

GOVERNMENT IN THE SOCIETY OF MARY

We are trying to explore Colin's original vision and its implication for our life today. Now we'll see the implication of Colin's vision at the level of structure.

We have seen that the center of gravity of Colin's vision is eschatological. Colin is looking into the future, into a new people of God, gathered around God under the maternal care of Mary. The ultimate concern of Colin is the achievement of Mary's work and not the Society of Mary as such. We've tried to make that very clear.

Mary's work had to be carried out, an eschatological people has to be anticipated by the Marist congregation. We are not yet in the last days. The last days will come. For the moment we have to try to start and to continue Mary's work and to anticipate in a certain sense the people of God tomorrow in congregations, of which the Marist congregations, are among them the Society of Mary.

Here comes a point which may seem contradictory to the big vision: the fact that Colin is very much concerned about this body of the Society of Mary, the Marist Fathers. Colin has founded a Society, a religious body. Colin did not found a spirit. Colin was not Confucius, a man who expressed a kind of wisdom in which many people may recognize themselves. He has not just founded a kind of spirituality, a devotion or an understanding of a new virtue, a new type of piety, a relation with God in which every family of souls could recognize itself. Colin is the founder of one very clear cut Society, the Society of Mary.

For the moment we will consider only the Marist Fathers. We already said many things about the various branches. But for the moment we are interested in what has certainly been his main achievement, the Society of Marist Fathers.

I think it's a danger to speak too much in a certain sense of the "spirit of the Society" and to forget the "Society," that even before being a "spirit," the Society is a "body."

I think it was a danger, perhaps, at the time, let us say, of Father Grimal and our present time. It's clear that men like Father Grimal very much insisted in the line of the French school of spirituality, on defining the very spiritual aspect of our spirit, to define this spirit which is very good, with the idea that if we have the spirit we have everything. And, therefore, we may practice this spirit in every kind of ministry, in every structure of government and what counts is the spirit only. The rest is, in a certain sense secondary.

That's certainly not what Colin had in mind. Oh, we could have the same idea that what matters is that each Marist acts earnestly and actively according to Colin's vision, tries to do something along that line but individually, the corporate aspect, if you like, of our life is not so important. I think that's a great danger. We have to realize that Colin has not been the Founder of a spirit, but the founder of a body.

When you say "body," you say, "physiognomy" each of your bodies, that I am so pleased to consider before me, each of them has its own physiognomy. They really differ, and each body has its own structure. You know, we cannot, speak of a body without speaking of a structure.

We will see this morning the implication of this in Colin's vision, at the level of the structures of government. It is a fact that Colin has given the Society of Mary a highly centralized type of government. I could illustrate that by quoting from the Summarium of 1833. It would have been perhaps better in the line of our present workshop, but on this question of structure, Colin did not change very much. What we find in the Summarium is practically, what we find substantially in the last text of Colin.

In order to simplify things, we will just take the Constitutions of 1872. I would like to read to you just two texts. They are not completely new for you because you have probably studied the Constitutions at the novitiate. Just listening to this text will remind you of something which is already of the past, in a certain sense. We certainly don't conceive the Society of Mary and its structure of government today as it is expressed in these texts.

It's Chapter Eight: The Government of the Whole Society, Article First: The Superior General:

"In military affairs, there is, in addition to lower officers who with due regard to the hierarchy of authority, preside over and take charge of particular matters. Therefore, above all those there is a higher officer who has charge of affairs in general, and whose chief function is to see that all is well conducted and properly ordered in pursuit of overall objectives. Just so, in this least Society which is the battle-line drawn up against the enemies

of salvation under the leadership and auspices of the Mother of God, in addition to those who have charge of the individual houses and provinces and take care of particular ends, both the general and the particular good of the Society require that there be some President or Superior General who exercises care and solicitude for the whole Society and has as his principle aim its preservation, increase, good government and wise advancement towards its overall ends for a greater service of God and the honor of the Mother of God.”

