon Rule where he first wrote down that initial inspiration. Only three fragments have survived the bonfire when in a fit of anger, he burnt all his papers since he felt it was useless. But these three fragments are extraordinarily significant.

The first fragment was that extraordinary thing which he wrote to the papal nuncio in 1822 in Paris, where if the Superior General entertains thoughts of greed for more than fifteen minutes, he was to summon the whole council, get down on his knees and confess the fault. The nuncio thought that was a bit impractical, but wait a moment, there's something important going on there. The great no to greed.

Then there was the no to power. The other fragment was once again the Superior General in council. When the councillors were voting on a decision and it was a split decision, you might say two for and two against, the Superior General had the right to make up his own mind, but he was earnestly beseeched to make a decision according to the opinion of those he disagreed with. Another extraordinary thing but it's the no to power and I wish we had a bit more time to talk

about it because in our world, power is one of the great values. In our world, the acquisition of material goods is one of the things people strive for.

And the third great no, the no to honour or ambition is counteracted by the third fragment from Cerdon, the hidden and unknown.

The three great no's are not negative. They are characteristic expressions that Colin had of the spirit of Mary in relation to the world. Don't look on them as negative. No to greed, no to power, no to ambition, but look on them as manifestations of Mary's spirit in confrontation with the spirit of the world.

They are also apostolic. One of the big obstacles of the Church of Colin's time were the greedy clergy. After the devastation of the Revolution, the Church was trying to re-establish itself with its great lands, its great monasteries, its beautiful churches and its fat clergy. The people had to pay for it and they didn't like it. It was counter-productive to the preaching of the gospel, to have your hand out and counting the collection. He had a vitriolic revulsion to the idea. That was stopping the mercy of God getting through.

It might not be quite so bad today but there are still things that of on in the Church which turn people off. They are to be the great no's for us today.

It's the same to the no to power. A subtle vice because we're all urged to be responsible adults, take charge of our own lives, make our own decisions, don't be children always running to the superior asking what to do. But then it can pander to self-interest. It can be inimical to the working together in a team and so obedience was the hinge on which the Society must turn.

Then ambition, the honour, what I call the Hollywood syndrome. To have our name in the papers, to have our two minutes on TV, to be known. It's important to have your moment of glory. Colin said rubbish. Hidden and unknown, forget your own interests because you get in the way.

The biggest obstacle very often to the hearing of the Good News of Jesus Christ is the one who preaches it. The biggest obstacle to the conveying of Christ's mercy is very often the apostle. So, let's be small, let's disappear so that all they see is the compassion of Christ and not the Father Christmas of the priest.

Source: Fr. Pat Bearsley, Video Conference 4, Boston Province Retreat, 1994