

## IN THE MASTER'S FOOTPRINTS

“I supported the Church as it was being born, and I will do so again at the end of time.” They are our founding words, The Society moves in that direction so to speak. They always served as an encouragement to us.

Early on in this retreat, we reflected on the first part of that, Mary in the early Church. We can't leave by avoiding the second part, the end time.

This is a difficult notion and I confess from the outset that I personally don't understand it. But I have a deep instinct that it is important and we have been running the danger of watering it down because we don't understand it or disagree with it.

There are difficulties. It seems fairly clear for example, that Fr. Colin sincerely believed that the age in which he lived was indeed literally the end time. The end was near, the second coming was just around the corner. In this he was similar to the first generation of disciples in the New Testament. There is ample evidence that they thought that Jesus' second coming was not long away. Unfortunately most of us don't believe with Fr. Colin that the end is just coming tomorrow or a month or a year away.

That's the first difficulty, we are not convinced that these are the end times. So we water it down a bit and say he really meant these last days in the sense of these latest days. He means now. Of course, we are right there but we have lost the eschatological dimension.

Another difficulty for us is that in the nineteenth century, particularly in France, it was truly the age of Mary. Devotion to Mary was strong and vigorous throughout the Church. Almost every congregation that was founded at that time, and there were many, were in some way dedicated to Mary. She was a strong, notable force in the Church. Devotion to her was part of the fabric of Catholic life.

As we all know, that is not the case now. We can hardly call the age we live in the Age of Mary. If it is to be measured in terms of devotion to her and the direct influence she has on Church life. One of the mystifying things for us Marists is how devotion to Mary seemed to collapse with Vatican II, despite what Vatican II did with regard to teaching about Mary.

There has been a huge paradigm shift in the Church from the Mary Queen of Heaven, Mary of the Rosary, Mary of the Assumption to another figure of Mary much less glorious, much closer to ourselves and more a companion than an object of devotion.

So, what are we to make of the end time? I suspect that we have to wrestle with this because it is of the very essence of our vocation. Until we come to terms with this idea of the end time, we won't be convinced that Mary wants to support the Church in this time. And if Mary doesn't want to support the Church in this time, we have no vocation because that's why we're here. Just as she supported the Church at Pentecost as it was being born, so she wants to support the Church now and she wants to do it through us. That's our founding story. That's the touchstone of our identity.

As we wrestle with this we come up against Fr. Colin's oft quoted saying, “The whole world Marist” and that's another difficult notion for us. He wasn't a megalomaniac. He wasn't trying to

win the whole world into the Society of Mary. But he certainly believed that the whole world should be Marist in the sense of like Mary.

Many times throughout his life, he referred to this and he often told the funny story of when he was talking with Cardinal Castracane, and Cardinal Castracane said something like, “The whole world will be Marist then?” “Yes, yes,” Colin says, “and the Pope too.” You know the story well. But at the end of his life, he was still saying the same thing. You will be surprised, this old fellow, this old duffer here, whom you see in front of you with one foot in the grave, has a great ambition. This eighty-three year old, doddering old man, still has a great ambition. To seize the whole world and to place it under Mary’s wings by means of the Third Order.

Some of you no doubt, have been saying, “When’s he going to talk about the Third Order? When’s he going to talk about the other branches of the Marist family?” Well, it’s a bit late, but I am going to talk about the Third Order.

Of course, this is of the essence. As Fr. Jago reminded us at the Chapter last year, “the Society of Mary has no future without the laity and the sleeping giant is beginning to awaken.” That’s true, we’ve got no future without the laity and we’re not just talking about collaboration and the development of lay ministries.

The Society of Mary is really a movement, its a great impulse and it starts from the heart of Mary and it spreads out. We are merely the agents, the intermediaries. It’s meant to pass through us. We are just the conductors of something far greater than ourselves.

The Third Order in my view must be an immense association which encompasses the whole world. We’re not talking about fidelity, although there is a place for that. We’re talking about an atmosphere, a spirit which is to grab everyone. It is the spirit of Jesus as reflected through the model disciple Mary. That’s what we’re really talking about.

