

COLINIAN PROPHETIC CRITICISM: Towards A New Church

To project a new consciousness, as Jean-Claude Colin does, is to attempt a programme which is radically critical. However, it is necessary for a prophet to establish some symbols which have an explicitly critical function and have the new consciousness as their reference point (Brueggemann, p. 66). In Colin's thought two such symbols can be detected: firstly, there is the set of what for Colin were absolutely non-negotiable elements, a set of rejections which Jean Coste has referred to as "the three no's", that is, the no to greed, the no to power, and the no to prestige (Coste, 1982, p. 29-31); and secondly, the symbol of Mary, the woman. There is in Colin an implicit protest against what in Jungian terms could be called the animus-dominated face of the Church.

Perhaps, before looking more closely at these areas of criticism, several points need to be made about the nature of Colin's criticism of the Church. Firstly, Colin's criticism emerges from genuine catholic spiritual traditions. Secondly, Colin's total concern was for the good of the Church. Thirdly, his criticism was not concerned with correcting institutions or structures in the Church; whole-hearted loyalty and support for the roman pontiff and the bishops was one of the explicit aims of the congregation he founded (Constitutions, 1872, n. 9). Colin's criticism was aimed rather at a whole type of behaviour of churchmen of his time, and consequently at a certain image of the Church itself.

The three no's

Colin's specific and outright rejection of greed, pride, and power derives from two sources. Firstly, his own experience of his times and his estimation of its needs. It was an age "of pride, luxury, materialism, sensuality, human and worldly progress, religious indifference, even godlessness" (Jeantin, quoted in Snijders, p. 34). In Colin's mind, the essence of this was an attachment to worldly considerations, material goods, external appearances, and the consequent rejection of dependence on God. Colin detected this worldly spirit as having penetrated the life of the Church. Concern for material goods, position, prestige, external trappings, and power were attitudes he experienced in the life of churchmen. Warning Marists against the rejection of dependence on God alone, Colin spoke in dire and prophetic terms:

If they were to forsake the spirit of poverty, Jesus and Mary would no longer acknowledge this Congregation as their own nor deign to dwell in its midst, and thus, left to its own frailty, it would in a short time and most certainly collapse into ruin. (Constitutions, 1872, n. 445)

These words are a clear echo of the words addressed by the biblical prophets to the people of Israel that, if they forsook the ways of God and relied on other gods, then He would no longer be their God, and they no longer His people. He would no longer dwell in their midst. For Colin, anything which smacked of this worldly spirit had to be unconditionally rejected.

The other source of these three no's lies in Colin's fundamental insight into the manner of Mary's presence in the Church. His reflection on this mystery made it clear to him that the spirit of greed, of desire for prestige and power, of concern for appearances was totally alien to the spirit of Mary and her manner of discipleship in the midst of the Church. Besides deriving from Colin's experience of the world and of the Church and from his fundamental insights, the three no's have this in common that they appear, in the strongest terms, in Colin's earliest attempt on the constitutions, namely the Cerdon fragments, and continue to appear consistently in all the subsequent stages of the development of the constitutions, right through to 1872. Clearly, these represent attitudes which for Colin were utterly non-negotiable.

Opposition to power, pride and greed is hardly a new statement in the history of Christian spirituality. Indeed, one Marist commentator refers to Colin's instinctive grasp of basic biblical and spiritual truths, especially as reflected in the temptations of Christ in the desert (Larkin, 1984, p. 25). The reference is interesting in that the context of our Lord's rejection of greed and self concern ("turn these stones into bread"), of pride and external show ("throw yourself down"), and of power and the abuse of authority ("I will give you all these kingdoms"), in His ministry and mission. And here, too, lies the significance of Colin's three no's: they are not moral exhortations, but rather calls to a way of being and acting in the midst of the Church, in the world, in ministry and mission. They are calls to a corporate witness and a corporate prophetic criticism.

