

## **September 24, 1836: the Society of Mary “drawn up as in battle array”**

We spent time yesterday getting some sense of what April 29, 1836, meant for the Marist enterprise. Today I invite you to give similar attention to the date of September 24. The brief of April 29 empowered, in a precise and limited way, the priest members of the Society of Mary to elect a superior general and to take simple vows. The meeting where this took place was held in Belley, four months after the brief of approval arrived there.

Although the Marist Brothers and the Marist Sisters were approved by Rome only much later (1863 for the Brothers, 1884 for the Sisters), in 1836 both congregations existed as diocesan congregations and already had their superior general in the persons of Marcellin Champagnat and of Mother Saint Joseph. The situation of the priests was different: they belonged either to the diocese of Lyon or of Belley, they did not exist officially as a group, and had no official superior except their local bishop. In fact, however, they had been functioning for six years with Jean-Claude Colin as central superior, and as soon as Champagnat heard that the Society was approved and that they would be taking vows, he wrote Father Colin that he was ready to take his. Father Colin wrote back, on June 23:

No doubt you know that the brief of approval of the Society empowers us to elect a superior general; in the meantime, I am far from wanting to consider myself such and consequently to act as such. Until this election, I don't mind continuing to be the rallying point as in the past, but I will take great care not to order or to receive vows. Still, your dispositions edify me greatly; I wish all the other confreres thought and acted like you; I hope God will eventually grant them this grace. (OM, doc. 396, § 1)

So, three months before the September meeting, it was not yet clear who would and who would not join. In the end, twenty one people met in Belley. Just to list their names would mean little; to get acquainted with each of them would take up too much of our time. Let us mention some we already know: though consecrated a bishop in June, Pompallier was a full-fledged participant. Jean-Claude Colin, Champagnat, Declas, and Terrailon had been with the project since the Fourviere pledge in 1816. Other names will be familiar to you either because they were part of the first group of missionaries (Bret, Chanel, Bataillon, Servant), or because they came this way later (Antoine Seon, Baty, Forest).

While only the priests gathered on September 20 in the physics laboratory of the minor seminary, let us recall that the Marist Sisters, the Marist Brothers, and the members of the Third Order in Lyon were very close in spirit to the group that met in retreat. The Marist convent of Bon-Repos was only ten minutes away; Pierre Colin was spiritual director there; Chanel's sister Françoise was there as Sister Saint-Dominique; several of the sisters had been directed there by Champagnat. The brothers at the Hermitage not only had their founder at the meeting, but they were also well acquainted with Etienne Seon, Bourdin, Pompallier, Chanut, Forest, who had lived at the Hermitage. There were also the men and women members of the Third Order in Lyon whose director, Pompallier, had just been replaced by Forest. In a real sense, the meeting in Belley was of vital interest to all branches of the Society of Mary.

At that meeting the priests' branch of the Society of Mary came into being. As we are challenged in a special way to make that happen again, it may help us to consider how it took place. Let us concentrate on two aspects: the explanation of the rule and the election of the superior general. The rule was the charter of the Society which the Marists were going to form; it spelled out the terms of their fellowship; the superior general provided a head for this group and enabled it to function as a body.

In September 1836, there was no officially approved rule; the brief of April 29 had explicitly left that to a later date. There was, however, a rule in the making. Much work remained to be done on it, but it was a body of writing that already had a twenty-year long history. Most of it went back to Colin's years in Cerdon, but Colin had re-worked it during his stay in Rome in 1833 and again in early 1836. During the four days of retreat that preceded the election and the taking of vows, Jean-Claude Colin went over the text of this rule with all the candidates to profession.

As it happens, we have a text very close to the one used at that meeting and we can form a rather precise idea of the themes around which the early Marists rallied. They remain *basic* themes of Marist spirituality: what the name Society of Mary means and what characterizes the Society. All we can do here is indicate rapidly how the early Marists would have made that meditation and how we can make it for ourselves.

