

“HERE IS WHAT I WANT.”

“This is what I want.” As Fr. Coste says, “These are the words that are the detonator that will unleash explosive forces.” Extravagant language you might think. “Here is what I want,” a detonator that will unleash explosive forces, says our sober Fr. Coste.

In 1809, Jean Claude Courveille suffered an attack of small pox which left him virtually blind. Being a pious young man, he went on a pilgrimage to a nearby shrine of Our Lady at Le Puy. There, while praying before the statue of the Madonna, he had a sort of inspiration to rub his eyes with some of the oil in the votive lamp burning around the shrine. And suddenly, he could see fully again. Naturally, thinking this was a miracle, he was very grateful to Our Lady, and for the next three years at about the same time, he would go back to the shrine thanking Our Lady for the great favour that she had done for him.

Then in 1812, he had some sort of an experience, which started off with those words, “Here is what I want” or “This is what I want.” And then, according to a much later account, he got a message very similar to what we have written here, the so-called Le Puy revelation.

“I have always imitated my Divine Son in everything. I followed Him to Calvary. Now in heaven, sharing His glory, I follow His path still, in the work He does for His church on earth. Of this Church I am the Protectress. I am a powerful army, defending and saving souls. When a fearful heresy threatened to convulse the whole of Europe, my Son raised up His servant, Ignatius, to form a Society under His name, calling itself the Society of Jesus, with members called Jesuits, to fight against the hell unleashed against His Church. In the same way in this last age of impiety and unbelief, it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be another Society, one consecrated to me, one which will bear my name, which will call itself the Society of Mary and whose members will call themselves Marists” or as possibly the very earliest way by which they described themselves, was to call themselves Maryists.

What are we to make of this? This is our story. This is our founding story and we are tapping into something which is very deeply and profoundly Marist whenever we tell that story.

You’ve heard it all a thousand times. Some of you might be a bit skeptical about the details. Was it really a miracle? I don’t know. Doesn’t greatly matter. Although the historical evidence is fairly strong that he was indeed virtually blind and that after this experience, he had pretty good sight for the rest of his life. His blindness was such as to prevent him going to the seminary because he couldn’t read to study. After this experience, he went to the seminary, studied, became a priest and ended up as we know, a Benedictine monk. The sole remaining photograph we have of him doesn’t show him wearing glasses, whereas we know that Fr. Colin had poor eyesight for most of his life and he had spectacles. Doesn’t much matter, the details.

Were there some medical properties in that oil? Had medical science lost its chance to find a cure for smallpox a hundred years before it was eventually discovered? I don’t believe so. Doesn’t matter.

The story is important though, because at the heart of the story is a sense that Mary took an initiative. How it was done, each one of us can have our own opinions. That it was done, I think if you are going to be a Marist, you have to believe. That Mary intervened, that she took an initiative, that she in some way did inspire Jean Claude Courveille by conveying to him something that she wanted.

We are now in the realm of Marist faith, something that Marists believe, something that Marists have to believe if they believe in their vocation. Because we don't believe that we are here simply because we agreed to be here.

The Society of Mary was not something established because a bunch of seminarians got together like a social club. Just because they thought it would be useful if we banded together to do certain works which attracted us. If that's all it was, the Society of Mary is purely of human origin and we're not interested in that today.

We're talking about Marist faith, faith certainly like that of a Christian, but not a faith that every Christian has to have. Just as, for example the Jesuits, in order to be true to their vocation, have to believe that Ignatius did receive revelations by the side of the Cardoner river or La Storta. But I don't have to believe it in order to be a good Catholic. Just as the Franciscans have to believe in the inspiration and vision that Francis had at San Damiano in order to follow the tradition of St. Francis. But the rest of us don't have to believe it.

Similarly, Marists have to believe in their founding story, but other Christians don't have to. They may. It's not of the essence of our Christian faith, but indeed, it is of the essence of our Marist faith.

And at the essence, at the heart of it, is this belief that Mary wanted the Society. "It is my wish, and the wish of my Son, that there be another society which will bear my name, which will do my work and the members will call themselves Marist." There's the heart of our vocation and there's the root that taps down deep into our identity.

Our Constitutions begin by retelling for us our story, sometimes in the jargon, our founding myth. Let's just call it our story. The first three numbers are pregnant with meaning. They are the ones which tell us in just a few suggestive phrases, the story again, outlining for us our identity and our reason of being, why we exist, who we are. I suggest that today, we should be reflecting very much once again, on this story.

These numbers are sketchy, the full story's not there, but we know it. All we need are little prompts, little prompts to our memory and that's all that these numbers are designed to do.

