

Jean Claude Colin as Founder

by Jean Coste, S.M.

In order to associate you with the celebration of the bicentenary of the founder of the Marist Fathers, the organizers of this colloquium felt that the best way to bring this event close to you was to begin with the most characteristic problems raised for the church by the contemporary world, by that world which came into being at the same time as Fr. Colin and in which his followers have to work today. How does the man who has brought us together here today fit into this situation; that is what our common reflection of today should bring out. The precise task entrusted to me, however, is not to link together Colin and the challenge of the modern world but to speak of him to you from the standpoint that was specifically his own, namely in the framework of the foundation of a religious congregation.

At the dawn of the last century he felt that the response to the needs then arising was to be found in the virgin Mary, but to express that conviction he did not take up the pen of a theologian or spiritual writer; nor did he start a new devotion or build a sanctuary to attract crowds, any more than he launched an original form of the apostolate. He was convinced that for the work of Mary there was needed a society of Mary, that the spirit of Mary needed a body, a social body whose structure, internal life, and way of acting would be inspired by the place occupied by Mary in the church of Christ. His irreplaceable contribution was to bring into existence a group of men who would take seriously the fact of their bearing Mary's name and accept the consequences. In a word, his role is that of a founder, namely the one who provides the foundations and brings into existence, even though, as happened in his case, he was not the first to launch the project. Although his was not the original idea, it was he who gave it flesh, a Marian task if ever there was one. He succeeded in moving from the ideal program to a rule of life, and through that rule to enable men of very different character to live and work together. In this way there gradually took shape a certain way of relating to God and to others which became that of a whole society, a reality difficult to define, but clearly recognizable, a reality which has survived its export to almost all parts of the world and its exposure to the risks of updating and renewal. It is thanks to him that we are gathered here today, priests and laity for whom two centuries later what we owe to Colin does not mean turning our back on the concerns of our contemporaries.

Born with the revolution that killed his king, his parents, and would have liked to kill his God, he discovered that God does not die. Deprived of the pomp of worship, God continued to visit his faithful through Masses celebrated in barns at night with the priest disguised as a shoemaker hearing confessions in the cellar. To live for God alone soon became more meaningful for the young orphan than to stay in the village and continue to argue about bits of fields. He went to the seminary dreaming more of a hidden and interior life than of becoming a parish priest, and dreaming also that he would not be alone in wanting this, and that hidden and unknown like Mary, they could do great things together. When the idea of the society of Mary was spread in the major seminary by a less shy and more brilliant companion, he simply said: "That's what you are looking for" and he joined the new group. At Fourviere on the 23 of July, 1816, the day after ordination to the priesthood, there were twelve who committed themselves to founding the society they planned. In fact there were only two who did so: Champagnat for the brothers and Colin for the priests. For both of them, [the] Society of Mary meant more than youthful dreams; it already had a content that had matured interiorly and was ready to become a rule of life.

Appointed to Cerdon in the department of Am, which was then a part of the diocese of Lyon, he was not short of work, and his days were full. He had only the night time to devote to the planned Society. It was at that time he jotted down in a large copybook the ideas that might serve as a basis for the rule. As outlined at the meetings of the major seminary group and in the Fourviere promise, the Society they envisaged came down to a major insight: to do what the Jesuits once did, but in a new spirit, in the spirit supported the church at the beginning and would help it even more at the end of time.

What kind of men were needed for this? There was hardly time in the major seminary to make this clear. It had to be discovered, allowing God to speak to the soul, discerning among many ideas that bubbled up those which brought peace and confidence. One formula asserted itself like a shaft of light: "Hidden and

unknown in the world, that is the best way of doing good". That alone meant a lot. That phrase is sufficient to expose the illusions of the clergy who expected a restoration of their former prestige, their financial advantages, their power. Any temptation in that direction had to be nipped in the bud. In the "house of the blessed Virgin" there could be no room for greed, for seeking after places of honor, for using one's decision making power in order to have one's preferences prevail. Should anyone, particularly a superior, entertain such thoughts for some time, he should exorcise them as soon as possible by publicly accusing himself before his brethren. Anyone rash enough to want to be superior should be excluded from the post forever. There should be no building up of capital: whatever one branch of the society finds superfluous should go to help another and the remainder should go to the bishop's account.