That’s only one text about the Superior General. Another one concerns his role in financial matters. That’s Number 319:

“Likewise, the Superior General has the right of superintendence in the Lord, over the houses and colleges of the Society, both in regard to the person and their obedience in them, and in regards to their temporal goods and income. To him it pertains with the aid of the assistants concerned, and all other considerations being taken into account, whether personally or through the provincials, local superiors, or whomsoever he has granted the faculty to administer these goods, to defend them, to assign, to administer these goods, to defend them, to assign their fruits to this or that house, to accept goods left to the Society, to dispose of them within the Society, and to redeem pledged property, etc.”

It’s a very clear conception: you have a Society with, at the top, a Superior General. And, I remind you of the structures as they existed according to these Constitutions. We don’t read all the texts. The Superior General appoints the provincials; he appoints also the local superiors, (after presentation, of course, by the provincials, but he appoints them); and he appoints also the masters of novices.

Therefore, all the positions of responsibility come directly a appointments from the Superior General. He has, therefore, the superintendence of everything. At any moment he can take anyone from one house to put him in another house, even from one province to another province. He has complete superintendence (and the word is to be found twice in the Constitutions) about every person and every good in the Society of Mary. I think that’s the basic pattern of the government of the Society as seen by Colin and we have to accept that as a fact.

What is the source of this? Why do we have such a highly centralized type of government? One could argue its because of Colin’s own temperament. He was certainly a shy boy, he was afraid of this and that. He had many negatives in his temperament. But at the great moments of his life he was able in a certain sense to overcome these various aspects. The passionate side of his temperament was strongly emphasized. Colin was exactly the type of charismatic leader, the man really who leads those just by the strength of his own personality. It was he who really led. You have that, a very good text from Mayet in A Founder Acts

“In business matters, Father Colin would speak only after everyone else had their say. He was deep, very deep. You were surprised and overwhelmed by the depth of his views. When, in his absence, some important job had been done, it was rare indeed that he found it well done. You could say that, when he was in Lyons, there was no one but him. Every other influence was of no account. You could say that he did not know how to get people to do things. He did them himself, and they were well done. A prominent member of the Society applied to him words spoken about someone else: ‘It is not easy to grow up alongside a genius.’ He added, ‘But when he is there, no matter how numerous or involved the difficulties might be, you can sleep peacefully’ (FA doc. 360: 17 – 19).

All the text has to be read, it’s absolutely excellent. But that will be enough for the moment. It gives this picture of Colin as a great leader, a kind of genius. When he is there, he leads everything. All the other influences practically don’t exist.

We could say that Colin had given to the Society of Mary his own temperament of a chief, of a leader, of somebody who wants everything to be, in a certain sense, decided by the General. It may be that this aspect of Colin’s temperament has played a certain role. One could say also: “Oh but that just comes for the political structures of the time.” Everybody was supposed to be in favor of the monarchy. It’s a monarchical order and is against all these revolutionary trends. That was certainly a basic trend among the ecclesiastics, the Churchmen at the time of Colin.

Colin himself would not hesitate to say that we are not supposed to follow all these trends about democracy. He said once:

“The Society, Messieurs, will not be a republic. There will not be two chambers. There will be a system of authority and obedience. If the Jesuits have survived in the midst of thousands and thousands of storms raised

against them, they owe it to the strength of their government, ... Ah, I could tolerate any other fault, any other breach of good order, but a spirit that is opposed to obedience, never.” (FS. 174:27)

For Colin it's clear: The Society is not supposed to take on the form of a republic or anything like that. It will be certainly a monarchical society.

We might say that Colin was influenced by a certain political conception of the time, reinforced by the fact that even in the Church they were moving towards the definition of the infallibility of the Pope and stronger centralization into the hands of the Roman curia. But I think that all those, explanations would not be sufficient, would not take us to the bottom of the question. It's clear, by a simple comparison of texts, that practically all these numbers on government have simply been taken by Colin from the Constitutions of St. Ignatius.

Therefore, to explain the structure of government, we do not need to recall aspects of the 19th Century, but rather, go back to the 16th Century, to the origin of the Jesuits.

