

THE MARIST MISSION – WHAT IS IT?

Edwin Keel, S.M.

I guess I have been pondering, writing, and teaching about the mission of the Society for almost twenty years. My first serious effort at writing about things Marist was a paper published as a booklet in the *S.M. Document* series entitled: “The Mission of the Society of Mary” (1980). After all this time I have come to the conclusion that the mission of the Society of Mary is a mystery.

By mystery I do not mean an obscurity that cannot be penetrated. Rather I mean a richness that cannot be exhaustively expressed in words, yet can be a perennial source of insight and inspiration.

For example, there are Father Colin’s many sayings about the end of time. We might be inclined to dismiss them out of hand as so much apocalypticist nonsense until we realize that at least some of the sayings are linked to the meaning of the Society and its mission. But after a number of studies by several Marist scholars, the meaning of the “end of time” in relation to our mission remains elusive. Nevertheless, reflection on that theme has revealed some important dimensions of our mission.

Another example is Father Colin’s well-known prohibition against our taking on parishes. Yet he himself took on the ministry of two parishes during his generalate. Obviously his ban is not meant to be absolute, not the last word. Nevertheless, when he does explain at length why he is against parishes, he says some things that at least raise questions for us, make us think, perhaps make us rethink our commitment to the parishes in which we find ourselves, perhaps give us indications of why and under what conditions and for what ends we should take on parishes if we do. Again, an aspect of mission that cannot be expressed in a simple formula, and yet a spring for fruitful reflection.

The Mission of the Society was a mystery for Colin as well. While he said much that is germane to a discussion of our mission, he never defined it. What is clear, however, is that Colin believed that the Society has been given a mission, and that this mission indicates how we are to live our religious life and in what ways and to what ends we are to exercise our priesthood – be it ordained priesthood or the baptismal priesthood common to all: brothers, sisters, laity, presbyters. Colin was convinced that Mary wanted something. But what? Colin’s whole life might be described as one long and essentially unending attempt to discover what Mary wants of us. For Colin this took the form of a lifelong reflection on two sacred words that were given him: **I was the support of the Church at its birth and will be so at the end of time, and hidden and unknown in the world.**

So, the Mission of the Society is essentially a mystery. I will, therefore, not attempt to define it. I will, however, attempt to suggest some salient *points de repère*, as the French say: points of reference, that I hope will stimulate our thinking and give some direction to our efforts as all three provinces make significant changes in their ministerial commitments, and as we begin to consider ways of collaborating more closely together on mission.

1. Marist Mission is about Renewal of the Church

We have, as you know, a clear and strong statement of Colin: “The Society must begin a new Church over again.” It is clear that he did not mean to start some new church other than the Roman Catholic Church; rather, according to Jean Coste, he wanted to help the Church become other than it was. Vatican Council II reaffirmed the age-old dictum *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Colin would certainly have agreed with that, but he was doing more than repeating this datum from tradition. Rather, for Colin, the foundation of the Society of Mary implied a sort of new beginning for the Church. The qualities associated with Mary that Marists were to emulate were

qualities that characterize the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, the Kingdom the Church exists to serve and hasten to its consummation. They represented a fresh reading of the Gospel, a retrieval of gospel values that had largely been lost from Christian consciousness or from church practice. They signified a new way of being church.

As a matter of fact, the Society of Mary, in the wake of Vatican II, has, in large measure, embraced wholeheartedly the renewal instigated by the Council and the post-conciliar reforms. Extreme positions on the far right or far left have been very exceptional and we have not been beset with any serious threat of schism as other congregations have been. Indeed, many of the conciliar reforms (the role of the laity; the rejection of triumphalism; ecumenism; a more inclusive approach to church; etc.) are at least supported by certain lines in our Marian spirituality, and in some ways were anticipated by Colin's vision.