This kind of writing shows little experience of the realities of life in common, and its inspiration comes more from the gospel than from earlier rules, of which Colin was ignorant anyway. There was a risk there, but without that kind of risk no religious congregation would ever come into being. Nothing of enduring value comes from copying the past. One must have the courage to imagine the future according to the quietly assured utopia of the early church.

"Your rule is more for angels than for men," Colin was told by the theologians of Paris to whom he showed his copybook. A wise remark that would become useful one day. For the moment, the Bishop of Belley –since Cerdon had now become a part of this new little diocese– allowed the two Colin brothers and a third member to form a missionary team to visit the mountains of Bugey in the bad season. It could hardly be called tourism: they travelled on foot in the snow, their knapsacks held their sermons and a change of clothing, they slept where they could, and in the damp confessionals they picked up rheumatism which stayed with them for life. But they had the joy of bringing God's pardon to those people by dealing with irregular marriage situations or cases of ill gotten gains which had been festering since the time of the revolution. This was far from the perspective of a God who would have reentered France along with the king, bent upon reconquering his people. We have come, Colin said in his opening sermon, as "instruments of God's mercy for you". To pray for the conversion of sinners, give them all the time they needed, absolve and catechize, these were the only watchwords. The missions were so arranged that they were not an expense on the people to whom they were preached, the preachers made themselves available to the parish priest if there was one, and they left without fuss when all was finished. This is how a new chapter of the rule was written, by spending oneself.

The bishop was soon to give them an opportunity to write a further chapter. At Easter 1829, Colin was appointed superior of the college-seminary of Belley, without ever having taught in his life. Within the space of a few months he had to set out his policy and explain to the teaching body who were not above mistrust what we would nowadays call his pedagogical plan. If at Cerdon he had written something on this subject, it would perforce have been rather vague. But in the course of four years of mission work he had been based at the college, and he observed. And then the children, during his missions, had been his primary concern. He knew them and was aware of how much could be expected of them if they were not confronted head-on and one was interested in them. Therefore he had no hesitation in producing Instructions which the experts still consider a surprising document. It was written for a particular college, in rather special circumstances; it sprang spontaneously from the meeting of a man and a work. Hence, it was genuine, and after a century and a half Marists still come to it to renew their resources in a way they could never do from a theoretical treatise.

It would be difficult to picture the texts written in Cerdon and the two set of instructions that came from Colin's missionary and teaching experience being set down side by side in a single rule. Besides, little by little an increasing number of priests wished to join the Society, and they had a variety of works. The ideal "house of the Blessed Virgin" which provided the setting for a symbolic description of Marist behavior was to be replaced by houses of brick and mortar, each with its own restrictions, where all would not be engaged in the same work and where all would not necessarily be always in agreement. As the Society began to scatter, it was necessary to hold on to a unity of purpose, of lifestyle, of prayer. Colin therefore rewrote his rule almost entirely and this was only the first step in a long history of rewriting.

In 1833 he went to Rome to present to the Pope the general plan of the society, with priests, brothers, sisters, laity, the beginnings of the people of God which Mary intended to bring together at the end of time. While the dossier was passed around and the cardinals smiled, Colin did not waste his time. He discovered canon law, he learned there are simple and solemn vows, he noticed that the problems he found in trying to get his religious to live together had been experienced by other founders before him. One text in particular fascinated him, the one Ignatius had written for his company, for that Society of Jesus in relation to which the society of Mary had been defined from the beginning. Why try to repeat what was to be found there in formulas which had not aged in three centuries? There was the course needed by a congregation which likewise dreamed of being sent by the Pope to all four corners of the world.

The dream was soon to become a reality. An elderly canon of Lyon who was asked to direct a mission to be founded in Western Oceania felt that Colin's young team would be much more suited for such a task. He wrote to Rome, and there the matter began to be taken seriously. The cardinals stopped smiling. This congregation which was not frightened at the thought of a mission at the ends of the earth, was to be approved. On 29 April 1836 it was done and on 24 of the following September Colin was elected superior general of the Society which had only twenty members. Three months later a first group set out for Oceania, and the martyrdom of Peter Chanel in 1841 brought this human venture fully into salvation history.