We may say that behind the Ignatian model, there's not just a personal idea of St. Ignatius, as such. I think that behind this Ignatian model there is a type of religious order different from the ones that were prevalent in the Middle Ages. A different meaning and importance was given by Ignatius to the structures of government.

Here I will not give you a course of Church history, I will be very schematic and probably too schematic, but we will leave aside the monks for the moment and let's just take the mendicant orders.

These existed in a sense to express a certain way of living an evangelical life. What is important is that the Franciscans and the Dominicans express in this life new values which are brought into the time as a kind of new understanding, a new gospel answer to the new cultural values emerging at the time. The Franciscans, the Dominicans in their communities embody these evangelical values in the life of their convent and in their personal lives.

Of course they also have to be organized; it's important that all the houses of a certain region are under a provincial, and that there is also a General to take care of general affairs etc. But it does not belong, if you like, to the originality, to the nature of the witness of the Franciscans and Dominicans, to have this kind of organization which, in a certain sense is, secondary. They are very aware of that and they themselves insist on that point.

With the Jesuits it is completely different. You cannot imagine the Jesuits without a General receiving orders from the Pope, and who is able to take every Jesuit at any moment, to send him in puavis mundi plaga, in order to fight against special needs that will arrive at such and such a place in the Church.

Here, the structure of a government is centralized in order that one man, receiving orders from above, sends his orders descending down precisely to bear witness to certain quality of life, to a certain type of life. We are an army, we have objectives, and there has to be somebody who will send the right man into the right place at the right moment.

Government for the Jesuits is really part of their understanding of the order while it is not for the mendicant orders of the Middle Age.

For Father Colin, as with St. Ignatius and we may say for almost all the post-Tridentine founders, the Order or Society is the depository of an apostolic mission from above. The Church, it was thought, was now in a world that had become pagan again, the Church was in a state of battle, in a state of war, in a certain sense. The Church needed these armies, these troops who would be able to fight at the right moment with the right men.

Each Society was aware of having received from above a certain mission. The Jesuits originated from an inspiration of St. Ignatius at Manresa. The initiating vision if you like, or inspiration for the Marianists of Chaminade at Saragosa. The Marists originated in a certain sense, from the inspiration of Courville at Le Puy. Each Society, if you like found its justification in a certain mission, a certain perception of things, received under the influence of grace by the founder. And that's what the Society has to do. The starting point is always anterior and superior to the Society itself. It really only exists because somebody, God, Mary had given a right inspiration at a certain time. That's the starting point of the Society. It has not been decided by the Society, by the corporate body. It exists before.

Therefore, you know, automatically comes the idea that you will need one key man who will be the Superior General who will be responsible for the mission that has been received. If he is the founder, he would have received it directly. If not, he would have received it in a sense from his predecessor, picked up the great responsibility. It is indispensable in this conception that he does not have the possibility of appointing men. He will choose the Provincials that he thinks will lead the Society in the right ways of God. With the help of the Provincials, he will choose the right local superior who will try to lead the Society in the right direction and he will also appoint the master of novices, because the transmission of the spirit of the Society relies so much on the masters of novices.

That I think is the real idea behind the conception of government, not the fact that Colin was a charismatic leader, not the fact that the trends of the 19th Century were in favor of the monarchy, but this new conception of a religious order. It comes from the fact that they are depositories of a mission which is anterior and superior to them, and of the need for a man to be responsible for that, communicating that through descending structures to the religious at the base.

That brings us to the second point of this talk: the difficulties of this concept after Vatican II. You have not waited until now to feel in yourselves a certain resistance, a certain questioning. "If that's really the Society of Mary and its government, where are we today? We are completely pre-conciliar. The Society of Mary does not have a great future." It's a fact that all the Vatican II trends are in a certain sense, very different from what we have just said. The great trends towards decentralization, to let everyone share in responsibility, the principle of subsidiarity. It's at every level that the responsibility should exist. The responsibility at the local level should be with the local community, at the provincial level in the province, at the general level to the general. Why put the General's responsibility at all the levels?

The idea of collegiality: it's not just one man with a direct line with the Holy Spirit, who knows all the truths, who decides everything by himself. Rather, everybody has to have a share. That's the common thing; therefore, have this spirit of collegiality, even in government.