I believe that a corollary of our mission of renewal is mobility. We have a message to bring to every corner of the Church. We ought not remain long in one place because, like Jesus, we have "other towns to visit" to proclaim our message. And when we remain too long in a place, the message can become stale, we can lose our renewalist edge, and we can well become too settled and thus part of the problem rather than the solution.

2. Marist Mission is about a Collaborative Vision of the Church

While safeguarding the integrity of the Society's identity and mission, Colin insisted on close cooperation with bishops cooperation to the extent that they might even consider us "their own". And he rejected every form of competition with diocesan clergy and other religious men and women.

Furthermore, the Society of Mary itself, as originally conceived, was to be a composite body of many branches, embracing ordained and non-ordained, men and women, religious and lay. This is a vision of collaboration in a single mission. Even if Colin was limited by the culture of his time and by his own prejudices from conceiving of apostolic projects involving priests, sisters and brothers working together, nevertheless there was a rich interaction of individuals and groups in the early days, and modern attempts at common endeavors such as the Marist Volunteers and the Wheeling project have firm roots in the original inspiration for the Society. Certainly Colin's vision for Marist laity was of co-workers in a common mission of evangelization, a mission that could not effectively be carried out without them. (One can wonder whether our difficulties in finding a collaborative place for Marist laity are due to our unclarity, in thought and practice, about our mission as essentially one of evangelization in the stricter sense.)

3. Marist Mission is about Evangelization and Reconciliation

For Colin, Marist mission is propelled by Mary's desire to "bring to the fold those who have never belonged, and to bring back to it those who have strayed." Today these tasks are spoken of under the rubrics *evangelization*, *reconciliation*, and *re-evangelization*.

It is not our mission to maintain stable communities of faith. We are called to be busy about outreach to the alienated and un-churched. We are called to make of the Church, wherever we are, an evangelizing people. Whenever the tasks of ministering to those whose relationship with the Church is essentially correct leave little opportunity to attend to those who fall through the cracks of the Church's ministry, and whenever we find ourselves failing to keep alive in ourselves and in the people we serve the basic vision of the church as a missionary, evangelizing people: in that precise moment the time has come for us to pull up stakes and move on.

It is also clear that evangelization today encompasses far more than it did in Father Colin's day. Pope Paul VI, in his now classic Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, spoke of evangelizing not only individuals, but cultures as well, and of the profound links between

evangelization and human development and liberation. And four years earlier the Synod of Bishops, in its document *Justice in the World*, declared unequivocally: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” We must bring our notions of evangelization into synchrony with these bold magisterial statements.

4. Marist Mission is about an Inclusive Vision of Church

Colin said that the aim of the Society is to “gather all the members of Christ, regardless of age, sex, or standing, into the bosom of the Church.” For him, the very meaning of mercy was inclusiveness, and the embrace of the Mother of Mercy was an inclusive embrace: “that all who would might enter.”

Today there are many groups or classes of people who find themselves at the margins of the Church: homosexuals; the divorced; cultural minorities; persons with AIDS; youth; the poor. Marist mission is about forging links between the Church and such as these. True, there are at times doctrinal or behavioral problems involved in ministering to some of these groups. But there is much more, and much needs to be done first in terms of human respect and acceptance before the way can be clear to address the doctrinal and moral issues.

Many women feel marginalized and unjustly discriminated against by Church practice. Short of priestly ordination, the Pope himself has called for inclusion of women in all levels of Church life and in decision-making power, but such inclusion has been slow in coming. There is much anger, often justified. If I may recall the words of Father Jago, then Superior General, to the 1986 Convocation of the Boston Province: ‘We who claim to base our lives on thinking, judging, feeling, and acting as Mary, a woman, could hardly consider ourselves credible witnesses if we do not support women in their legitimate concerns and struggles for justice in the Church and in society today.’

