

## COLINIAN PRAYER

Having looked at some length at Colin's view of the place and mode of asceticism in the life of the Marist apostle –its very radical nature, directed as it is at the very root of pride and self-centredness; and its constant and immediate ordination towards a freer and more efficacious commitment to the ministry– it is now time to take up the other vital pole in the preparation of an apostle. This is prayer: its place, form and purpose in the life of an apostolic religious.

### Prayer in the life of the Marist:<sup>1</sup>

Almost inevitably when Colin refers to the characteristic traits of the Marist he mentions prayer as one of them. He must learn to unite prayer and action.<sup>2</sup> The Marist spirit is one of simplicity and prayer - that of Mary herself.<sup>3</sup> The Marist must learn to live a discreet life of silence and prayer - like Mary did.<sup>4</sup> Like Mary's prayer, that of Marists should also be apostolic - winning grace for the salvation of men.<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying for Colin that the Marist must be a man of prayer,<sup>6</sup> a man of God,<sup>7</sup> if he is to be an apostle. Only the man of prayer, the one who has tasted the eternal realities, can hope to communicate them to others.<sup>8</sup> Only the man of God can do the work of God, be a channel of grace to others.<sup>9</sup>

It may be noted that prayer in the life of the Marist is almost always referred to in the context of the apostolic life. Colin assigned a key place to an experience of God in prayer. The core of the Marist novitiate for Colin was establishing an immediate contact between the religious and God. This would be the real source of his later zeal for souls.

Later, he says in the flow of daily life, seeing as one has tasted the gift of God, one recalls it, and returns to it with pleasure. The novitiate has formed in the soul a treasure that draws to itself.<sup>10</sup>

The experience creates a sense of God, a felt need of Him in the midst of all activities, such that the missionary finds himself constantly drawn back to that inner communion with the source of life within him.<sup>11</sup> In this felt knowledge of God the apostle finds the heart of his commitment: it becomes a kind of living background against which he lives out his whole life and ministry.<sup>12</sup> It provides him with a kind of inner home in which his entire religious life can find stability -

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the following references to prayer are made by Colin towards the end of his generalate, especially after 1850. Not a surprise: he always looked forward to a retired, prayer-filled life. He was also getting on in years. In 1850 he had bought La Neyliere, a chateau west of Lyons, and one of his favourite projects during these years was planning a contemplative branch of the Society of Mary (ES 182, 52ff, 18, 5ff). This branch was intimately related with the apostolic vocation of the Society. Also, Colin always spoke of the spirit of the Society in terms of prayer.

<sup>2</sup> FS. 132, especially 5f & 15. For this and following points, c.f. Index of FS, "*priere*".

<sup>3</sup> M VII, 187 (FS. 141,18)

<sup>4</sup> ND (Notes Detachees - still Mayet) I 57

<sup>5</sup> M VIII 692ff (ES 188, 6 - 7)

<sup>6</sup> M VI 688m "the missionary who is not a man of prayer, is not a good missionary." (FS 187,1) See also FS. 132,5; 161,3

<sup>7</sup> FS.9,3; 182,42

<sup>8</sup> M I 536 "Zeal is essentially linked with charity, it cannot even be distinguished from charity, the one who loves God seeks to communicate that love, to make God known."

<sup>9</sup> M IV 527m

<sup>10</sup> FS 63,3

<sup>11</sup> FS. 187

<sup>12</sup> One could compare the centre of zeal and awareness of God with the kind of inner "pole" of which speak so many of the mystics: Augustine's One who is more intimate than one's inmost self; Catherine of Siena's "inner house of self knowledge". It is noteworthy how Colin always links this central point of the spiritual life with the apostolate.

rooted, as it is, in God.

Colin once thus held up St Francis Regis as a model apostle for the Marists (September 1850, at dinner during the retreat). The Founder traces the extraordinary fruitfulness of the saint's preaching to the fact that he was:

a perfect religious, a man of prayer and meditation, a man of renunciation and self-denial, a humble man. oh! let us become like him, and zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls will consume us. Let us fix ourselves, hold ourselves completely still in God; movement, perpetual movement is in every head today; let us put a stop to it in ours; let us become stable men, and that we may, let us drop our anchor into God, let us fill ourselves with him.<sup>13</sup>

Here, in the words of Colin which drag us along with their eloquent vehemence, we can see how clearly zeal must be rooted in a life of prayer and self-denial. How the ministry can only become both fruitful and stable when it springs from the inner calm of the Divine Life: and that calm must become the very soul of the apostolate. Effectively God himself becomes the foundation of the apostolic life.