A good instance of how a Marist in 1836 would express himself is a paragraph Colin wrote Bishop Pompallier about three weeks after September 24, while the missionaries are preparing to depart for Oceania:

“Always remember the poverty, the simplicity of the Apostles; they too were bishops, and yet they often worked with their hands to take care of the primary needs of life. Simplicity, poverty, a spirit of zeal must always accompany the missionaries of Mary; this sweet name will ever remind you that you are leaving under her banner, that she is the one leading you, that she is the star of the sea, that under her protection you have nothing to fear. In need, in perilous undertakings, see only Jesus and Mary, expect help only from them; don't reason with yourself, but always see Jesus and Mary.

Finally, conduct yourselves and regulate your external behavior in such a way that people everywhere recognize that you are the children of Mary and that the missionaries we will send you find again among all of you the spirit of the Society, which is a spirit of poverty, of humility, and of simplicity.” (Colin to Pompallier, October 18, 1836)

What strikes me here? The missionary context, the way Jesus and Mary are kept present to the mind, the implications for behavior. And most importantly, of course, the way these three dimensions are closely knit into one whole.

a) The missionary dimension: as the reference to the apostles makes clear, Colin was well aware of the similarities between the enterprise upon which the first Marists were embarking and the beginning of the church as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Nor did this apply only to those who were preparing to leave for Oceania. It was the whole Society which was engaged in founding the church again. Cardinal Castracane had rejected such an ambition at the same time as he rejected the plan for a four-branch Society, but the theme was too much at the heart of the Marist enterprise for it not to emerge in other forms.

Indeed, Colin always speaks of the Society in missionary terms, with regard not only to Oceania, but also to France. It was not easy for people in his time to be critical of the situation of the church.

When French liberal Catholics like Lamennais tried to speak the language of the French revolution, they were quickly crushed. The efforts of the early Marists to go against some accepted practices in the pulpit and in the confessional remained on the humbler level of daily ministry, but they expressed an awareness that the life of the church had become fossilized and stood in need of renewal.

b) How did Marists gain their fresh perspective on the church and where did they look for ways of renewing pastoral practices? They did this as Marists, that is as people for whom Mary was constantly present. Nor was it Mary present as some detached abstraction. They learned to see Mary actively present in the church as the church came into being and just as actively present in the church as it struggled to come to life again in their own time. Colin insisted that they keep Mary constantly before

their eyes, so that they would learn from her what the church could be when she was present in it, and how they were to act in order to make her present in it. Colin's insistence on remembering, on looking to, on keeping one's eyes fixed upon, brings out his awareness that such an attitude is the result of constant and attentive exercise. It is the exercise of love.

c) The Marists gathered in Belley were challenged to make Mary part of their lives by keeping her constantly before their minds. They were also challenged to make her presence visible in their external behavior. There was something paradoxical in this, for Marists would be recognizable as children of Mary in so far as they became hidden and unknown. However, the church had become so ineffective in Colin's world precisely by being obtrusively present, present as power, as coercion, as imposition. Marists could be a source of renewed life for the church by saying no to power, to money, to prestige. There is nothing new in that: we are back to the gospel. At the same time, that no always needs to be said in a different setting. It was the merit of the early Marists to be able to articulate it and to say it in France in 1836.

It will not be easy for us to be lovingly critical of our church today. How is it an obstacle to the coming of the Kingdom? How is it fossilized? And, especially, how can we be within it vivifying, rather than just critical, elements? How can we be lucid but so as to be constructive? Our ways of thinking about the church are vastly different from what they could be at the time of Colin. Our contribution here will probably not be at the theological level (many fine theologians, women and men, are working hard and well at that level), but at the level at which Marist tradition has already proven itself, that of a pastoral approach in the light of a special relationship to Mary, and to Mary present in the newborn church.

Our understanding of how the church comes to be and of Mary's role in this benefits from the biblical scholarship that has renewed theology before and after Vatican II and from an awareness of the world which continues to stretch our minds. After Gaudium et spes, we can no longer speak about the church in the world as Colin did in his time and as we were still doing in the 1950s. Awareness of and respect for religions other than christianity forces us to revise our missionary vocabulary and, more importantly, our attitude toward those who practise those religions. Our catholic ways of speaking of the church and of Mary can no longer ignore the sensibilities of other christian churches.