I think it's absolutely useless to insist more on this. You know it perfectly well. But you also have some other theories. I refer here to an article that appeared in a 1975 Review of Religious, volume 6 by Murphy O'Connor. It was very good, a very good criticism of the project of the new Canon Law for Religious. But apart from his criticism which was good, he proposed his own theory, and a clear-cut distinction between what he calls "action community" and "being community."

An "action community" is one whose raison d'être is the performance of a series of related actions. It is brought into existence for that purpose. Thus, an army exists in order to execute a plan of defense or attack; a business company exists in order to produce and sell the product. The goal desired in each case is beyond the capacity of an individual. So a number band together to extend the power and scope of their activity. A "being community" on the other hand, is composed of those who come together in order to be or become something as individuals. The purpose of a fitness club is that the members be fit and healthy.

After this Murphy O'Connor focuses on Christianity. Is the Christian community an "action community" or a "being community"? The answer he says is very clear. In the light of the New Testament, there can be no hesitation: it is a "being community," for its raison d'être is to make it possible for its members to follow Christ and thereby to prolong his mission internationally by demonstrating the double reconciliation that he came to accomplish.

After that he comes to the religious life:

"Since the religious community is nothing than the Church in a microcosm, the primary function of religious in the Church is to demonstrate to other Christians the reality of the new dimension restored to human existence by the love of God in Christ with a view of inspiring them to a more authentic commitment to an ideal of love. This it does by witnessing the possibility of reconciliation in the most radical way possible through the total sharing implied in the vows of poverty and chastity. The individual members can witness to what the community has made possible for him, but reconciliation can only be manifested by a community."

You may read the whole article, if you like. But I think that this clear-cut division, plus the fact that the only possible Christian type of community is the "being community," leaves us Marists in a very, very bad position. It's clear from what we have said before that, as with the Jesuits and all the congregations founded after Trent, we belong to a certain type of community. We belong to an "action community," not necessarily in the sense of

activities, justified only by the staffing of a parish or a school. But really in the sense of the image itself of the army taken by St. Ignatius and retaken by Colin. This image shows practically that we belong to a certain type of community which is an “action community.”

If we were to accept Murphy O’Connor’s theory, (and I don’t) we would be very badly off, precisely because of the trends of the Council and the post-conciliar Church. Changes of structures had to be made and had already been made in the Society of Mary. I just remind you of the main changes.

First of all, the procedure of election: now, the provincial is no longer appointed by the General but elected by the members. And if you think that this is just a slight change, just a, a little concession given to the spirit of the Council, certainly not. That’s absolutely basic. We have to be aware of that. I am not against it. I am certainly not speaking against this change in our legislation, first of all, because I am a Marist and I love my Society and accept what it has decided, but even personally, I don’t think it’s bad at all to have made this change.

We also now speak of the General Administration as having a role of animation and etc., but how do they animate? By a circular? If it is well done, it may have a great impact, but it’s still paper. The great possibility of animation before was for the General to choose between Father “A,” who was a rather liberal man and Father “B” who was, on the contrary, a man who tried to insist on the importance of prayer in his province, etc. By choosing “B,” he was animating the province. He was really influencing the way of life of the Society.

Now, he no longer has this power. He does not appoint the provincial. He does not appoint the local superior. He does not appoint the master of novices. Practically, you know, his responsibility of great animation of the Society is in a completely different position. He has lost a great part of the means of action that were his. Here again, I am not criticizing, but I am just drawing your attention to the fact that by changing a structure –and it’s easy to change, we say, Oh, now we will have an election, etc., etc.– we certainly touch something which is important.

Another great change in the traditional conception is that the provincial chapter had only to verify the application of the Rule by the province, and elect delegates of course, to the General Chapter. But apart from this election of delegates, it just had to see whether the Fathers were not smoking when it was forbidden to smoke; they were not having personal radios, when it was forbidden by the Rule to have personal radios etc – verification of the application of the Rule. No question of policy.