At the center of this story are those founding words repeated time and time again by Fr. Colin. "I upheld the Church at its birth, I will do so again at the end of time." "Yes gentlemen, I do not mind repeating it here once more: the words "I was the mainstay of the new-born Church; I shall be again at the end of time" served us in the earliest days of the Society as a foundation and an encouragement. They were always before us. We worked in that direction, so to speak" (FS. 152:1)

But already, we feel at some distance from Fr. Colin when we hear these words. These are the words which galvanized them into action. These are the words full of energy for them, they served for an encouragement whenever they were a bit depressed, whenever they came across the thousands of obstacles that faced them in the early days of our history as they sort to get the Society started. And yet these words were always in front of them. They worked in that direction, so to speak. They were words full of energy, dynamic words, explosive words.

But we don't feel quite the same today. Why? Why don't they also encourage us? Why don't they give us a sense of direction? "I upheld the Church at its birth. I will do so again at the end of

time.” Are they the foundation of our Marist life today? Do they energize us, do they excite us? They certainly did for Colin, Chavoin, Champagnat and the early pioneers. They are our founding words.

Well, I know that in my own case, for a long time, I didn't really know what they meant. I heard them in my novitiate. My novice master explained them to us, but I wasn't greatly excited. They seemed to us certainly founding words, but happened long ago, 150 years ago. Mary said something, yes. I could accept it, it's true, yes she was there at the beginning and it would be nice if she was there at the end. But how did it happen to my identity as a Marist. How did it give me energy for my mission as a Marist? Really to my shame and regret, it was only when we were working on the Constitutions, that finally the penny dropped, largely through the conviction and the understanding of Gaston Lessard.

So, let's look at these words, let's meditate on them again. Let's try and unlock their secret so that indeed, they can serve as a direction for the Society today, so that indeed, we can root our identity in those words.

Our new Constitutions make it quite clear – number two. “Those who worked for the next twenty years to carry out this promise were convinced that they were responding to a wish of the Mother of Mercy, which found expression for them in the following words: ‘I supported the Church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time’” It's rather a soft, convoluted way of saying it, because we were a bit scared of the Roman Congregation for Religious at that time. Remember, the chapter was trying to get the Constitutions approved by Rome, that was a fairly ulterior motive, also trying to refound and inspire the Society. But we had to get past those bishops and we knew that they were not going to approve any private revelation. So those words which found expression for them in the following words was a way of just softening it a bit. But really what lies behind it and what we believe is, because Mary said to us “I supported the Church at its birth; I shall do so again until the end of time.”

Without these words, there would be no foundation of the Society. Without these words, there is no foundation to the Society today. Without these words, we are founded simply on sand, on simply human agreement and like sand, it will shift, and if the foundation shifts, so does our identity, our mission. And like the house in the gospel, eventually we will fall.

But what do these words mean? What do they mean for Colin and the pioneers? What do they mean for us today? Unfortunately, there's no historical account of precisely those words and how they happened. Colin was always very mysterious about them. His voice would lower, his eyes would sort of gaze off into the far distant future whenever he pronounced those words. He sort of went a bit funny and he would never explain how they came to him or whether they came to him.

Coste is of the opinion that they are Colin's summary of Courveille's experience. Courveille himself insisted that he did not have a vision, and when he gave his account to us, he was already an old man, and no doubt that was the way that he remembered it, and had treasured it, developed it perhaps over the years.

In the early days though, when he first talked about this message, this inspiration from Mary that he had received, the early fathers took it and interpreted it each a little in his own way. That's why I've given you our three earliest stories of our beginnings. The Courveille account, given towards the end of his life. Fr. Declas account and Fr. Terrailon's account, all tell substantially the same story of course but each one gives little details which are significant for us.

For example, Terrailon starts off quite clearly saying that the Society began by Mary. He also has that treasured phrase that in those days in the seminary, they enthused themselves with the thought that they were the first children of Mary and of the great needs of people. An idea that we still treasure.

Declas reveals that he was the first to whom Courveille talked about this experience he had. Declas was cutting his hair, an amateur barber. A lovely man Declas. It's worth reading once again just to tell ourselves our story.

But once again, we still feel at some distance from our pioneers with these words today. What do they mean? How were they understood? Why were they greeted and used so enthusiastically? Why were they so full of energy for the early men?

Well, who said this? Obviously they believed that Mary said, "I supported the Church as it was being born; I shall do so again at the end of time." The words may well have been uttered in 1812. Why should we still get excited about them? That's our challenge and that's our question today?

Part of the problem is, I think, they are stated as a fact. Certainly in my own experience, that's how I understood them. Mary sort of is revealing something but stating it as a fact. I supported the Church at Pentecost, as it was being born. I am the mother of the Church and at the end of time, I still will be supporting the Church. So what?

It's very nice Mary, I'm glad you were around, but where do I come in? Those questions arise though, because we interpret it as Mary telling us something about herself. Not that's not the way Colin and the pioneers heard those words though. It wasn't just Mary stating a fact about herself. No, Mary was expressing a wish and that's the important thing. Mary wanted something. Remember, the revelation started with those words, "This is what I want..."