The Mary symbol: Colin 's critique of the animus image

The question was asked in the previous chapter: why the Mary symbol? What of Christ? The answer to this question was that in Colin's manner of thinking the Christ symbol, because it had been co-opted by the image of an overtly masculine Church, reflected in its aggressive restoration efforts, its dogmatism, its power structures, and its moral rigorism, was rendered deficient as a symbol capable of speaking of the fullness of Christ in His poverty, in His weak humanity, in His compassion and mercy. Thus Colin's word to the Church and to the times was Mary-in-the-Church. She was to be the model, the face of the new Church which, Colin said, needed to be founded to meet the needs of the new times. Colin begins and, as it were, ends with the picture of Mary disappearing into the early Church, a Church which was of one heart and mind, which lived the poverty of sharing, which was vulnerable, which was lacking in worldly gifts, which waited and listened in prayer, which was an effective presence in a hostile world, which was modelled on Mary the perfect disciple hidden deep in its heart.

Colin clearly presented Mary as a critique of the present reality of the Church and of the times. If one were to take up Jung's concepts of the *animus* and the *anima*, with all that they imply, as tools of analysis, one could say that Colin presented a challenging criticism of the heavy animus orientation of both the Church and the times. As opposed as they were, Colin perceived that the post-revolutionary Church and the forces of the Enlightenment confronted each other in a similar spirit, a worldly spirit as far as Colin was concerned, a very animus-orientated spirit. If the Church was taken up with post-revolutionary assertiveness, high-handed dogmatism, judgemental rigorism, and legalism, if it was still caught up in the trappings of the power élite and still evoking privilege, so too was the new era assertive in its claims for human reason, its assertion of its rights, its competitiveness, its empiricism, and anti-romanticism, all of which attitudes betray the underlying emphasis of an animus orientation.

One could assemble numerous pages of texts which would demonstrate Colin's fundamental opposition to this animus tendency. Already it can be seen as underlying his three non-negotiables, the three no's. Here perhaps it is sufficient to cite Colin's views on a limited number of specific issues before attempting to extract their overall impact and the consequent image of the Church:

On confession: according to Colin, in the confessional, "it is the reign of mercy" (OM, doc. 711). "In the Society we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God, on account of the great weakness of poor human nature, without however falling into a laxist theology" (FS, doc. 37).

On attitude to sinners: "Show great kindness to sinners who come to you in the confessional. Do not rebuff them, or appear surprised by their crimes, however great they are: that would be a great imprudence and very harmful to souls. Instead, remember that you hold the place of Jesus Christ, and our Lord Jesus Christ knew the profound depths of the human heart" (FS, doc. 116, § 11). And again, Colin's well known advice to Marists was: "We must win souls by submitting ourselves to them" (FS, doc. 102, § 33).

On preaching: in the pulpit Marists are not to try "and gain a victory and take (people) by storm" (FS, doc. 92, § 16). In 1844, Colin recalled an early mission: "In a parish where the middle class had not attended the mission but where they came to the planting of the cross, Father Jallon, whose turn it was to preach, reproached them sharply, in a way which might have made them stay away for good. I was very upset, but then at the end I found an opportunity to say a few words. I spoke with great esteem, attention, and respect about those who had not attended. I even complimented them" (GM, doc. 581, § 19). Colin also advises us to avoid "those terrifying descriptions, comparisons with Judas" (FS, doc. 102, § 24).

On mission crosses: as in many villages a tree of liberty had been planted as a sign of the victory of reason over faith, so it was the custom during the restoration to conclude parish missions by planting a mission cross. Colin was not happy with this ceremony. To him it smacked of unnecessary triumphalism and was unnecessarily antagonistic. "As long as the cross is planted in people's hearts, there is no need to plant it in the ground" (FS, doc. 102, § 46).

On the law: "Rome was very useful to me on this point. It was there that I learned the maxim: 'Law was made for man'. If I cannot save him with the law, I shall try to save him without it" (FS, doc. 163, § 2). Again Colin stated, "In the confessional I follow the same principles as they, the Romans, do. I am very fond of those principles: *All for souls* and *Salvation before law*" (FS, doc. 95, § 3).