I think it was Buckley who was the first to do a really sensible thing. He insisted, even before the Council, on the fact that the General Chapter should not be only guardians of the past, but also be able to give form to a policy for the province. That also is very, very new, you know, because now, the policy making is no longer just at the level of the General Administration. It is at the level of the province. Therefore, a great variety of influences and decisions, and circumstances will have their importance in the concrete orientation of the Society of Mary.

The same too for the communities. Communities are no longer just supposed to carry out the legislation both general and provincial. They are now supposed to meet every year at the beginning of the year and to take care of what will be their style of life, vacation, etc., etc. those things which really express, give the tone to the community will be decided by the community. Therefore, the changes have been already made, and we may say that we, as all the other religious congregations after Vatican II, have integrated these trends. We live in a very different type of structure.

Now, just one question: How can Colin’s dynamic conception be totally reversed without touching the basic sense of the Society of Mary as being responsible for Mary’s work, this work of Mary’s which is anterior and superior to itself? Here I think, we really have two possible dynamics. One is magnificently expressed by the history of this country. You had, if I understand it well, a certain number of colonies and they decided at a certain moment to go Pluribus Unum. They chose the dynamic of plurality, to have a federal government, but keeping a certain number of rights for themselves. It meant delegating a few rights to a federal government and forming this United States, starting from the plurality to arrive at a central authority, one that exists just because of the delegation from the various colonies.

You also have the dynamics of the Society of Mary which is not Pluribus Unum, but Ex Uno Plures. At the beginning, you have not a plurality of provinces that would decide at a certain stage to form a federation and to delegate a few of their powers to a central government. You have at the beginning, if you like (here, again, we come to Colin’s vision) a certain intention of Mary which is expressed towards this founding event of the Society of Mary. It is expressed towards the founding event, the apparition, if you like, at Le Puy: Courveille

comes; a group is formed. That's the founding event. A General, a founder, really takes all that upon his shoulders. Colin as such really gives shape to the Society of Mary. He rules it. He gives the Rule. And, after that, the Society of Mary exists in order to carry on this mission.

Now a problem would come if we transformed the Society of Mary into a federation of Provinces. The word has been pronounced more than once. We could someday arrive at a General Chapter with this perspective, a postulatium of saying that the provinces are completely autonomous. They just delegate a few common powers to the president of a federation. At that time, would we still be, if you like, in the dynamics of Colin's foundation?

That's just a question I am asking, but I personally think that we could not reverse completely the dynamics and still keep to Colin's conception. It is precisely the structures that tie us to a certain conception of the Society.

Does that mean that we will be tied forever to a kind of monarchic and descending line? I don't think so, because if we examine Colin's heritage, we find many other elements which help us practically even without having recourse to the mind of Vatican II, elements that balance very well the conception of authority in the Society.

I am now coming to the third point of my talk: "Elements of Solutions in Colin Himself." The first of these elements is the concept of Mary as the Superior expressed in our "De Societatis Spiritu." We had to fight very strongly with the Congregation of Rites to put this concept in our Marist liturgy, our Marist Proper. They said: Poof, that's just mere piety; Mary is already the Queen, the Advocate, whatever you like. Why say again that she is the Superior? She has never been a superior. She was not a nun. She was not a superior. Why add a new term of piety for the sake of de Maria nurnouam?

But for me, that's not what this idea is about at all. It's not an expression of piety towards the Blessed Virgin. It has a great, a meaning not just invented by one man in one text. This term has always had a meaning in our spiritual tradition. Indeed I have the elements for a very big article, if not for a book on this idea of Mary as superior. I will not give you an historical analysis, but just hint at the meaning. From the beginning, and it starts with a Benedictine tradition in the 18th Century, the meaning of this theme is that the superior renounces his authority. He says: No, I don't want to act as a superior. I am not worthy of that. She will be the superior.

You know, in the past, I think this theme has always been understood in exactly in the other sense. I remember a provincial, not in America, and you will not find out who he was... a provincial based his provincialship on a great sense of authority and on obedience from his Marist subjects. He used to tell them: Don't forget who is speaking to you. It's not me it's the Blessed Virgin herself, therefore, please obey. The theme was for him a way of enhancing his authority. It's not only me it's the Blessed Virgin who commands you.

