

Historical Commentary
on the Constitutions of the Society of Mary

**THE ROLE OF MARY AT THE BIRTH OF THE
CHURCH
AND AT THE END OF TIME**

The conclusion of the last article on the meaning, in Fr. Colin's thought, of the phrase *Ignoti et occulti* brought out the necessity of a careful study of what Fr. Founder meant when he pointed to Our Lady herself as a model for our hidden apostolate. For there are undoubtedly numerous ways of interpreting this idea of an imitation of the hidden life of Mary and, while each of these has an equal right to exist in the Church, it is essential for us that we should grasp clearly what our Founder meant when he recommended that we be unknown and hidden in the world after the example of Our Lady.

This will be possible only if we are again willing to forget somewhat our own mental surroundings in order to adopt those which history shows us to have been Fr. Colin's when speaking of the Blessed Virgin, so as to reach a full understanding of the expressions he used, even though they may differ notably from the ones we would use nowadays. And here, one sentence above all strikes us as being the one which Fr. Colin repeated most often, most consistently and most regularly during his whole life, namely the statement, attributed to Our Lady herself: *I supported the Church at her birth; I shall do so again at the end of time*. A study of this expression will provide the key to Fr. Founder's extremely far-reaching conception of the historical role of Mary and of the Society in the Church, a breath-taking view which alone reveals the full import and the true originality of his statements on the hidden life of Mary.

This most crucial, and at the same time most delicate, aspect of Fr. Founder's thought has been little investigated so far. All the very statements of Fr. Colin relative to it are far from being available to the confrères. It has therefore seemed necessary to study this point in a series of articles in which these statements would 'be quoted extensively and would be studied in their historical origins as well as in their more recent developments. Four articles are planned:

- I. The Expression Itself and its Origin.
- II. Sources of this Concept in the Spiritual Tradition.
- III. The Thought of Fr. Colin.
- IV. The Actual Relevance of this Concept.

The following article is the first in this series.

I – THE EXPRESSION ITSELF AND ITS ORIGIN

A. The Texts

Before any other consideration, the reader may be glad to find here the sum total of the texts known today in which Fr. Colin used the expression with which we are concerned.

As early as 1837, that is, during the first months of his noviciate, Fr. Mayet picked up on Fr. Colin's lips the following statement, which he wrote down without indicating its context:

A The Blessed Virgin has said: I have supported the Church at her birth; 'I shall do so again at the end of time. My bosom will be open to all who would enter it.'¹

Two years later, speaking of the good relations which existed between the Jesuits and the Marists, Fr. Colin explained:

B This, I think, is due in part to the revelations which have been made concerning the Marists; the Jesuits do much spiritual direction, and I know that they have received confidences about a number of these revelations. He then repeated to me (Fr. Mayet goes on to say) what he had told us about this revelation where Mary said: I have supported the Church at her birth; I shall do so at the end of time.²

In 1844, Fr. Mayet took down another statement of Fr. Founder on this matter:

C On September 25, 1844, I said to him: It seems that the great number of wonders worked by Our Lady forebode the end of the world, for devotion to 'Mary is usually the last resort of Divine Providence when It wants to convert a sinner. – Yes, he replied, *I supported the Church at her birth; I shall do so again at the end of time...* These words have presided over the first beginnings of the Society.³

A month later, a further statement is made, which Fr. Mayet inserts next to the one of 1839:

D On October 26, 1844, he repeated those words and said: It is now about thirty years ago since that was said to a priest.⁴

About the same time, in a personal remark in his Memoirs, the faithful chronicler could write, referring to the foregoing texts:

E Whenever he (Fr. Colin) talked intimately about our origins, he would do so in broken and mysterious words which I have often recorded, for instance: The first picture of the Society was given under the emblem of a three-branch tree...; or again:

The Blessed' Virgin has said: I supported the Church at her birth; I shall do so at the end of time, etc., etc.⁵

¹ MAYET 1, 11.

² MAYET 1, 459.

³ MAYET 1, 11 margin.

⁴ MAYET 1, 11.