On moral rigorism: Colin, judging himself in the very early days of the Bugey missions, said that he was inclined to "pay too much attention to the law and not enough to the fragility of human nature" (OM doc. 577).

One could multiply relevant texts from Colin on how Marists are not to promote themselves but others; on

how they are not to claim their rights where pastors and bishops are concerned, out of a desire for unity in the Church; how they are never to make use of connections in high or powerful places to further the interests of the Society. A picture emerges from the whole ensemble of Colin's practical advice and instructions: it is a picture of a marian presence in the Church. Or, to use the jungian concepts suggested, there is a clear anima orientation in Colin's approach. And in this there is always the implicit criticism of current ecclesiastical culture and of the times. These too often emphasise reason, Colin emphasises the heart; these too often emphasise the law, Colin emphasises the priority of the person; these too often emphasise domination, Colin emphasises presence and solidarity; these too often emphasise self-sufficiency and self-reliance, Colin emphasises vulnerability, faith, and trust; these too often emphasise justice, Colin emphasises mercy. Here, surely, is the reflected image of the woman, the perfect disciple, Mary in the Church. Here, too, is the key symbol of the prophetic criticism which is an implicit function of Colin's word to the Church and the world, of Mary's active presence in the Church as showing us a new way to be Church, to be ministers, to be apostles, to be disciples.

The Colinian Eschatological Vision

The biblical prophet reaches into the past to draw from the memory of God's people symbols and images which speak to the present reality. If the prophetic word has a critical function in relation to this present reality, it also exercises, as Brueggemann points out, an energising function: the prophetic word speaks of future possibility and newness.

It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God.

The prophet speaks anew God's word, which already lies at the heart of His people's origin and past. But this is more than just an exercise in reminiscence. God's word spoken afresh in the context of a present reality is a critique of that reality and a challenge to it. But the prophetic word signifies even more than this. Its critical and challenging function is essentially in the interest of a liberation from the confines of the present perception of reality. In other words, the prophetic word has an essentially future-orientated dimension. If the critical function of the prophetic word is in the interest of liberation, of wider horizons, and of new possibilities, then it must be ultimately the projection of an eschatological vision. It is this vision which gives meaning and purpose to the liberation and which embodies the wider horizons and the newness of possibility.

Colin's eschatological vision of the Church

In the order of the rediscovery and re-appropriation of Jean Claude Colin's thought, his eschatological vision has been among the last. Perhaps there has been a tendency for Marists to side-step important colinian texts, looking upon them as embarrassing oddities of extravagant language. In two studies Father Jean Coste has outlined the basis of a coherent approach to Colin's eschatology (1982, 1984). Colin seems to have been thoroughly imbued with an eschatological line of thinking. Indeed, it is only during the period of his generalate (1836-1854), when vital practical concerns faced him, that the end-of-time mode is not a strong feature of his thinking. The eschatological line of thought is strong during Colin's fertile and inspirational pre-generalate period, and it is a line of thought which returned to him during the last period of his life, when he was freed from immediate practical concerns and was devoting himself to attempting to embody his key insights in the constitutions of the Society. We have already discussed Colin's prophetic word to the Church of his day, "I was the support of the Church at its beginning, and will be its support at the end of time. This word, which is so central to all of Colin's thinking, has an undeniable eschatological orientation.

If one can look through some of Colin's apparently wild and exaggerated language, what emerges is an eschatological vision which is quite free of anything bizarre, grotesque, or even exaggerated. One of the most important texts in this regard is contained in none other than Colin's 1833 *Summarium Regularum Societatis Mariae*, which constitutes his first attempt to present a rule to Roman officials. It is worth presenting here:

The general aim of the Society is to contribute in the best possible way, both by its prayers and its efforts, to the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, and to gather, so to speak, all the members of Christ, whatever their age, sex, or standing, under the protection of the blessed Mary Immaculate, Mother of God; and to revive their faith and piety and nourish them with the doctrine of the Roman Church, so that, at the end of time as at the beginning, all of the faithful may with God's help be one heart and mind in the bosom of the Roman Church and that all, walking worthily before

God and under Mary's guidance, may attain eternal life. For this reason, entry to the Society is open to lay persons living in the world in the confraternity or Third Order of the Virgin Mary. (s, 109: AT 1, p. 83)

Of the many Colinian texts with eschatological elements present in them, this is the one that Jean Coste mainly centers on. He points out (1982, p. 9) that this text, although being presented in a legal context to Roman authorities and purportedly dealing with the aims of the Society of Mary, is actually an expression of an eschatological vision. Indeed, in this text the key elements of Colin's eschatology can be discovered.