But if you look at the theme in that way, just to enhance the authority of the superior, you are right off the track. You have taken it in the opposite sense. The real meaning of the theme is exactly the contrary: Who am I? Who am I to be superior? And when you receive your letter of an appointment: how is it possible that in Rome they have thought somebody like me for this? They are crazy these Romans. And who am I? You go to the statue of the Blessed Virgin and you say, dear Mother, who am I to tell them what to do? I am not better than they are. And I just accept, because somebody has to be appointed I just accept to be the one. But I commit myself, not to, to command according to my own views, but according to your views.

Therefore, the real superior is not the one who comes to his first community meeting saying: Ah, my dear confreres, by the grace of God and the wisdom of my Superior, I am now your superior. I am here for three years or four years, and you will see what you will see. This is my platform: a), b), c), d), e)... That's not the Marist superior. Rather, he's the one who will say, No, why should I impose my views on you? I will try only to carry out intentions that are God's and Mary's intentions.

You will tell me: but what do we know about Mary's intentions. And here I answer: we know a lot! We know Mary. Mary was not this insipid sum of virtues that is spoken of in certain manuals. Mary was a living person with her own way of living the Christian experience different from the one of Paul and the one of Peter. Mary is a person. And we really know what Mary was.

If we believe in our Marist life, Mary's intentions are expressed by the founding event of the Society of Mary. All this history of the foundation of the Society of Mary, how it appeared, what were the basic ideas, the basic vision at the beginning, the big "No's" of Colin, all that for me, read in faith, is the intention of Mary.

But also the rest, the subsequent evolution of the Society of Mary, the decisions of the last General or Provincial Chapter, even the decision of the last community meeting, all that is a way by which Mary really tells me something. Therefore, when I myself become a superior, and say: I will commit myself to act according to the intention of Mary, I am not saying something void, I am saying something with a real, real commitment.

You know, this theme of Mary as Superior appears in all the branches of the Society of Mary. It existed also in other religious congregations, but I may say that in no other religious family does it have the importance that it has in the Marist family. The first branch it appears in is the Marist Brothers and, ah, Marist Father and Marist Sister. It occurs at the beginning in a consecration of a house to Mary as Superior. After that, it passes into the Rules of the three congregations. You see a real deepening and evolution of the theme and it culminates in the famous declaration of the General Chapter of the Society of Mary assembled at Ste. Foy in 1872.

You know that during the difficulties between Colin and Favre, you had almost two rules: you had the rules of the Founder and the rules of the Superior General; two different parties. The only way of overcoming this was to obtain, like at the end of the great schism of the Church, the resignation, the simultaneous resignation of all the existing Popes and the appointment of a new Pope. And that's in a certain sense what happened spiritually, the Superior General and the Founder spiritually resigned their power, recognizing that both of them were neither Superior nor Founder but only Mary deserved this title:

“The undersigned members of the General Chapter of the Society of Mary hereby declare to all Marists, now and of the future, that by this solemn act they gladly recognize l'ary, Queen of Heaven and Earth, as their true Founder, and choose her again freely and spontaneously as their first and perpetual superior. By this solemn statement they openly proclaim that always, in all circumstances, and particularly during the approximate deliberation they wish to depend completely on this most noble Virgin, wholeheartedly and with all their strength, they renounce their own views, their own wisdom, their own inclination, so as to have no other views but Mary's, no other wisdom but hers, and no other inclinations but, but those of her Immaculate Heart...”

I won't finish the text because it's too long, but I invite you to read it entirely in private. That's really how the difficulties within the Society of Mary were overcome by this general spiritual resignation of both the Founder and the Superior General, and a Chapter which tried to act only according to intentions prior to Colin and prior to Favre and prior to Courveille himself.

This was a spirituality that had an immediate bearing: they deliberated in this Chapter very differently than they would have done without this help.