A mission of reconciliation and inclusion must also confront the deep divisions and antagonisms in the Church today. Bishop Anthony Pilla, president of the N.C.C.B. [National Conference of Catholic Bishops], in his sobering but impassioned remarks at the bishop’s meeting last November, spoke of “hatreds” within the Church, of “bullying,” and of people “attacking the moral character of those with intellectual differences.” Again, real doctrinal differences are only one part of the picture. Even there Pilla, while insisting on clarity regarding dogma, insisted as well that the truth must be spoken with love. We Marists are called to work at bringing people together. Much in the spirit of Pope John XXIII, we are called to emphasize those things that unite rather than those that separate. Seeking common ground is a Marist work. Marists are called to minister to the broad spectrum of persons in the Church, and to promote reconciliation, communion, and true dialogue. If you haven’t yet, you may wish to read Bishop Pilla’s talk. It expresses what I would call a very Marist analysis of the current situation and a very Marist concern for reconciliation.

5. Marist Mission is Presbyteral

I would like to say a word about the presbyteral character of the Society of Mary and of its mission. Our mission is essentially a religious one: it has to do with linking people to God and to the Church as the vessel of salvation. It is presbyteral in that the institutional character of the presbyterate renders the official actions of the Church. While we may be involved in many human services such as education, counseling, addiction ministries, advocacy, etc., the context that gives meaning and purpose to these activities for us is the ministry of ecclesial inclusiveness and reconciliation. The presence of the brothers in our community, of the Marist laity who share our mission, and of the broader Marist family with whom we are associated, make clear that this

is a collaborative mission of the entire people of God. The presence of the presbyterate within the Marist missionary efforts renders visible the ecclesial dimension itself of the mission, as well as the ultimate religious purpose that undergirds the mission.

6. Marist Mission is about Education

When Colin and his colleagues in the earliest days of the Society undertook the missions in the Bugey, they characterized themselves as *catechists*. This was in part to avoid arrogating to themselves the prestigious title “missioner”; but it also expressed an emphasis on education and learning – the early missions were, by and large, catechetical enterprises – that carried over later into the schools and seminaries we took on, and into the Constitutions where Colin insists on learning for the sake of mission as an essential characteristic of the Society. Colin was convinced of the importance of knowledge for the practice of the faith and for the full development of the human person.

Today in this country we are faced with a number of realities that call for increased emphasis in our ministries, be it in schools, parishes, or wherever: Many Catholics, infected with the anti-intellectualism of American culture, are verging on a rapid emotional fundamentalism in their approach to faith. Most American Catholics suffer from arrested development in the area of faith: while their education level has carried into college and beyond, their religious education often stopped at Confirmation or with graduation from high school. There is furthermore an entire generation of adult Catholics whose religious education during the sixties and seventies was without substantial content; when these people turn to religion in their adult years they have little to fall back on intellectually; they become rigid and fundamentalist in their beliefs and pietist and devotionalist in their practice; the rich scriptural and liturgical reforms of the Council are lost on them. Conversely there are many laity who are rising to the challenge of Vatican II and responding to the grace of their Baptism. They wish to participate actively in the mission of the Church. Many of these need to be educated; many others who are already well-educated for ministry need a clergy ready to respect and welcome into ministry their level of knowledge and their gifts. Finally, if we are going to respond to the challenge of the Superior General (see his letter 1997-2) to develop a Marist laity fully integrated into mission, we need to mount a serious effort at education in the skills for evangelization and in Marist spirituality.

7. Marist Mission is about Making the Whole World Marist

We know Father Colin’s dictum: “Our aim is nothing less than to make the whole world Marist.” But what does that mean? For Colin it expressed, first of all, the essential openness of Mary’s Society to include all: inclusiveness, as distinct, say, from a perceived exclusiveness in the makeup and approach of the Society of Jesus. Secondly, it expressed his desire that the lay branch be given free rein to develop far beyond the limits of extension of the Marist religious congregations, and that membership be simple enough to include large numbers of people, much like the various devotional confraternities of his day. Finally, it had to do with the spread of Mary’s spirit, which would be carried in word and deed by both laity *and* religious to infect the Church with the Gospel values represented by Mary’s spirit.