1. Colin's eschatological vision is clearly a vision for the incarnated, institutional Church. Whereas some eschatological dreams imply an anti-institutional stance, it is precisely from within this Church that Colin looks forward into the last days, and it is precisely for this Church that he envisages a fulfilling future. Colin foresees the Church as all of God's people, no matter what their state, being gathered around Peter and their piety and faith thus being nourished with true doctrine and true communion. Colin's vision, therefore, is not one for some other Church, for some idealized or over-spiritualised entity; Colin himself described such a thought as blasphemous (FS, doc. 120, § 1). However, already it is clear that Colin is looking for the Church to be more of what it means to be Church and, like many before him, he evokes the image of the early apostolic Church: the Church is to be more of a communion being united as "one heart and one mind"; it is to be more inclusive and embracing and less defensive and exclusive. It is important to note again that Colin does not invoke the image of the early Church of Pentecost as being the basis of some other, essentially different Church, but rather as an authentic image expressing the full possibilities of the institutional Church. Essential, then, in Colin's vision is the ecclesial image of the institutional Church of which Peter is the leader, the symbol of unity and the source of authentic piety, faith, and doctrine.

2. Mary has an essential role in Colin's eschatological vision of the Church, a role that she has already begun to play. In many classical eschatologies, according to Coste (1984, p. 7), the final age is marked by the appearance of the anti-Christ; it is an age of a final crisis. It is also an "age of the Spirit"; Grignion de Montfort uses this expression. For Colin, however, the focus is Mary, as if the last days could be referred to as the "age of Mary," though he never uses this expression as part of a neatly formulated eschatology. However, he does use the expression in an eschatological context (FS, doc. 78, § 2).

What looms largest in Colin's vision of the early Church is Mary's presence and action in it. Colin's insight of Mary's essential relationship with the Church and the mystery of her continual presence in it, especially in the last days, is fundamental to his eschatology. As to the early Church, it is as if Colin had caught a glimpse of Mary, not clinging to her privileges as mother of Jesus, as she disappears into the Church, where, in her "hidden and unknown" presence, she becomes the key model of the Church, full of grace, ever attentive to God's word, ever open to the Spirit, a presence, indeed, such as to have occasioned another out-flowing of the Spirit.

It is no surprise that what Colin sees as the emergence of the Church in its fullness, being again what it had been "in the beginning," is to be related to a renewed presence of Mary in the Church, a presence which will occasion a new out-flowing of the Spirit and will typify the Church. Colin's clear vision is that Mary will be present in the Church of those last days as an active symbol of what the Church is called to be. She will symbolise the Church's openness and obedience to God's word, its receptivity and docility to the Spirit, its mission of heading and nourishing all her children, especially the weakest, the lost, the poor, the sinners, the marginalised ones. Mary will be the symbol of the welcoming and gathering arms reaching out to all God's children, so that "there would be seen at the end of time what had been seen at the beginning: *Cor unum et anima una*" (OM, doc. 427, § 2).

3. The third feature of Colin's eschatological thinking is that it is pastoral rather than apocalyptic. As Coste points out (1984, p. 7), there are some dark and gloomy texts from Colin, especially after the 1848 revolution; nonetheless Colin's viewpoint about the last days is to regard them, not as a final, catastrophic struggle, but as a final gathering in of all God's children around Mary, in the new Church. His picture, then, of a marian Church in the last days is not that of a Church made up of an exclusive and proven elite, but rather of an inclusive body, embracing all. This eschatological vision is strongly pastoral. If the growth of the Church to its fullness is the growth of a marian Church, then the Church of today is provided with Mary as a pastoral symbol, a symbol of how it is to use its power, relate to its own privileges, be present in the world, conduct itself in its works and in its prayer, a symbol of its practical and actual values, attitudes, and priorities.