This theme is very clear in other fields also. That's why I am very glad to read to you a text that I have discovered in Oceania, in the archives of the rectory of Pouebo. It is a consecration of Bishop Douarre. I will read the text first before commenting about it:

“We, the undersigned, Guillaume Douarre,” (COSTE: It's at the very beginning of the mission in New Caledonia) “We, the undersigned, Guillaume Douarre, Bishop of Amata, Pierre Rougeron, apostolic missionary, Blaise Marmoiton, Jean Taranya, and Claude Bertrand, all members of the Society of Mary” (COSTE: Here I stop. Remember what I said yesterday about the brothers, Marmoiton, Taranya, and Bertrand are coadjutor brothers. You have, therefore, the Bishop, the apostolic missionary, and you have the three brothers, all members of the Society of Mary. The differences between the Bishop and priests disappeared in a certain sense because of the fact that they were all members of the Society of Mary.) “recognize as Superior, Queen, and Mistress, Mary, our good Mother. We surrender to her in all ownership the goods already acquired, or yet to be acquired in the interest of the New Caledonia missions: the sight of our former residence of Maomat, the little field of Uebunu, our house of Pouevue, the property of Vaiao which belongs to it, as well as whatever we have purchased at Pouebo from Chief Goa and from his brother and his son and from Payama, Chief of Cheli. And we want to make use of these only as stewards, pledging ourselves to administer these different properties in such a way that the fruit of which it..., we will draw from them might redound to the greater glory of God and may be always used to make him known, loved and served along with the most holy Virgin, our good Mother.

“Done at Pouevue, 3 December, 1845, the Feast of St. Francis Xavier...” and follow the five original signatures.

This text is a piece of gold. What is this text? At one and the same time it is two ‘genre littéraire.’ It's clear that Bishop Douarre is imitating the style of the lawyer: such and such property given by such and such, the goods

acquired and to be acquired. It's a legal deed. As a matter of fact, it's the only existing record of the purchase of these lands, which are all still in the hands of the Society of Mary. Bishop Douare was perfectly aware of the fact that all these thousands of acres of land, bought for a few pearls, a few things like that, were really not acquired by them. They were not owners. They were just having this land because they needed it for the good of the mission. Therefore, they would just act as stewards, they were just administrators.

Therefore, these legal deeds end up also becoming a consecration, a real consecration to Mary as superior with all the characteristics of an act of consecration. I think nothing could better show us that this spirituality is not a mere piety or anything like that! It is something which has a great bearing! When I discovered this text, I showed it of course to the confreres in New Caledonia, and I told them, this text binds you! If you were to now sell all these acres of land, just to have more good life and a good time you would be betraying something that had been committed to you. They admitted that. They are very, very aware of this the problem of land tenure is one of the main problems in the Pacific Islands. Does the land bought by the Europeans when they came belong to them or does it really still belong to the community, to the indigenous people?

What I want to illustrate is that this is not just a spiritual theme, but it's something which has an immediate consequence for our administration, for our style of government. Therefore, let us come more directly to our problem of structure of government.

I think that the Marist superior is therefore someone who is aware of not acting according to his own preferences and inclinations, but according to the intentions of Mary as we have defined them. But this is not true only of the superior. It is true also of every Marist insofar as he has a certain margin of responsibility. Each of us today has more than a small margin of responsibility: as a teacher, as a parish priest we are responsible for such and such, we have a great responsibility. Here again come the problems. Will I make use of this freedom and responsibility only as an opportunity to express myself, to express what I prefer, to express my own self? Or will I feel responsible for something which is anterior to me, and which is also Mary's work and Mary's intention?

If, in a community, the superior really acts as the one who is not the superior, but just a vice superior trying to express Mary's intention, and if each religious does that at his own level, we will have a real Marist community one that will express in its existence, the intentions of Mary.

Therefore, we are very, very far from the concept of a monarch. It's really by the union of all the minds in this idea that they are fulfilling Mary's intention that we arrive at a real Marist community.

This then is a corrective element from Colin himself. You have this idea of Mary as superior, and you have also whatever Colin has said and done in the sense of the collegial responsibility of Marists toward the Society of Mary.