Once we open ourselves to the point of view of the oppressed, as liberation theology teaches us to do, we learn to recognize oppression where we never suspected it before, and that too changes our view of the church. Nor will we, the men, continue to speak of Mary in the same way once we expose ourselves to feminist theology.

Meditation upon Mary in the new-born church will lead us on paths that differ markedly from those that were familiar to Father Colin and Mother Saint-Joseph. Some years ago, French Marist Father Vivier wrote a brief essay on Nazareth at the time of Jesus in the light of recent scholarship. A few lines from it will give a hint of the distance covered:

“The general atmosphere of Galilee at the time is that of clandestine and armed resistance. . . . The Magnificat is a revolutionary war song... (Mary) is always at the head of the comando of the brothers of Jesus... Hence, the perspective Father Colin was seeking (in Nazareth) would have been a militant perspective of resistance and engagement.” (France S.M., December 1981, pp. 18-19)

Father Vivier's essay deserves to be read for itself; I simply isolated the sentences that were more likely to shock us.

I do not propose that we take as the symbol of Mary in the new-born church a girl wearing the uniform of the Israeli army and holding a submachine gun. At the same time, being Mary present in the church at its birth can no longer be expressed as it was at the time of Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn and of Father Colin. This is so, first of all, because our reading of the New Testament, our understanding of

the teaching of Jesus, and our view of the place of women in the church at the beginning and now can no longer be what they were before the liberation and the feminist theologies.

I still have before me the image of a child I saw in Ticoman in November 1983. The Chiquihuite hill is one of the many hills surrounding Mexico City, along the sides of which shantytowns creep up, providing shelter for hundreds of thousands of people. A Mexican Marist accompanied me there on a Saturday morning. At a corner, in the open space, all by herself, lost, there stood a girl who could have been twelve or fourteen years old, skinny, poorly fed, in shabby clothes, and in the last months of her pregnancy. Suppose we take her as a symbol of Mary in the new-born church, or rather of the newborn church itself, of which Mary is the figure, what happens to our meditation on our role in the church being born?

Obviously, we cannot keep Marist tradition alive unless we use the best available tools to criticize our ways of speaking about the church and about Mary, and about Mary and the church. But the real contribution that Colin, Champagnat, Chavoïn, the tertiaries, the pioneers made to the life of the church was to invent fresh ways of behaving, so that nothing would stand in the way of the good news, and particularly not the bearer of the good news.

As we commemorate the meeting where the early Marists worked out an understanding of their special mission in the world of 1836, the challenge before us is, it seems, to work out for now how we will put at the service of the church the riches we have inherited in Marist tradition. As the early Marists kept before their eyes the image of Mary in the newborn church, they saw where the church needed to be started again. They also saw that if they were to contribute to this new beginning they needed to free themselves totally of the desire for possessions and for recognition. Our renewed perception of Mary and of the church will also, I suspect, enable us to see more sharply how the church needs to be started again and how our own inner freedom is an essential part of that new beginning.

## 2. The election of September 24

On the morning of September 24, at five thirty, the twenty one participants who had been meeting at the minor seminary of Belley walked in silence to the ex-Capuchin convent which had become the first Marist fathers' house four years earlier. The four days they had spent studying the rule were an important step in setting up the Society. The Society could exist only on the basis of the common ground which the rule provided: a common understanding of what Marist life and work would be. All this, however, only represented the building materials piled up near the site where the house is to be erected. The Society could exist and function only as it structured itself. The image of the body came to Paul's mind in speaking about the church. It holds for the Society of Mary both as a human society and as a special kind of cell in the church.