It was time for Colin to give his sons, now scattered over the ocean, constitutions in keeping with their responsibilities. Within the framework designed by Saint Ignatius, borrowing his formulas whenever possible, but modifying them when he felt that the work of Mary required it, Colin wrote a broad and vigorous text where everything is general. Few practices, nothing on ministries, which were left wide open, but keeping a practice which had always been the strength of scattered Jesuits: opening one's conscience to major superiors. This text could be considered as a basic law which more precise directives would later complement in order to ensure better cohesion of the group. It can be said that during the eighteen years of Colin's generalate, Marists were more or less everywhere united by accepting a form of clearly structured religious life whose integral strength and coherence explained the dynamism of this little congregation.

Through a thousand details which cannot be quoted here, some characteristics stand out to describe the Society as it then was. First of all, a shared conviction that the name received from Mary contains the Society's "raison d'être" and mission; the importance for the individual of the religious body to which he belongs and in which he finds expressed the global meaning of his existence; in a network of spiritual exercises, in the help he finds in superiors and confreres, the Marist is offered the concrete possibility of a life totally consecrated to God; in return, he accepts, as a personal and collective condition of survival, the group's control over the fidelity of its members; what he loses in autonomy of decision he regains in fraternal life where putting things in common is drastic, privileges are hounded, the notion of personal career inconceivable.

Of course this body, concerned about its unity and preservation, needed government. This however is not merely to administer the common good. It is there primarily to ensure the fulfillment of a mission received from on high, and before the superior is considered as a representative of his men, he is for them a representative of God. Corresponding to this office, halfway between heaven and earth, there is a formidable power, but everything is done to remove from the one who temporarily holds it any temptation or means that would allow him to turn it into a position of personal prestige.

In thus preserving an identity defined in terms of something higher than itself. The Society of Mary holds itself available for whatever the Lord expects of it: it is on site to accomplish its mission. From the time of the conversations of the first companions in the seminary, in fact, to feel oneself called to the family of Mary and to be attentive to the great needs of people were one and the same thing. The church of the past conjured up pictures of power and rigidity, of an institution conscious of its history and its rights. It needed to be rebuilt on the model of the early church, according to the heart of a mother who cannot bear to see any of her children lost. Marists are there to help it reach sinners where they are, to reshape a

people of God of faith and of communion. Methods of formation, instructions on preaching, hearing confessions, teaching, all were intended to make Mary's priests instruments of divine mercies, an infinitely delicate task to which one could not lay claim unless one had first allowed oneself to be dispossessed by God.

In this way, for almost twenty years, within the framework of a rule which, while not overwhelming in detail, pushed one towards a basic fidelity, and thanks to the spiritual animation of Colin's exceptional leadership, a balance was kept that was almost miraculous but nevertheless very real. It was the balance of an institution that had a total hold on its members, but without smothering them; an institution which staked everything on a mission which surpassed the individual person and welcomed an increasing number of new members; an institution which spoke only of a world to be saved and brought its members to the interior conversion demanded by Christ. The fact that time and a thousand other elements of distance separate us today from this achievement should not excuse us from honoring it with the respect that is due to all those who at one time succeeded in raising man above himself.

What was to call in question this balance was the progressive impact of modernity. Colin's resignation in 1854 and the choice of Julian Favre as his successor, more an administrator than a charismatic leader, obviously precipitated and made more noticeable the evolution, but the problem was larger than just the two men. With or without Brother Elias, Francis of Assisi's ideal would have to face the challenge of growth of the Franciscan order. In the case of the Marists, over and above the numeric increase and the inevitable change in lifestyle it brought in its wake, what modified the way in which the religious life came to be understood and lived were gradual inroads of certain demands of the modern mind: the need for a more critical approach in matters of exegesis and religious history, a growing sense of respect for the human personality of each individual, the conviction that a certain osmosis between religious life and the life of the surrounding world is both indispensable and a good thing, etc.

When Favre, to make up for the lack of approved constitutions, set about extracting points from Colin's texts, in spite of using the very same words, he could not hide the fact that he felt differently, and it was this difference of feeling, which combined with a certain lack of tact, led Colin to believe that t~ wanted to put aside both himself and the ideas he represented.