Another effect of the experience of "tasting God" is to create in the heart of the Marist a felt need for communion with him. His whole life is lived in the Divine ambience, so that he quite spontaneously turns to the Lord in moments of need, of success, and of repose.<sup>14</sup> This is what Colin calls a "spirit of prayer" not always being before the Blessed Sacrament; nor all of the time having a Rosary Beads in one's hands; but, rather, walking with God through life.<sup>15</sup>

Acquiring this spirit of prayer the apostle will learn to pray always, which is nothing other than to feel unceasingly the dire need we have of the grace of God, of prayer..., then, in the midst of our various occupations, as we come and go, speak and act, let us say: 'My God, help me!' This is to pray always.<sup>16</sup>

The spirit of prayer, then, is a never-ending sense of one's utter dependence on God; and confidence in his providing bounty. It leads, therefore, to an unconquerable peace, joy and strength in the apostle's life.<sup>17</sup> It directs the religious, by way of permanent attitude, towards the seeking and the doing of God's will - that becomes the ultimate norm of all his living and working.<sup>18</sup> The apostle will learn, as though not needing to be taught, to see God in all things;

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<sup>13</sup> M VIII 398d.

<sup>14</sup> M I 498f: "Never lose recollection..., you must become accustomed to act in a broad way, simply, with purity of intention, and, at the same time, with recollection. In this way you will receive a lot of light. When you are busy you must relax yourself... by speaking with God concerning what you have to do".

Also M V 358f — Colin to the missionaries in Oceania (1838): "ne perdez jamais de vue la présence du Sauveur du monde: c'est en son nom que vous partez, c'est lui qui vous envoie... il sera avec vous partout comme il était autrefois avec ses apôtres".

FS, 141,5; M I 650m – to the fathers at La Seyne (1842): "If you cannot always do all the exercises, walk constantly in the presence of God. That exercise will take the place of the others".

<sup>15</sup> FS. 844,20-3; FS. 132, 9. 11-2

<sup>16</sup> FS. 141,5

<sup>17</sup> FS .56, 3-4) M. V 359 – Colin addressing the missionaries leaving for the Pacific in 1838: "... It is in the continuous thought of your divine Saviour that you will find your strength, your peace, and all the lights that you will at every moment need so badly".

<sup>18</sup> M. I 674 - Colin recommends the following prayer to students in Belley having difficulty in prayer: "My God, here I am, as I am; this is all I can do; I abandon myself into your hands": and keep calm..."

and all things in God.<sup>19</sup> By seeing God everywhere, the apostle will become like him, taking on the very mind and heart of the Lord,<sup>20</sup> - and thus will be able to “be” Jesus in his ministry to men.<sup>21</sup>

One of the figures who most clearly incarnated the spirit of this apostolic prayer was St Francis de Sales. Colin cites his manner frequently, saying that Marists should take the moral teaching of St. Alphonsus but the piety of Francis.<sup>22</sup> But the following extract, addressed once more to the confreres during the general retreat, expresses very clearly how Colin saw this salesian piety in action:

At first, gentlemen, let us set ourselves to acquiring a real piety, solid and firm. Our vocation is not to contemplation. ... (at least) it is not the general vocation of the Society. Our prayer (oraison) should be that of Francis de Sales, of St Charles Borromeo, of St Francis Regis, of St Francis Xavier. The task we have been given, gentlemen, is what is most pleasing to God. What could be more beautiful than saving souls after the example of Jesus Christ who left the bosom of his Father to come to redeem men ...<sup>23</sup>

All of the examples listed above were either missionaries or pastors: hence, the type of prayer they illustrate is an eminently apostolic one.

The “solid, firm” piety which Colin calls for is quite other than that of the contemplative life - it is directed to works of zeal, finding its main nourishment in the knowledge that such ministry to men is the will of him who sent him.

As a consequence of this view of prayer as predominantly an instrument of apostolate. Fr Colin severely relativised the value of the regular “exercises” of piety - their function is rather to maintain the spirit of prayer.<sup>24</sup> When they must be dropped or shortened for the good of souls, then there must be no hesitating over which is the greater good.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to note, too, that the major benefits of prayer mentioned by Colin –apart from intercession– seem to be largely of the psychological order.<sup>26</sup> The apostle needs to pray in order

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<sup>19</sup> FS 182.40. An Ignatian formula.

<sup>20</sup> In 1842, Colin expressing the primitive spirit of the Society includes this: “let us walk in God’s presence, seeing him all the time, we will become like him”. In February of the same year Colin gave the following instructions to Eymard: “You must clothe yourself in Our Lord. Do everything in him, as if you were body of his body, soul of his soul.... Since your life is one of action, in putting on Our Lord you will always be at peace, and your soul, indeed, will be constantly caught up in the fondest prayer. You cannot undertake many spiritual exercises, but if you keep in close union with Our Lord, that will serve as everything for you. You will see everything in him: your pupils, your work, yourself - and that is very important”. FS. 45

<sup>21</sup> FS 102,27; In reaction to mission preachers inclined to omit their prayer so as to hear confessions, Colin says: “if you go to hear confessions without the spirit of interior prayer, it is no longer God who is speaking; it is a priest who is in the confessional, and not a man of God”. (M. I 343m)

<sup>22</sup> FS 135. 3-4

<sup>23</sup> FS 141.17; FS. 56,3-4 – the preacher: who am I to be preaching here to these people ? ... it is the thought of the One who has sent him that reassures him

<sup>24</sup> FS 44.3 – community reunion to prepare for the official visitation by Fr Maitrepierre.