This is indeed one of the big ideas. This is going to be the mark of the end time. The whole world like Mary. Colin said the whole world Marist all right. It probably sounds closer to Mary in the French than it does in English. But he had a sound instinct here which contemporary theology has caught up with and has explained much more clearly than in his basic intuition.

The gospels do recall Mary as the model disciple, as an archetype of what it means to follow Christ. She is the pattern that every disciple should be modeled on. She is the perfect disciple because as St. Luke says in Chapter eight, at the conclusion of that great parable, she is the seed in rich soil. The person with a noble and generous heart who hears the word, takes it to herself and yields a harvest through her perseverance. That is Luke’s definition of a disciple, a person with a noble and generous heart and the essence of discipleship is hearing the word with an ear attentive to the voice of God, the Word of God. And taking that word deep into herself, identifying with that word and then allowing it to affect her life.

That is obedience and we know that the Hebrew word *shama* or listening is exactly the same as the word for obeying. If we truly hear the word of God, its not something that comes in at the ears and stays in the head. The word of God sinks deep into the heart and transforms us so that we are different from henceforth. That’s true obedience, that’s true listening to God and of course that is following Jesus.

Mary of course did that most perfectly. The Word that she heard was the very Word of God in capital letters. God as it were spoke out to our world and Mary was the one who heard that word and she too it literally deep into her heart, into her womb, transformed it into herself and spoke it back to God as a human being in Jesus Christ. The most perfect way of listening to the word of God and responding to it in her own way, a human way. God as it were speaks the divine language. Mary receives it, translates it, speaks it in her own language and Jesus is born, the Word is made flesh. Mary is the perfect disciple, the model disciple and every disciple in some way has to reflect the essence of discipleship as found in Mary.

So when Colin says he wants the whole world Marist, he is really asking that the whole world be won for Jesus Christ. That the whole world become followers of Jesus. The mission of the Society therefore now becomes the mission of the Church which is to go out to the whole world baptizing, making disciples in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here again is this deep insight that Marists are men of the Church. We must be because our mission is in fact that of the Church.

To make the whole world Marist is not an egocentric idea. It is another way of saying of winning the world for Christ. That's our mission and of course, when that happens, when the world is won for Christ, we are at the end, the end times have come, the world has reached its fulfillment, the Kingdom has come and we are at the end of time.

So Marists, therefore we have to reach out for the end time and try to make them real now. That's how I understand the importance of the end time for us. We don't settle for any half-measures. When we are told to found a new Church, we're not looking for a Church which is new and which will be good for the next hundred or two hundred years. We as it were reach for the fulfillment, what we know it will be and try to make it real now. We don't settle for half-measures, for what's good enough for now or good enough for a hundred years. We want the perfect realization of what God wants and we work to make that happen now.

There is a sense of urgency about it because the world isn't fully redeemed. People are hurting out there now. There's plenty of injustices, violence, warfare, all the things which are the antithesis of the kingdom of justice and peace which Jesus proclaims.

So, the whole world Marist, the end time, the coming of the Kingdom, the establishment of the Kingdom of Peace and Justice, the coming again of Jesus all of these are the things we want to bring about now. And if we don't, it's perhaps because we are a bit seduced by the world in which we live, we quite like it and we don't want it to come to an end. But if we are truly fired up with zeal for the Gospel, we do want the kingdom to come, we do want Jesus' work to be completed and the sooner the better.

That's something for me anyway of why the end times are a vital part of our vocation. If we ignore that, it's to our peril. There is a sense of urgency, there should be fire in our belly for this.

It's not a peculiarly Marist thing. It's really what the Church is on about. It's what every Christian should be striving for and it's very, very Marian. She wanted nothing more than the extension and the fulfillment of the Incarnation, which surely means she wants what began in her womb to reach its fulfillment, come to completion.

