

## Claudine of Lyon: the French Connection

In 1838, Father Claude Mayet, who had joined the Marists less than a year before, wrote down the following words, where Father Jean-Claude Colin, his superior general, told of the trip he had made to Rome in 1833:

*I know, Colin said, that among cardinals and generally in Rome during my trip, it was my simplicity that people liked best in me. They said: He is quite simple and quite frank. Whereas I know that they were very wary of others who presented themselves with grand airs (OM. doc.428,1 ).*

To Colin's words Mayet added:

*It is probably the superior of the diocesan missionaries of Lyon, Bishop Mioland, I think, today bishop of Amiens, and Mr Carrand, also, I believe, of the same house, prefect apostolic of Mattinigue. Indeed, both have a majestic and very dignified bearing (ibid., d).*

Four years later, in 1842, Mayet took down another anecdote told by Colin and involving Mioland. Again, Mayet felt the need to add a note, especially since Colin's story referred to a conflict:

*Mr Mioland was then superior of the Lyon missionaries said to be of the Charterhouse on the hill which overlooks the Saone river near Serin. (. . . ) Everyone knows the virtues, the qualities, the peacefulness of Mr Mioland (OM. 2, doc. 547, h).*

When I first read them twenty five years ago, those lines held very little interest for me. Today they fairly jump at me. When Mayet speaks of the hill overlooking the Saone near Serin, he is not giving me information he picked up a few minutes earlier in a Baedeker guide book. He is talking about the place where he was born and grew up, and where Claudine lived from the age of twenty (1794) until she moved across the Saone to Fourviere in 1820. The hill Mayet refers to was called La Croix-Rousse, and, up to the French Revolution, it was essentially a summer resort, just outside the city, for the rich families and the clerics of Lyon, both religious and secular. As Gabriela Maria tells us (p.174:5).

*Religious communities like the Jesuits, the missionaries of St. Joseph, those of St. Charles, the seminary of St. Pothin, acquired large properties there. The bourgeois of Lyon developed the usage of having, at La Croix-Rousse, a country house, a garden of leisure where they could spend Sundays.*

Mayet, and before him his aunt Clady, left the bourgeois world from which they came: belonging to it was not the ultimate value in their eyes. But they could not shed all they had received from it. Nor did they need to. It enabled them to serve. In Mayet's case, his social background enabled him to become a first-class source for our knowledge of Marist beginnings. In Claudine's case, it enabled her to put at the service of her compassion all the business experience (and connections) she had at her disposal simply by dint of belonging to the Thevenet family.

Again, when Mayet explains to us how the Lyon missionaries came to be referred to as the Charterhouse missionaries, he is not passing on hearsay. He is literally talking about his home. He and his family lived in the former cloister of the Carthusian monastery (Gabriela-Maria, p.274). Not that they were a particularly austere family. It is simply that the Charterhouse was more a village than a house and that the cells grouped around the cloister were large enough to serve as homes. The Charterhouse was sold as national property in 1791 (OM 4, p. 399).

The sumptuous church of St. Bruno became a parish church in 1803, Cardinal Fesch bought back several buildings between 1807 and 1813, but at least some of the cells became homes. You remember that Marie Chirat and Adele Duperier lived in one of those cells and that the sisters of St. Joseph had installed a small sewing room in another (Gabriela-Maria, p.219). Thus, the Mayet family lived in the shadow of St. Bruno's church. Claudine's home was only a few hundred yards away (600 - 700).

The physical proximity to the parish however, was little compared to the closeness of the ties that linked both families to the priests who served the parish and lived in the missionaries' residence. Mioland was the superior of these priests. When Mayet speaks of his dignified manner and his peacefulness, he speaks as an eye witness, for Mioland was a close friend of the family. When and how the friendship began I don't know, but it was well established by 1823, when Mayet's mother was so ill and was so devotedly nursed by her sister Glady. Mioland was Aline Mayet's spiritual director (Gabriela-Maria, p.270) when she married in 1827. In 1836, Mioland blessed the chapel newly ordained and convalescent Father Mayet was allowed to have in his sister Emma's home at Pommiers, near Villefranche (Farnham, Leters, p.29).

Through Mioland and the diocesan missionaries, Claudine had access to another privileged network: she was right at the heart of the diocesan church. From the start, the missionaries were meant and seen to be the elite of the clergy of Lyon: men exclusively devoted to the bishop (as against religious), men highly trained and highly trusted. Mioland was on the staff of the major seminary for four years before he became superior of the missionaries in 1816, and he sat on the archbishop's council from 1824 on. Among the early members, four, including Mioland, later became bishops and three, including Andre Coindre, founded religious congregations.