<sup>25</sup> M I 650m – “if you cannot always do all the exercises, walk in the presence of God constantly. That practice will take the place of the others addressed to the community at La Seyne.

<sup>26</sup> Colin highly prized intercessory prayer. Not alone was he forever asking others to pray, but he did so himself, for every work or decision he had to take up (M V 689 - it is only by prayer that one can convert others; OM 2. 282 + note reveals how Colin’s vision of the Third Order was very much one of unstinting intercession for the conversion of sinners

to expand or “enlarge” his heart:<sup>27</sup> to allow his zeal extend away beyond the limits of his own horizon to embrace the whole universe of God’s salvific plan. And this largeness of zeal is not just a question of reaching out to the ends of the earth – it is also linked to that “certain greatness” of soul that Colin wished the Society to have: a manner of behaving, governed by reason and discretion, which will not alienate anyone, but help the Marist to deal with anyone and everyone.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, “psychological” effects of prayer on the apostle may be seen in Colin’s insistence that he should pray before going to the confessional, into the pulpit, in order to “put on” the ears and mouth of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> That Colin envisaged the impact of the prayer primarily in terms of a moulding of the mind and heart of the apostle may be seen from this little insight into pastoral practice - it is reminiscent of the spirit of Gregory the Great’s Pastoral Rule:

Speaking of the preacher, Fr Colin said on the 2nd April, 1849:

“the one who loves is in turn loved. You must allow all that you have formulated in your mind to pass through your heart, otherwise you will not touch those listening to you. Only the heart speaks to the heart. Without the heart the speaker will not succeed. That is why I want some period of prayer before a sermon.”<sup>30</sup>

There seems no doubt but that Fr. Colin saw exercises of prayer very much in terms of means, rather than of ultimate significance in themselves. As long as the religious had a right intention, a spirit of prayer, the most important thing was to concentrate on whatever he was supposed to be doing. And, to finish, I would just refer to Colin’s attitude to prayer in the scholasticate. He was not in favour of long prayers for those studying.<sup>31</sup> When he visited the house in Belley, he was much more concerned with the fact that the students get sufficient recreation and bodily sustenance,<sup>32</sup> and with the level of studies there,<sup>33</sup> than with extending their prayers. He considered the ordinary spiritual exercises sufficient. The important thing was to do all with a pure intention, at one with the will of God.<sup>34</sup>

*Source:* Paul Walsh, *MARY’S CHILDREN AND THE NEEDS OF MEN*. Rome 1982, pp. 23 – 30.

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<sup>27</sup> The significance of having an “enlarged heart” seems to have been very important in Colin’s view of the apostle. It is achieved through prayer: “Pray always, pray a lot for one another; one must pray in order to do good; the one who loves God, the true priest, ought to embrace the whole universe in his zeal; with even greater reasons, let us pray: the one who does not pray has a narrow, constricted heart; he will only receive grace to the extent that the constriction of his heart allows (his very words) B VII 687 the same kind of “breadth of viewpoint” seems to be intended when Colin insists so much on scholastics being allowed to have a “relaxed, easy piety”, against which good reasons there can be no rules (M I 424-26). And he echoes the same sentiments, stressing the need for such a broad, easy approach in the apostolate, when addressing the General Chapter in 1845 (FS. 105.5). Such a spirit is also the product of humility and learning -whence their necessity if it is to deal with all kinds of people (FS. 23; 102, 6; 163,1).

<sup>28</sup> FS. 23

<sup>29</sup> c.f. above, note 21

<sup>30</sup> M. I 501m

<sup>31</sup> M. V 377f; FA 268,14; Gobillot II pp.129ff – studies in themselves are considered to be a means of sanctification. Colin forbade the addition of extra spiritual exercises.

<sup>32</sup> M. I 424-30; FA. 268; Gobillot II pp.126f

<sup>33</sup> M. V 375ff; FA. 268, 1-13; M. V 167 – in the context of remarks made by Colin on the pressure he had been exerting on students that year to study hard, he said: “Gentlemen, we are an active body, we must work. That is our aim, let us not fail in it.”

<sup>34</sup> FS. 132,12. Like Ignatius, Colin seems to presuppose a solid degree of commitment to God and self-renunciation in the young men who are preparing to be Marist apostles. Given that, he can tell them to concentrate their energy on their study, and gear everything else around what is necessary for that.