⁵ Mayet 5, 391-392

This statement, so often repeated already by Fr. Colin, will now be renewed from year to year. In December 1845, he gave a talk to some scholastics who were preparing for their profession. One item recorded by one of his hearers reads as follows:

F Jesus left His Mother with His nascent Church so that she would watch over it in its cradle. She reappears at the end of time to call in those who have not yet entered the fold and to lead back to it those who have strayed away from it.⁶

At the retreat of the following year, more precisely on September 23, 1846, Fr. Colin proclaimed again, even more solemnly than before:

G As for us, Gentlemen, we must reproduce the faith of the first believers. That is precisely what was foretold from our very beginning (he uttered these words in a somewhat mysterious and uneasy manner). It was foretold that the Society of Mary was not to model itself on any of the societies which have preceded it; no, nothing of all that; but that our model, our only model, must be and was the early Church. And the Blessed Virgin, who then did such great things, will do still greater ones at the end of time, because the human race will then be in a worse state.⁷

For the year 1847, we have this note of Fr. Mayet in the margin, next to the first text of 1837:

H He repeated these same words on December 2, 1847, at Puyrata, and he said: About 36 years ago.⁸

A few days later, on January 19, 1848, while commenting upon the *Ignoti et occulti* before a group of confrères in the refectory, Fr. Founder reiterated his solemn statement:

I Let us not worry about what the societies before us have done, for, when a society comes to light, it is for a particular need. Yes, Gentlemen (and here he assumed a solemn tone of voice), I am pleased to be able to repeat it here once again: *I supported the Church at her birth; I shall do so again at the end of time*. These are the words which sustained and encouraged us at the very beginning of the Society. They were always before our minds. We have worked along that line, if I may so speak.⁹

At the retreat of that year, on September 14, 1848, we have just a quick reminder in an exhortation on the necessity of 'being prepared for anything:

J These are wicked times, but Mary, who has comforted, protected, saved the Church at her birth, will save her at the end of time.¹⁰

On January 31, 1849, in order to stress the importance of teaching in the Society, Fr. Founder established a parallel between the mission of the

⁶ MAYET 5, 694 - 695.

⁷ MAYET 4, 521.

⁸ MAYET 1, 11.

⁹ MAYET 4, 467

¹⁰ MAYET 3, 271.

Society of Jesus and that of the Society of Mary. This text deserves to be quoted at length, for it will turn out to be an important one:

K Gentlemen, 15 centuries after the preaching of the Gospel, there appears all of a sudden a body of apostolic men. The name of Jesus has been reserved for them, and accordingly they imitate Him. Like Him, they prepare themselves in retirement; like Jesus, who only initiated His ministry at the age of thirty, they are ordained priests only at the age of thirty. It is the society which has done most good in the Church. And I dare say that their superiority comes from the fact that they oriented themselves towards teaching; that is the source of all the good which the Jesuits have done. In its turn also, 19 centuries after the founding of the Church, there comes a small society. The name of Mary has been held in store for it, as it were, and given to it by God. The Blessed Virgin has said to it: I supported the Church at her birth; I shall support the Church at the end of time. We must also follow the path of the Jesuits. My greatest ambition, one of the first ideas behind the founding of the Society, its first aim, is teaching. I have no hope in its future, I consider it as lost, if it does no teaching.¹¹

From the following school year on, Fr. Mayet, to whom we owe every one of the precious texts quoted so far, was no longer in the vicinity of Fr. Colin, and the attestations relative to the use of that expression by Fr. Colin will be much more spaced out, of course. However, in the notes written by Fr. Maitrepierre in 1853, relative to the Society, we find this remark:

L His modest simplicity has never stopped him from believing that the Society of Mary was called to do great things in the Church of God. Mary, he said, protected the Church in her cradle; she will protect her in a very special way at the end of time.¹²

Characteristic as they were of Fr. Colin's spiritual teaching during his generalship, these reminders of the expression under consideration might have ceased with his resignation in 1854. On the contrary, we shall see that, even after he had resigned as Superior, Fr. Founder made it a point to repeat these statements, for he considered them as part of that treasure of essential ideas which he wished to bequeath to the Society.

In July 1863, after having received a letter from Fr. David, Fr. Mayet inserted at the beginning of his Memoirs the following note:

M "Mary supported the Church in the early times; she will do it also at the end." I asked him, Fr. David writes, whether he had any particular motive for believing that it would be so. He told me: "Mary herself has revealed it, and it was in reference to the future of our little Society."¹³

At the Chapter of 1866, before taking leave of the capitulants at the

end of the first session, on June 20, Fr. Founder declared, referring to the delays'

¹¹ MAYET 7, 652.

¹² MAYET, *Notes détachées*, t. 1, p. 98.