La Croix-Rousse, St. Bruno, Mioland. Those names open doors to the world which shaped Claudine and in which she moved. La Croix-Rousse, however, is really outside the city, and people went there to escape the city, to exclude it from their lives. In that sense, it was an exclusive world. Of course the whole point about Claudine is that she performed the opposite movement: she included the city, allowed it to intrude upon her life. That aspect of her relationship to Lyon seems well illustrated by her association with Pauline Jaricot. The presence of Pauline among Claudine's close friends in the years before 1820 reminds us of yet another network that made up Claudine's world: the Congregation, to which Pauline's brother Phileas belonged, together with some two hundred men and young men from the leading families of the city.

These relationships constituted a world, a store of resources to which one has access, a confidence that things can be accomplished. They also form a way of speaking, a way of feeling, a way of perceiving. In trying to get a glimpse of that world through Mayet's fleeting references to it, I was attempting to get a sense of it. Watching Mayet look at Colin will help me spot what matters to Mayet. Indeed, Mayet's references to Mioland and the Charterhouse were only foot- notes to a remark of Colin which itself introduced Colin's narrative of an incident that took place during his first trip to Paris in 1822. What Mayet describes there is Colin, the country curate, coming to grips with protocol in an attempt to have an audience from Bishop Frayssinous, who had just been appointed the equivalent of minister of education. All I would retain from Mayet's description is the vast difference that separates his world from that of Colin. And since Mayet's world had much in common with Claudine's, I am fascinated when I see the two worlds touching each other through the foundation at Belleville in 1821.

You remember that on November 14 of that year Claudine bought a school that had been run by two lay women in that small town and that these women joined the sisters sent by Claudine to take charge of the school. From Claudine's point of view, something very straightforward was taking place: her newly born congregation was making a new foundation, opening another house. The two women who had started the school were joining the congregation, and everyone would live happily ever after. As you also remember, after five months the two women left the sisters, and within ten years the sisters had left Belleville. What was the world that Claudine had encountered at Belleville? It was the world that Mayet had encountered in Colin.

Jeanne-Marie Colin, an older sister of Mayet's superior general, was thirty seven years old (ten years younger than Claudine) when she and Marie Mathieu entrusted their school to Claudine's sisters. Five years earlier, a young woman had joined the small Belleville group but had only stayed a few months (OM. 4. p.304). There have been other attempts at recruitment. It seems clear that by 1821 the two women had given up the idea of founding a congregation of their own.

They had it a try. Their attempt had started seventeen months earlier. The originator of the attempt was probably Fr. Gabriel Captier, who was appointed pastor of Belleville in 1803, a year before Jeanne-Marie Colin came to his parish. Captier was one of three brothers who were priests in the diocese of Macon before the Revolution. He was born, in 1757, in a small village only forty miles northwest of Lyon as the crow flies but as remote in every other way as Buckhannon, West Virginia, is from, the Bronx. Captier spent his first five years as a priest (1781-1786) as a curate in a parish lost in the hills of Beaujolais that separate his birthplace from Lyon. Jeanne-Marie Colin was born during those years in that parish. A special relationship developed between the curate and the Colin family, for Captier is the only link between the Colin's and the nearby village of Poule, where he was pastor from 1786 to 1803, and where we know that Jean-Marie Colin was brought up, (OM. 3, p. 996). In 1793, when Jeanne-Marie was eleven, she lost her mother (age forty eight). A bachelor uncle was appointed tutor for the eight orphans (the youngest two years old), but a woman was also found to keep house, and it looks as though Captier was the intermediary, for she was from his parish. When time came for Jean-Claude Colin to be confirmed in Lyon's cathedral in the first confirmation ceremony to be held since the Revolution, Captier again appears on the scene, for he signed the holy card that Colin kept as a souvenir of that day, June 5, 1803 (OM. 4, p. 492). The confirmation took place in Lyon because Colin's parish, as well as Captier's, was now in Lyon diocese as a result of the division of France into departments in January 1790. It is as a priest of the Lyon diocese, therefore, that Captier was appointed pastor of Belleville in September 1803. He was forty six.

Less than a year later, Jeanne-Marie Colin, now twenty, was buying property in Belleville together with her older sister Claudine (twenty nine) and two other women. The picture is clear: the pastor has brought together a group of women who will staff a girls' school in his parish and, why not start a religious congregation to insure the future of the work? The dream did not materialize. By 1821, when Claudine Thevenez was called in, the Belleville group had for many years been reduced to Jeanne-Marie Colin and Marie Mathieu, also called Miss Gabriel, plus, of course, Father Gabriel himself.