It is true that, while the structuring of the Society is symbolized most clearly in the election of a superior general, it is not limited to that. It involves all the ways in which the Society functions as an organized whole. However, the election of the superior general, the body giving itself a head, is clearly the prototype of the structuring of the Society. It is daring of me to invite you to look closely at what may strike you as rather intimate family matters. Here is my excuse: Colin's attitude toward the position of superior general of the Marist priests provides matter for reflection on the exercise of power in the church. That topic is at the heart of christian living. It is an important dimension of Marist spirituality. How power is exercised in the Society of Mary is an important test of how relevant Marist spirituality is to christian living today.

When the time came to describe in the minutes the actual election of Jean-Claude Colin as superior general, the secretary felt that this historical event warranted an effort at style, so he penned the following sentence:

“At the solemn moment when such a heavy responsibility was to rest upon a single head, silence took on a more than imposing aspect, and a religious emotion seized the assembly; it became more pronounced as, each time his name was called out, we could hear the sobs of the one whom God in his infinite wisdom had chosen from all eternity” (OM, doc. 403, § 19).

Fr. Maitrepierre, who was present, later wrote more simply, in his notes for the novices:

“As Fr. Colin's name kept being proclaimed, his tears increased.” (OM, doc. 752, § 47)

But then Maitrepierre went on to write:

“[Fr. Colin] could no longer restrain his sobs when Fr. Champagnat stood before him and, in his distinct and rough accent, began his address as follows: ‘Mr Superior, we have just presented you with a pretty sorry gift. What a heap of troubles you can expect in your administration: Your dignity elevates you only to expose you to the wind and storms, and on the last day you will be accountable for each of us.’ ” (OM, doc. 752, § 47)

This election was a point of arrival and a point of departure. As a point of arrival, it put an end to the period when the Society only existed in hope, in the minds and hearts of those who planned to belong to it. More concretely, for Colin, it was going to be the moment when he would be relieved of the charge he had assumed for over ten years, of being the center of unity for the group and in the dealings with the bishops and with the pope. In his mind, when the Society came together, it would choose as its head Mr. Cholleton, the priest who had been the spiritual director of all of them at the major seminary and who was at that time vicar general of the archbishop of Lyon. Colin, however, was the only one to think in that way, and his vote was the only one to go to Cholleton. The votes of all the others converged on Colin.

As Etienne Seon explained later:

“We all looked to him and we considered him as the superior of the Society, as the one who was to be put in charge of it some day. He was the one who had worked most for this Society; we knew this, and we also knew that he had taken commitments before God on behalf of this work. Finally, we could see very well that he was the one who had the broadest outlook” (OM, doc. 625, § 19).

The vote that made Colin superior general was unanimous. In that vote the minds of the first twenty Marists became united and that unity created the Society. But it would take a long time before that unity permeated the lives of these Marists, and it would be a permanent challenge to preserve it as new members joined. In that sense, the election of Colin was a point of departure: everything remained to be done.

Mayet wrote:

In 1844, (Colin) told us that, during the first two years after his appointment as general, he felt a deep sadness which overwhelmed him, even though he did not show it. He told us that right away and at one glance he had seen all the difficulties of his job and all its obligations. He understood immediately how difficult it would be to bring to unity many members who were coming together without having made a novitiate (OM, doc. 592).

For Colin, unity in the Society was essential: “Otherwise, he said, we cannot function” (Mayet 2, 293). He admired the Jesuits on that score and gave as an example their style in hearing confessions:

“How that manner suits me: They are the best confessors I have found. Well, they train each other and they transmit this style. On that score, so far I really have only two men in the Society who think as I like, who have broad and far-reaching views; they are Fr. Epalle the elder and Fr. Favre; I like their way of applying theology; their style is far-reaching, well thought out.” (Mayet 2, 294m)

We may think the style in hearing confessions was a very secondary matter. For Colin, it was linked to his understanding of what the Society of Mary was called to be in the church by virtue of its name: to be Mary's Society means to embody Mary's desire to be of special help to people at the critical end time. People are in greater danger of being lost because of the misfortunes of the times. Mary makes herself especially active on their behalf through the Society of Mary.