Today I believe a new reality is taking shape. As more and more lay *people* engage in ministries once the exclusive domain of priests and religious, the contribution of religious congregations to the Church will not be measured so much in terms of the work they do, but more in terms of the extent to which they share with the Church the gifts of their spirits and spirituality’s. I believe that Marist spirituality is a gift that we have too often buried in the ground of our private inner lives rather than investing it for the good of the people of God by propagating it. I believe that Marist spirituality is not only an apostolic spirituality that will stand interested lay people in good stead as an underpinning for their lives in ministry, but its emphasis

on eschewing power, prestige, and personal gain can provide a remedy to the temptations that accompany any engagement in religious service. It is a gift sorely needed by the Church in our day, and it is about time we began to be serious about sharing it explicitly and articulately.

8. The Importance of a Sense of Mission Today

A number of contemporary writers on religious life, including David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis in their monumental study on *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States*, are warning of the danger of what they call the parochialization of religious life. By this they mean the coopting of religious, men and women, clerical or non-ordained, for ministry in parishes and other diocesan structures, and the atrophying of corporate works proper to the religious institutes themselves. It is a critical issue for religious, but a subtle one. It has to do with our sense of identity. It operates on both the conscious and unconscious levels, and perhaps more on the latter than on the former. But it is critical nonetheless, and probably has more to do with the morale of religious and with the current vocation crisis than would appear on the surface.

It is a particular issue for clerical religious, because aside from the lure of the ministry in itself, there is also the considerable pressure exercised by bishops for us to take up the slack by staffing more parishes during the current priest shortage.

At issue, I believe, is not the question of the propriety of parochial ministry for religious and specifically for Marists. Rather it has to do with the purposes for which the Society exists, its mission. The Society of Mary calls us to priesthood for the Society's purposes, which may not be the bishops' purposes. True, we are ultimately called to priesthood by the Church. But we are ordained for priesthood within the Society of Mary whose constitutions and mission have been ratified by the Church. Our decisions to take on or relinquish ministries, parochial or otherwise, should flow from our mission. And our purposes for taking on parochial ministry, and the goals we set out to achieve in parochial ministry, must be defined by our mission.

I have indicated above how our mission has to do with renewal, evangelization, and reconciliation or re-evangelization. These tasks, from New Testament times on, have been the tasks of itinerant evangelists and prophets who either moved into areas not yet evangelized, or moved about among established communities to call them to renewal of their fervor. These are different than the tasks for the residential clergy whom the apostles and evangelists left behind them to care for established and stable communities of faith.

An approach much more in line with the missionary character of the Society might be to take on parishes for limited lengths of time and with clear and measurable goals to accomplish. I believe that the first of these –limited terms – is the current practice in all three provinces. Not always clear, however, are the purposes for which we are taking on this or that parish, enunciated as a set of clear and measurable goals that will be the principal criteria determining when our task has been accomplished and the times has come to move on.

9. Mission and Consecration

I would like to say a few words regarding the current controversy as to whether consecration or mission should be the primary focus of religious life. Consecration emphasizes the vertical dimension: the relation with God, prayer, vows, the transcendent. Mission emphasizes the horizontal, our task in the world. I do not have a final answer to the question, though I believe that the solution lies in the direction of integration and balance rather than in an either/or. I would simply like to make a few remarks that may be germane to the issue.

It seems that active religious congregations, including ours, exist for the sake of their mission. The Society of Mary exists because Mary wanted something, and while she certainly wants the salvation and perfection of all of us, she called for the foundation of the Society not simply to provide a locus for us to work out our salvation, but to accomplish an ecclesial mission in these

last days.

On the other hand, the reason one enters a religious congregation is far more profound than to work at the mission of the group. It is a response to the grace of one's Baptism which moves one to put God before all else in one's life, to imitate Christ, to seek God, to save one's soul, to be perfected in the image of Christ.