Her job was not over just in nine months when she gave birth to Jesus. Her job continued right through his early life and it's Colin's instinct that it's still continuing. Just as I gave birth to Jesus

in Nazareth, just as I gave birth to the Church at Pentecost, I want to give birth to the Kingdom at the end of time. There's a continuity there, Mary's the same, that's what it's all about I suspect.

Now it's not going to be done just through the Society of Mary, and possibly less these days, by the clerical branch of the Society of Mary. But it is going to be done by the people of the Church who take on the features of Mary and that's what the Third Order is. It's important that we realize that it's an event of association. It's as big as the Church, as big as the world.

This is Fr. Colin's last thought: "It's not part of your body. My thought has always been that it should be a work of the Society" We should be promoting a lay Church which bears the features of Mary. It's a work we've got but it's outside of us, it's much bigger than us and it should go beyond us, we are the mere conductors, it should pass through us. If we hold it to ourselves, as our work, as our little group of lay auxiliaries, who are there to help us be a bit more efficient or because we haven't got so many people now to staff our colleges or our parishes, let's bring in the lay people to help us.

Rubbish! They're not there for our aggrandizement, to help us do our work. We're there to help them, the apostles, to spread the Word, to establish the Kingdom of peace and justice in this world. We're there for them, not them for us.

So, it should be a work of the Society but outside the Society. The Blessed Virgin entrusts this to you as a bridge to souls. I presume it's from this text that this new text we've been given gets its title, "As a Bridge."

Fr. Cozon continues this thought, and he was the one who really preserved within the Society the Colinian notion of the laity bearing the face of Mary. We've got an enormous debt of gratitude to Fr. Cozon.

"In the mind of the Founder, the Third Order ought not be confined with the limits of the Society. It ought, in a sense, to be a work outside of the Society, to which the Society will communicate its spirit of the Holy Virgin. Its development ought not to be limited to the dimensions of the Society, It ought not remain in our hands, but pass to others. It ought not to be an essential mechanism of the Society, nor revolve around it as a planet around the sun, but ought to radiate freely in the Church. It would be wrong to consider it as a valuable means for aiding the Society by interesting the pious faithful in its works: it is rather the medium for transmitting farther the impetus received from Mary, so that, passing through the Fathers and the Tertiaries, it might keep on going and finally disappear at the farthest reaches, so to say, of the Church, without any personal consideration." (LM Anth, 7.B.2 §20)

It's a big idea, and it's vitally important. That's what Fr. Jago meant in the Society of Mary has no future without the laity. In a sense, they're much more important than we are because they are the Kingdom, the Kingdom of the last days.

Although we are a people of the end time, it is also clear that we are a people of today's world and we can marry the two notions only if, in a sense, we seek to make the present age the final age. It's not because we want to kill everyone off but because we want God's will to be done and the Kingdom to come quickly.

The other problem with the end times I have to wrestle with is that our present age is very different from Fr. Colin's age. In this, I personally take a bit of issue with Fr. Snijders in his

book. I think there are grave and great differences between the age in which we live in and the age in which Fr. Colin lived. We only have to think in our imagination of nineteenth century rural France and compare it with the world we live in today.

True, there is a continuity, but its not just the age of the Enlightenment any more, its not even the age of secularism. We don't even have a name for our present age. We call it the Post-Modern age because we are aware that even modern times are now passed and we are living somewhat beyond it.

The biggest difference is that even in Colin's age, even in the age of Enlightenment and secularism, there were still certainties, there were absolutes, even though they weren't particularly Christian absolutes. The human person was still at the center, freedom was an absolute, the dignity of man, the ability of man to unlock the secrets of the universe. Man the measure of all things. That was the age of the Enlightenment. That's what Colin was fighting against.

But these days, unfortunately, even those certainties have gone. We live in the age of relativism as you know. It comes out for us and makes the challenge of our apostolates so much more difficult. It comes out in "Yes, that's your opinion, you're entitled to your opinion but I'll have mine as well."

Truth is not a value of our age, practicality, usefulness have taken its place. We don't seem to live in a world of absolutes. I might be absolutely convinced of the truth of the Gospel and I'm not so much met with hostility out there when I try to share that truth, as indifference. "So what? You're entitled to your opinion." What do you do with that?