It's in the light of that wish, that desire on Mary's part, that we must again hear those words today. They mean something like this, "Just as I supported the Church as it was being born at Pentecost, so I want to do the same at the end of time."

In all the accounts, and all the recorded occasions in which we have Colin using these words, there's only one that really gives the key for us today I think. It's not in Our Founder Speaks. In 1866, eight years before he died. "I have always thought that the Society is called to fight until the end of time. Mary supported the Church at its birth. She will do so as well at the end and she will do so through you." (Keel, 15)

"She will do so through you." There's our reason of being. Mary indeed wanted something. She wants to support the Church in the last days, but she needs us in order to do so.

Mary doesn't work like magic, just as Christ no longer works as he did when he walked the streets of Palestine, working miracles, forgiving, curing and all the rest. He still does it of course, but he does it through his Church.

Something similarly. If Mary is to intervene in our world, she has to do it through us. She has to do it through people committed to her, committed to doing what she wants. That's something of our vocation. Mary wants to continue to support the Church. Mary wants nothing more than the redemption, the salvation won so painfully by her son to have its full effect in our world today.

She's not a selfish person. She doesn't have a personal agenda. It's her son's agenda that she wants to have it's full effect today. And that's the point of the revelation. Notice how it started with Mary declaring herself her son's disciple.

"I followed my son in everything, even to Calvary. I was the faithful disciple still standing at his feet as he died so agonizingly on the cross. I followed my son in everything when he was on earth and I'm still following him now. What he wants, I want. And I'm distressed that in the world today, the great treasures of grace and salvation he won, are not getting through to the people he intended them for. I want that none of my children be lost, not one! And yet, so often the message is not being heard."

"The Good News sounds awful to too many people. I'm concerned about that. It distresses me. My son's work is not being done. And yet, I'm there. I'm supporting, I'm sustaining, I'm encouraging the work of my son's church. It's not being effective. I need another Society, one completely dedicated to that work. I want it to bear my name because its going to be my Society, it's going to do my work and I want them to call themselves Marists."

That's what Mary wants. She wants a Society dedicated to the work of salvation, dedicated to supporting the Church in its work of carrying on the mission of Christ. She wants it to work in her way, to do her work.

And there's another sacred phrase for us, "the work of Mary." In recent times, Fr. Jago and his administration have resurrected that phrase for us in our consciousness. It even started a bit earlier. I remember Fr. Bernie Ryan commissioned quite a few Marists throughout the world to study this phrase, "the work of Mary."

Finally though, Fr. Coste has done a study on this phrase, "the work of Mary." He has shown us that this wasn't just something for Fr. Colin. All the pioneers used that phrase – Marcellin Champagnat, Jeanne Marie Chavoin, Maîtreperrière, probably even Courveille himself.

This phrase, "the work of Mary" can be understood in two ways, but it was quite clear that our pioneers understood it in one way. The Society of Mary in their understanding, was the work of Mary. It was Mary's work.

We tend to think of it today as doing Mary's work, a specific task out there. Not so for Colin, Chavoin, Cahmpagnat and the others. The work of Mary was the Society itself, as is so clear. Sure, the work of Mary was to do the work of Mary, but the Society itself was Mary's work.

That's another key idea which we should treasure, that we today are Mary's work. She's sort of responsible for us and that too should give us an encouragement. We are a work that she does. That gives us also the element of hope, because if Mary is still intervening in the world through us, through us doing her work, then indeed she is the one in charge. That's where the energy comes from, that's what it's all about, the work of Mary.

All of this of course will be of importance to us, all of this will touch into our hearts and our identity to the measure that Mary herself is real and effective to us. That's the question I invite you to ponder. Who is Mary for me today? That's vitally important because if Mary doesn't mean much to me, I'm not going to be particularly concerned about what she wants. And if I'm not concerned about what she wants, I'm not really concerned about the Society – the foundations gone.

This is a dreadfully serious question for each one of us. Who is Mary for me? Is she just the plaster statue? Is she just relegated to the periphery of my spiritual life? Am I a good Christian dedicated to God through Christ and the saints are optional extras? Who is Mary for me? Do I really care about her? Do I really care about what she wants?

That's the Society's foundation. Mary telling us, "This is what I want," and our responding, "Yes Mary, your wish is my command."

It's that dynamic which founded the Society in the beginning. It's that dynamic which will keep the Society alive and flourishing today. Mary still speaking, "Just as I sustained the Church at the beginning, so I want to in these last days, and I want to, through you." Mary saying that to each one of us and each one of us responding, "Yes Mary, your wish is my command."

Source: Fr. Pat Bearsley, Video: Conference 1 Boston Provincial Retreat, St. Stephen Priory, Dover, 1994

c.f. *The foundation of the SM*