In summary, Colin's eschatological vision derives entirely from within the life and the traditions of the institutional Church. It is a vision for this Church, not for some other entity. It is a vision of the possibilities that are inherent in this Church, of possibilities which in fact have already been seen in it. And yet, it is a vision of a renewed Church, a Church made new by the eschatological, Spirit-freeing presence of Mary, who "supported the Church in the beginning and will do so at the end of time." Besides being a picture of the Church in its last days, this vision has an immediate pastoral function if the Church of today is to allow its eschatological potential to emerge. Thus, although Colin's vision has an essential forward-looking thrust, it calls to mind the beginnings and challenges the present. In Colin we have an eschatology rooted in the Church's historical reality, related to the Church's being and pastoral life, yet still implying the Church's wider possibilities for itself. Perhaps it is this happy combination which enables Colin's eschatological thought to side-step the grotesque, the spectacular, the apocalyptic which often empty eschatological visions of their energising potential.

The Society of Mary in Colin's eschatology

Jean-Claude Colin founded the Society of Mary primarily because he was convinced that this is what Mary herself wanted: "Here is what I want..." (OM, doc. 718, § 5). He was convinced that Mary wanted a society bearing her name, because she intended to play a crucial role in the Church of these present "last days". The mission of the Society of Mary, therefore, cannot be thought of in terms of some specific apostolic function, but in terms of Colin's eschatological vision. Mary intends to be the support of the Church in these last difficult days as she supported the Church in its early difficult days. The Church in its last days will once again be a Church with Mary hidden in its midst as an active symbol of all it means to be Church, to be disciple. It will be a Church after the type of Mary. The mission of the Society of Mary has an essential and immediate eschatological dimension. Thus Colin talks of it in somewhat grandiose, often untheological language. The Society is "to begin a new Church," "gather all... under the protection of the blessed Mary," "invade everywhere," "embrace the whole world," "seize the whole universe", bring about "the kingdom of Mary" (FS, doc. 120; s, 109; OM, doc. 427, § 2; 846, § 18, 36). The essence of all this is that it is the mission of the Society of Mary to be an instrument of Mary's presence in the Church, so helping to initiate the new Church of the last days. Individual Marists are called so to imbue themselves with Mary's own consciousness that she will become their perspective on all things, and together as a community they are called to disappear into the Church, attempting to make present within it the emerging reality of the new Church of the last days. Being a marian presence in the Church, the Society will not draw attention to itself, will act in such a way as to be "hidden and unknown", will continually say no to wealth, power, and prestige, will not draw anything to itself but will promote the interests of others, will be the welcoming and gathering arms of Mary, gathering others not to itself but to the Church (in such a way that the bishops will regard the Society "as their own"), and will be Mary's merciful outreach to the poor, the neglected, the sinners, the marginalised.

Colin desired that the mission of the Society determine its actual structure. This is what he put to the Roman authorities in the form of his *Summarium* in 1833. Because the mission of the Society was to be a microcosm of the new Church of the present times, then, as in the Church, membership in the Society must be open to all. We recall Colin's comment in which he compares the Society with the Society of Jesus:

Someone reminded him that he had said the whole world must be Marist. He said, "Yes, God the Father has appointed our Lord as judge of the living and the dead. The congregation of Jesus is a simple body. With the Jesuits you must have talents and many other things.

"In the congregation of the blessed Virgin, it is not so. She is the mother of Mercy. Her congregation will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people." (FS, doc. 2)

Jean Coste comments on this:

We can see that the very structure of the Society Colin has in mind, with priests, brothers, sisters, and an immense association of lay people, is linked to his vision of an age of mercy represented by Mary, who is less concerned with judging or selecting than with gathering and uniting all her children. (1984, p. 8)

It was not surprising that Rome was unable to accept a religious congregation of such proportions. What resulted in fact was a family of congregations: priests, sisters, and brothers, with an approved Third Order associated with the Society of Mary, a congregation of priests and brothers. This juridical situation, while of

course not destroying the mission of the Society, nonetheless has weakened its symbolic impact. Colin's thinking on the Third Order is significant here.