Colin was met much more with a definite hostility. There was a new ideology in the world after the French Revolution, but it was an ideology. There were certainties, but nevertheless, they were certainties. You knew what you were fighting at, but today, the challenge is, its sort of wishy-washy out there, it sort of goes with the flow.

That is a genuine difficulty and so we have to ask ourselves does the pastoral strategy of the hidden and unknown for example, which was so effective in Colin's day, is it still the strategy that is effective for this new world out there? Colin's no to greed, to power, to ambition, which was so relevant in his day because they were obstacles to the gospel, are they still the same obstacles today or are there new obstacles?

Like the fact that the preacher might come on too strong. Its also the privatization of life. It is certainly an extension of the freedom of things. The respect for freedom which has now become extremely privatized. "We like to live in a society, our family," but we choose our friends, and strangers aren't welcomed in it, in that little circle.

These signs of the times are something which impressed me from Timothy Radcliffe who is significant for us – I think he's the Master General of the Dominican Order. I think he says some important things, particularly how he contrasts the world with our founding myth, the gospel.

Finally, that survey on religious in this country pinpointed from the data surveyed where the future could lie for a congregation. It said that the religious of the future will focus on the gap between the evident culture and the gospel community. I think there is a lot of truth in that. Earlier we talked about the faith shock that founders experience when they notice the gap

between the gospel and the reality of the world in which they live. That's still where religious are going to find their place, in the gap between the world in which we live and the gospel values.

But let us not forget that for Colin, we are primarily a missionary congregation. Don't begrudge your time with sinners, he said. We don't like that word now. It's another example of the relativism in which we live. Who am I to judge anyone? Good question. I'm not judging anyone but he certainly did. He called them sinners. It doesn't matter. We know the type of people he's talking about. The world. That's what the Rule tells us. That's the work of the missionary, the conversion of sinners. Winning souls for Christ.

Archaic language. We know what he's getting at. If a soul comes to you who's already on the right path, then you can be brief. A few words to encourage them. They will be saved anyway. We are not sent to that kind of person. Marists may say with the Lord, "I have not come to call the just," they've already been called. "I'm here to call sinners."

We are a missionary congregation. Fr. Fernandez is reminding us of that. Fr. Jago at the Chapter last year was most insistent on it. I'm told that a sort of catch-cry at the Chapter was a kind of aside he made when he was giving his report to the assembly: "The status quo has no future." The past has no future. A future toward restorationism is not going to solve the problems today. And there is a movement towards restorationism in the Church. That's quite clear. That's what Colin had to grapple with. The Church of his day was trying to restore the pre-Revolutionary Church. There seems to be an insidious movement in the Church today trying to restore the pre-Vatican II Church. We will have none of that. Adopting a fundamentalist approach is not any kind of solution.

Now this is no comment or criticism of the past or past practices. Fr. Jago is not doing that. He was just well aware that the world has moved and we are sent out into the world. It is difficult. We regret the changes, we might think it's worse, that doesn't matter. The point is, it has changed and we have no option. So we can't go back. Our mission is to the world of today and to try and ensure that it is also the world of the end time.

Finally again, Fr. Jago tells us to look at our Index. Let's be honest and realistic, he said at the last Chapter. To know what our real missionary commitments are, we mustn't look at documents. We've made the pious statements, it's all written down in every Chapter, Provincial Chapter, General Chapter. We've all made the good resolutions and written them faithfully down. But he says, if you want to know where our true commitments lie, look at the Index. There you will see the apostolates in which we've chosen to stay. The apostolates in which we chose to work and you look at them and you judge them against Marist criteria, against our old roots and you see whether indeed they are new shoots or just dead branches. And I suspect he was saying that if you were honest and realistic, you'll find more dead wood in the Index than we should be comfortable with.

But all is not lost. In fact I am someone who is full of hope for the Society because when we also look at the Index we see definite signs of hope. We see them in the apostolates we have chosen.

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