The first text I have put here is one that Father Lessard quoted in his talk to the Washington assembly. It's very good. It's Colin writing on November 14th, 1830 to Champagnat. They are now speaking more and more of the necessity of a Rule because of the increasing number of Marist aspirants:

"The more I think about it, the more objection I see to making a summary of the Rule for you. And here is the reason: It would be necessary that it be read and discussed by all of us together, so as to avoid serious difficulties later on, to see if it is not sound."

Notice, the Rule will not be just the expression of a few insights Colin got from the Blessed Virgin at Cerdon. The Rule has to be the property of everybody. I could send you a summary, and Champagnat was wanting Colin to do just that. But Colin says no, we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss it all together. The Rule has to be that: something which is accepted completely by everybody.

Colin also has another very interesting and challenging idea for us in A Founder Speaks, document 175, #34:

"All the same, the age of the Society, its youth, should not discourage us. Each one of us should say to himself, 'I am an instrument of providence, I am the founder.' Yes, Messieurs, we are all founders."

That again, you know, gives a real meaning to this idea that Mary is the foundress. By saying Mary is the foundress, Colin says, I don't want to be considered as the real founder with all the possible titles and dignities attached to it.

By saying that Mary is the foundress and that you are all founders is exactly the same. It means I am not retaining for myself this power of a Founder, but it belongs to someone higher than me. It belongs to Mary. And therefore, it belongs also to you, because you are also responsible for Mary's work.

Here again, we come to the importance of the Council for Colin. I will give you just this one quotation found somewhere in Mayet's Memoires: "Frequent councils are the soul of the Society." The Society really should keep this spirit of consultation, everybody being involved in a certain sense. Father Colin also said, if the community is not numerous, everybody should be part of the council. It flows from this idea that all of us are founders, we are responsible for the Society, we should be engaged as much as possible. This idea became very clear at the end of the life of Colin when he was already retired and when Favre published his first Rule.

Favre had an incredibly ingenious, naive concept about who was eligible for the General Chapter. All the superiors, all the former superiors, and all the religious with the vow of stability. The superiors, of course, had been elected by the Superior General, the former superiors had been elected by the Superior General, and the members of who had made the vow of stability were chosen freely and completely by the Superior General. Among various candidates he had chosen those he wanted to be stable members.

Therefore, the membership of the General Chapter was practically composed only and exclusively from members designated by the Superior General. I have never seen anything more autocratic than that in any religious Society.

It was Colin who was against this and not because of any personal position. He was a member of right to any Chapter. It was not for himself but he said, this concept is an insult to the members of the Society. That it was enough to ruin everything. That was one of the reasons for Colin's opposition.

So, let us understand that Colin was not so completely autocratic of mind, that we are not tied to an idea that everything in the Society should hang on a kind of revelation at the beginning. Somebody, a kind of inspired person, told us that Mary wanted that, and since then, we have just had a descending process and we are not able to say anything. We are just crushed by this descending idea. No. It is not at all that. Certainly Colin's vision was along that line. But at the same time, Colin has given us and wants other elements that make us feel that we are responsible for the Society.

I think that the structure of government is very, very simple. I think we are and we always will be a congregation different from the orders of the Middle Ages. We should not look with too much nostalgia to the Franciscans and Dominicans. We belong to another age. We belong with a number of societies based on the idea of having received a certain mission from above, a mission which implies a certain activity fulfilling a certain mission through a certain number of works, etc.

Even though Father Colin gives so great an importance to a central power, to a General Superior, at the same time, he has foreseen all the possible elements for inviting each Marist to also feel responsible for Mary's work. Therefore, I think this simple phrase sums up everything. 'We are responsible for Mary's work and not for our work.' The Society is not completely free to change itself, to call itself the Society of Saint Joseph and to completely change its own structures. The Society of Mary depends on something anterior to itself. But it's all of us who are responsible for that. Therefore, it's completely normal for a General Chapter to discuss that, and all of us at a local level, provincial level, feel responsible for Mary's work.

Source: Jean Coste, Framingham Retreat 1980, Conference 8

See "No To Power" Framingham Retreat