The Marist who made the most effective impact in developing the Third Order was Pierre-Julien Eymard. He developed the Third Order of Mary along the lines of the traditional Third Orders and in line with the trends characterising Third Orders in the mid-nineteenth century. His "concept for the Third Order was somewhat restrictive and élitist. [...] It was designed to assist people of greater religious inclination and sensitivity to advance in perfection" and in the interior life. It had rules regarding exercises of prayer and meditation, and certain disciplines were laid down regarding dress and entertainment (Keel, I 980a, p. 20). This group gravitated around the religious of the Society of Mary, were associated with its works, and contributed to them by their prayer and support.

This was not Colin's idea for the Third Order. It is apparent that Colin fundamentally regarded the Marist project as a movement rather than as simply a new foundation of religious. Although Colin's work did result in the formal approbation of congregations of religious, his approach to the Third Order captured his real inclinations. For him, the Third Order was not to be a group of "mini-religious" in the world, gravitating around the Society of Mary. The trappings of religious life, such as postulancy, novitiate, profession, habit, rule, which Eymard had made part of the Third Order, had little relation to Colin's ideas.

These ideas were at once less grandiose and yet more grandiose. Less, in that Colin's aims for the Third Order were to be very basic, namely, the perseverance of the just and the conversion of sinners; and yet more grandiose, in that he saw the whole world as being gathered into this Third Order. The Third Order for Colin was to be a key instrument in the emergence of the new Church. It was to be the welcoming gateway of Mary's mercy to all God's children. This Third Order must be open to all, according to Colin even to "sinners and the ungodly" (OM, doc. 846, § 18). His concept is big, but that is because Colin is not envisaging a neat, tidy, and specifically structured group of laity; he is talking about the new, "marian typed" Church of the last days which it is the Society's mission to promote. It is the Church which is to be promoted, not the Society of Mary, which must disappear into the Church. Father Colin entrusted the presentation of his ideas on the Third Order to Father Alphonse Cozon. Cozon has left us with what is probably the best statement of Colin's vision:

In the mind of the founder, the third order ought not to be shut up within the limits of the Society. It ought to be, in a sense, a work outside the Society, to which the Society ought to communicate its own special spirit, which is the spirit of the Blessed Virgin. Its development, therefore, ought not to be restricted to the proportions of the Society; we are not to retain it in our hands, but only let it pass through them. Thus, it is not a mechanical piece in the Society's clockwork, it should not shine around us, so to speak, like a planet around its constellation, but it should shine in the Church. Thus, it is no longer a precious means to help the Society by drawing the interest of pious faithful to the Society, but rather it is a means of extending Marist action over the world, in such a way that the same thrust, going forth from Mary, passing through the Fathers and the members of the Third Order, might go forth and lose itself in the Church without any personal consideration. (Translation by Girard, 1990, p. 157)

It is clear that Colin considers the mission of the Society to be an essentially eschatological one. It is also clear that he considers this mission to be bigger, and more important, than the Society, for he considers it to be none other than the mission of the Church itself. Thus, the Society must disappear into the Church, not gather anything to itself nor promote itself; it must submit itself to this mission and be constantly within the Church, conscious that it is the Church's mission which the Society is called to serve.

By constantly placing itself within the context of Colin's eschatological vision, the Society of Mary will best find itself constantly recalled to and renewed in its spirit and mission: to imbue itself with Mary's consciousness, to have her perspectives on all things, to be "hidden and as if unknown in this world," and so be an effective sacrament of Mary's presence in the midst of the Church.

Source: Michael Fitzgerald, *A MARIAN CONSCIOUSNESS Maristica 5*, Rome 1991 pp.72 – 74; 86 – 92; 94 – 110.