How the contact between Belleville and Fourviere was actually made we don't know, but there were many possibilities: Lacroix d'Azolette, the superior general of the diocesan missionaries and pastor of St. Bruno, had spent his first year of priesthood as Captier's curate in Belleville. Claude Chevalon, also a diocesan missionary living at St. Bruno, had likewise spent his first year as a priest in Captier's parish; besides, a team of six diocesan missionaries, including

Chevalon as well as Mioland and Andre Coindre, had preached a five-week mission in Belleville, starting on the first Sunday of Advent of 1817 and ending January 4, 1818 (Gabriela-Maria, p. 386).

The foundation was made, after Christmas 1821. For several years, things went smoothly. True, Jeanne-Marie Colin and Marie Mathieu did not join the sisters, but the schools were prospering. After two years, seventeen sisters (including two lay sisters, eight novices and two postulants) were running a boarding school for thirty girls of the better families, who could pay, plus a day school for eighty girls who did not pay, and a providence for orphans (Gabriela-Maria, p. 388-9). The system which was functioning so well at Fourviere had been transplanted to Belleville and was apparently meeting with equal success there. The original buildings had been enlarged, and construction was still being planned in October 1826.

A letter of September 1827 written by Captier for Claudine provides the first indication that a grave conflict has arisen. It begins:

*It is true that it was not possible for me to talk with you at length, but even so I saw with real sorrow that I had the misfortune of grieving you. Forgive me, Madam, and please believe that I never intended to afflict or upset you.*

The letter then treats the first item on which there was disagreement and which concerned financial arrangements between Claudine and Captier's two spiritual daughters, Jeanne-Marie Colin and Marie

Mathieu. These arrangements are certainly part of the conflict, but the second item treated in the letter is of more direct interest to us. It reveals that Captier had arranged for the sisters of St. Joseph to start another school in Belleville, a move which obviously baffled Claudine. Captier explains:

*I would also like to be able to persuade you that in trying to establish the sisters of St. Joseph I only had in view the greater good of the town by keeping out, for the future, women teachers of the kind I saw here, who brought their pupils to the fairs, to the bar, etc. I was afraid I would hear charges of injustice; that is why I did all I could to obtain from the diocese of Belley a simple sister who was known, whose mother is a simple day laborer in Belleville. I think people would have taken less offense if they had seen only this poor girl at the head of an establishment which I do not fear to see in humiliation (and) from which I would hope for less if there were pretentious people (in it). Therefore, be sure, Madam, that my fatherly and pastoral concern tended only to provide in Belleville wholemeal bread for those who might not want or might not be able to feed on white. Everyone must live. One works for the good of a town if one provides rough but healthy food for those who cannot afford delicate food. (Positio, p. 237-9)*

Unfortunately, Captier's letter is the only document that provides an inside view of the conflict, a one-sided view, of course. But we are not conducting a trial, and in its openness and simplicity the letter articulates well enough the theme I hoped to illustrate under the title Claudine of Lyon. It is the theme of Claudine as a woman belonging to a given place at a given time. Not definitively bound to that place and that time. Not utterly incapable of transcending them to some degree. But belonging to them, rooted in them, and, like all of us, limited by them. Again, without in any way attempting to apportion blame in the Belleville conflict, it does seem that one of the factors at work was the difficulty for Claudine of entering the world of Captier's concerns and, no doubt, the web of his long-standing relationship with Jeanne-Marie Colin and Marie Mathieu, and the corresponding difficulty of Captier in understanding why Claudine should have been upset by his calling in the sisters of St. Joseph. Captier felt he understood his people's needs better than Claudine. Claudine undoubtedly felt she knew better than the old pastor what the education of young women entailed. Two worlds met and failed to understand each other.

Our knowledge of the Belleville story is fragmentary. Our curiosity has been aroused and could only be satisfied with more research. Let us simply indicate that the boarding and day schools started by Claudine were closed in 1829, and that only two sisters remained to take care of the Providence until 1832, when the sisters of the Sacred Heart of Larajasse replaced them. These sisters left Belleville in 1836, leaving only the sisters of St. Joseph in the town. By that time, the pastor had been dead three years. As for Jeanne-Marie Collin and Marie-Mathieu, the latter died in Belleville on March 22, 1840 (Positio, p.216), and the former in 1847.

OM : Coste-Lessard, Origines Maristes, 4 vol., Rome 1960 - 1967

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