But if one responds to a call to an active apostolic religious congregation, this means that the way one will find God in one's life is precisely by fidelity to the way of life of the congregation, a way of life that includes as a central element the engagement in mission, and which way of life in its integrity has been approved by the Church as a way to God.

I believe that religious bring to mission, whatever that mission may be, a life consecrated to God and seeking God. While it is not the mission itself, this consecration ought to permeate and infuse our missionary activities and make a qualitative difference in the attitudes, approaches, and temper with which we carry out the mission. In particular, a presbyteral ministry which so often involves word and sacrament ought, of necessity, to bring the search for God into relief in the lives of people served.

10. Mission, Ambiguity, and Tension

A mission such as I have described will necessarily be fraught with tensions and involve living with much ambiguity. There will be tension between loyalty to the Church as it is, and our Marian vision of what the Church must become; between the demands of law, and the requirements of mercy; between the spiritual nourishment sought by the saints, and the attention we are to give to sinners; between the hunger of Catholics for word and sacrament, and the cry of the poor for justice; between the priorities of our mission of mercy, and our desire to cooperate with the bishops whose priorities often focus more on institutional integrity; between the bishops' need for priests to staff parishes, and our concern for those not reached by parish ministry; between being ministers ourselves, and being animators of laity in ministry; between our presbyteral calling, and our concern for women who experience exclusion from presbyterate as an injustice; between the magisterium of the Church, and the legitimate questions of the human mind and heart; between our individual gifts, talents, and preferences, and the call of the Society's mission; between professional integrity and order, and the messiness of the world on the margins where we are called to minister; between consecration to God, and mission in the world; between being a small and in many ways insignificant Society, and the call, the need, to do great things for God.

Colin himself often faced tensions of this sort. He wanted the Society to be hidden and unknown, and yet effective in the world. His way was the inclusive, merciful way of Mary, archetype of the feminine, and yet the goal of mission for him was always union with the Church of Rome, the papacy, the embodiment of the masculine. We see him trying to forge a Society that would be at one and the same time diocesan and universal. We see him insisting that we cooperate with the bishops in such a way that they could consider us their own, and yet having to struggle all his life with bishops in France who opposed the emergence of the Society, and bishops in the missions who were careless of our needs as religious. Indeed at the very moment that he was experiencing his greatest difficulties with Pompallier, we see him preferring that the bishops in the missions function as provincial superiors rather than having a separate provincial authority, all for the sake of unity in the mission.

Colin's way was never to collapse the tension by choosing one pole to the exclusion of the other. His way was to hold on to the tension and seek creative solutions, often at great risk. That must be the way for us as well. Scripture gives us a picture of Moses stepping into the breach when God's anger wanted to destroy the people in their infidelity. Perhaps that can be a fruitful image for us: our mission often calls us to step into the breach, to deal with the tensions among seemingly irreconcilable realities, in order to be faithful to the Gospel, the Church, and our

Marist calling.

Conclusion

The Marist mission, then, is a mystery. It arises out of Mary's desire, a desire to be present in the Church of these millennial times, a desire to proclaim the Gospel where it is not yet heard, and to bring back the alienated and the marginalized. It implies a profound renewal of the Church, a collaborative vision of the Church, a mission of evangelization and reconciliation, an inclusive vision of the Church. The mission is educative, and it has to do with making the whole world Marist. It is our sense of mission that must guide us in our decisions regarding ministries to be undertaken, the type of persons we recruit, and the formation we provide to our neophytes. Finally, mission needs to be integrated with a deep sense of consecration to God and our search for God. The Marist mission is indeed a mystery, a mystery that can only be grasped by living in the breach and the tension and the ambiguity of many conflicting realities, but a mystery whose contemplation can be a perennial source of insight and initiative for the service of God's people.

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