When, after ten years of painful ambiguity which I need not recall here, the Founder was again entrusted with the task of putting the final touches to the rule, the basic problem became all the more acute. Convinced that the Society had no future except in fidelity to the original inspiration, Colin not only took as his starting point the text that Marists had lived during his generalate, but he returned to certain detailed practices which, in the first rule, expressed in a particularly symbolic and powerful manner the choices proper to the Society. For example the request that the superior give preference to the views of his councillors over his own, which however he had the right to impose, the preference for works without any glory, the refusal to be attracted by money or comfort.

On all these points the opposing differences became clear, but **-and this is very important-** however convinced he was of the validity of his first insights Colin did not refuse to listen. A difficult dialogue began during which the requests of a new generation listened to, were helpful in making choices and often succeeded in finding more nuanced expressions which the Founder himself was happy to accept. The result was a text of constitutions in which young and old, Favre and Colin, pre-modern and potentially modern, can recognize themselves and which was to endure substantially unchanged until the second Vatican Council.

Even after the Council and after the rewriting it requested, Marists refused to bury in the archives the text which had sealed the unity of the Society, the text which melted together inspiration and experience, the demands of God and the requirements of man. It was a temporary fusion, of course, because in this area nothing can be definitive –who believes nowadays that any text can have an eternal value?– but the resulting text is of the highest importance, because it preserved for the Society the consciousness of not being its own creator and of being capable of further growth without being unfaithful to its beginnings.

I was asked to present in a limited time, Colin the founder; I am not sure if I have succeeded in bringing him close to you. Perhaps the account of certain episodes in his life or a panorama of the works he launched and animated would have held your attention more. No doubt you will also be interested in what Jan Snijders will tell us this evening on the relation between insights and today's problematic situation. At any rate, I have no regrets about choosing to show you a man grappling with what, until recent decades, our times hardly appreciated: a rule! Rule. Is it really necessary that men's journey to a God who is love and creation needs to be "ruled" like music sheets? To write and rewrite a text of which the only certainty is that it will not last forever, is it worth all the trouble?

In the face of such reactions, which we all share to some extent, rather than stay on the level of principles or recall historical precedents, I prefer to look at what is going on before our very eyes. Far removed from traditional canonical categories, more concerned to create than to conserve, Christians, oftentimes more laity than priests, are nowadays involved together in what religious have become tired of: lengthy periods of prayer, radical sharing, submission of their commitments to the control and decision of others. Through them God is coming back into his own. Driven out, happily, from a thousand places in which he had no business anyway. God in fact is not dead. He lives in those who allow themselves to be changed by him, and he shows himself most clearly when the willingness to listen is that of a group which he accepts and spells out his daily demands. Let us not speak here of "finding" God or "giving" him to a world waiting for him: one cannot give what one does not have, and no one can catch hold of God or make him their own. However, he promised to be present when people meet in his name, not of course to glory in possessing him, but to allow him to open us to our brothers; to organize that life together in the name of Christ and of his mother, to provide it with sufficient structure to enable it to last, that is what Colin tried to do all his life, that is what he brought to the church. After we stop looking for points of convergence between some of his themes and those which are dear to us today, he will remain as the one who succeeded in getting men to live together while being dispossessed of themselves and humbly present to others.

Our hope however is not merely that he be honored by historians for this feat, but that there will always be Marists to show in their very lives this form of life has not lost its attraction. This will be the case if those entrusted with Colin's heritage can recognize it not as a straightjacket, but as an opportunity, the opportunity of not having as reference point constitutions produced by themselves and reflecting their own desires, but a rule which forces them to look higher than themselves. Faith begins when our impatience to express ourselves does not block out the voice of one who speaks in silence, when our desire to make our mark does not prevent us from discerning the steps of one who came to meet us before we knew how to walk. The true paths to God are those in which we can recognize that he himself has already trodden, and the signs of his presence are likely to be genuine if they point to a meeting that has already taken place, a meeting which others can experience in their turn. A path, signs, meeting place, that is what Colin can offer, since he did not create them himself, but received them. There is a treasure there, hidden and unknown, that treasure of the father of a family in the gospel, from which many old things can be brought out, but from which, with your help, Marists still hope, in proportion to their faith, to see new things come out.

[This talk was given in Lyon on January 26, 1991 at a colloquium organized by the province of France for the bicentenary of the birth of Jean-Claude Colin.]