There is a totalitarian way of understanding Colin's concern for unity: everybody must think alike. With a bit of sympathy, we can see that that is not what Colin is talking about. There is a way of understanding Mary and the church which is rooted in the experience of the early Marists and which has important and rich implications for the life of the church today. It is our job to keep that understanding alive so as not to deprive the church of the gift it received in the Society. That can take place only if that understanding is shared by Marists and if it is embodied in their action.

In Colin's time, the Society went from twenty to two hundred members. Even then, it was quite a challenge to insure that it be animated by one spirit. Now, we are over fifteen hundred, and, if we perceive ourselves as belonging to the same family, we are several thousand. The challenge is far greater to form some kind of unity. Still, the church will be the poorer unless we manage to keep alive the distinctive presence of Marist tradition.

When Colin spoke about unity, the image he put before Marists was that of an army, of walking as one man. That image is linked to a way of functioning which for him was like water for fish. Not only was it his natural element, but he was incapable of imagining himself in a different one. Both civil society and ecclesiastical society were built on the model of authority and power being entrusted to one person at the top and of orders coming down from there. Within that model, Colin saw the traps of power and ambition, and one of the important dimensions of the Society of Mary was to avoid those traps by having Mary as superior and by submitting to the opinion of others. That was one important way in which the Society brought something new in the church: in the exercise of authority. But this was not to be done at the expense of effectiveness; the Society still had to function as one body, and obedience was absolutely essential, apart from the religious value placed on it.

Even at the time of Colin, absolute monarchy was a thing of the past, but it was still partly alive, and in any case Colin, like many others, still thought it would come back. In his time, and even in ours, absolute monarchy in the church was undisputed. In most of present western society, the values that are preached, if not practised, are those of democracy: consultation and participation. In the church, Vatican II has at least opened the door to an ecclesiology of communion; the revised code of canon law even talks of structures of consultation and participation. In this very different context, Marist tradition has an important contribution to make: its refusal to give any importance to power and its call to root out ambition from our hearts are at the very heart of the gospel and are more timely than ever. It should equip us particularly well to begin to put into practice the ecclesiology of communion.

At the same time, we need to find ways of building up the unity of the Society. This was relatively easy when there were twenty Marists in all. It is more difficult with fifteen hundred, but it is all the more necessary. The Society is much richer with fifteen hundred different visions of the world and as many ways of dealing with it, but all that richness is lost unless we find ways to make those visions communicate and form a fellowship.

How will the Society, and our Marist congregations, succeed in achieving two things which don't go together naturally: on the one hand, to exorcise the specter of oppressive power which raises its head whenever we speak of a strong government ensuring the unity of the congregation and which is at the very opposite of all that the name Mary means for us; on the other hand, to have our congregations function as a unified body, without which we are nothing more than a collection of unrelated, well-meaning, and ineffective individuals who cannot be trusted to carry out a mission as a body?

When the Marists concluded their meeting on September 24, 1836, and went their separate ways, the Society they had just begun did not cease to exist. They had created bonds strong enough to keep them united into one society no matter how far they were to be from each other. If the society they created still exists, it is in virtue of those bonds; if it continues to exist, it will be in so far as we succeed in constantly recreating those bonds.

### Conclusion

At the end of the 1849 retreat, as the Marists were ready to disperse after having spent time renewing their sense of call and of mission, Colin placed before them the image of Jesus before the ascension, telling his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (Jn 20, 21). Colin then went on to say:

“What a mission that was: It involved changing the face of the earth, going everywhere on earth. The apostles did not argue, they divided the world between them and went their separate ways... You know the rest.” (FS, doc. 176, § 2)

Ideally, the Society, and each of our congregations, should always be both in chapter and at work, gathered to renew our awareness of belonging to Mary’s society and of being entrusted with her loving care for the people of God, and dispersed throughout the world to carry out our task. Being both gathered and dispersed can only take place through constant communication between all of us, and this is the responsibility not only of superiors, but of each of us.

Sydney, August 26, 1986

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