¹³ MAYET 1, 3 margin.

encountered in the matter of the Rule

N The more I think of it, the more I congratulate myself that I did not undertake to finish the Rule any sooner. The matter was not yet ripe. I needed the time to see clearer. And that is what makes me hope that our little Society will live and that it will live unto the end. I have always thought that the Society is called to fight until the end of time. Mary supported the Church at her birth; she will do so also at the end, and she will do so through you. We must therefore penetrate ourselves with her spirit, and this spirit we must draw from her heart. The Apostles never did anything without consulting her, because she had the new law written in her heart and had been taught by the Holy Ghost even before the Incarnation.¹⁴

In September 1868, Fr. 'Gautheron and Fr. Jeantin both picked up on Fr. Colin's lips statements which are similar to the foregoing ones. To Fr. Gautheron, he said:

O I have always had the idea that the Society was called to work for the salvation of souls at the end of time. The Bl. Virgin sustained the Church at her cradle; she will sustain 'her in a special way at the end of the world.¹⁵

and to Fr. Jeantin:

P The Bl. Virgin said, referring to the Society: I supported the Church in the early times. I shall do so again at the end of time.¹⁶

Finally, on February 6, 1872, on the occasion of his brief appearance at the end of the second session of the General Chapter, Fr. Founder, deeply moved, gave a few words of encouragement where he used for the last time the expression which we are studying:

Q It is true that the future is not in our hands. But, as the Blessed Virgin supported the Church at her birth, so she will support the 'Church at the end of time. Let us cling to her spirit, and she will be with us for ever.¹⁷

B. A Summary Analysis

The sequence of texts quoted above may have appeared somewhat tedious. Yet it was necessary, not only in order to provide the reader with all the pieces of evidence, but also in order to 'bring out the variety of the dates and circumstances in which Fr. Founder came back to the expression he had at heart. A quick analysis of the data provided by these quotations, so much akin to each other, will open the way to a more precise grasp of the historical problem which they raise.

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the Chapter of 1866*, p. 39.

¹⁵ MAYET, B copy, t. 3, p. 2197.

¹⁶ Note of Fr. Jeantin during his retreat in 1868.

¹⁷ *Proceedings of the Chapter of 1872*, p. 152.

All the preceding texts have this in common that they attribute a decisive part to the Virgin Mary both at the beginning of the Church and at the end of time. A number of them present this assertion merely as a conviction, a personal certitude of Fr. Founder, without indicating what it rested upon (texts J, L, N, O, Q). Most of the time, however, the statement is placed on the lips of Mary herself, whether the text indicates this explicitly (texts A, B, E, I, K, M, P), or whether it appears clearly from the use of the first person in the expression (C, D, H).

Despite its very generic meaning, there is no question that the “saying of Mary” reported by Fr. Founder has, in his eyes, reference to the Society of Mary. While it is implied in almost every single text, this reference is explicitly stated six times (texts B, G, I, K, M, P). Text K deserves special notice here, because it is the only one in which Fr. Colin had occasion for a direct justification of his assertion, in answer to a precise question.

When and to whom was addressed this “saying,” so capital for the future of the Society? These are, of course, the questions which come immediately to mind. Three texts can help us answer the first question. Text C tells us that *these words presided over the first beginnings of the Society*; text C refers us to *what was foretold in our very beginnings*, and finally we know from text I that *these are the words which sustained and encouraged us at the very beginning*.

One may have noticed, in these three different sentences, a desire to emphasize the word *beginnings*, considered to be too vague by itself. There can be no doubt that the mysterious words were not pronounced during the period of origins, taken in the wide sense, but that they go back to the very time when the project of a Society of Mary was first conceived, that is at the Major Seminary of Lyons, perhaps even before.

Two texts even put us in a position to be more precise: text D, which, on October 26, 1844, refers us about thirty years back, and text H, dated December 2, 1847, which says more precisely *about 36 years ago*. These two indications may seem to contradict each other, but it is not so, for the unit used in the first case, being the decade, allows for more margin than the precise figure used in the second case. By relating the two indications one to the other, which is quite natural seeing that they come from an identical source and refer to the same object, one is brought back to a period which hovers around the years 1811-1812.

As for knowing *to whom* these words were communicated, only one text (D) gives us any information: *It is now about thirty years ago since that was said to a priest*. This detail, of course, excludes absolutely that the recipient of the words should have been a nun or a mere layman. On the other hand, if we take into account a current way of speaking which was not completely foreign to Fr. Founder, it does not make it absolutely certain that the person in question should have been a priest at the time of the communication, It is enough that he should have been one at the time when Fr. Founder was speaking, namely in 1844. In current speech, do we not often speak of events concerning “a Cardinal,” “a Bishop,” with-

out bothering to find out whether, at the time of the event, they already possessed the title with which we now refer to them?

After these remarks, we can now tackle for its own sake the historical problem of the origin of the expression with which we are concerned here.

C. Probable Origin of the Expression

At the term of the above analysis, it appeared that the assertion of Fr. Founder concerning the role of Mary both at the birth of the Church and at the end of time, could be traced back to a communication claimed to be from Mary herself, bearing directly on the Society of Mary, and made in its very beginnings, around 1812.

But we also happen to be acquainted with the text of a "revelation," claimed to be from Mary herself, bearing on the Society of Mary, and going back to the year 1812, namely the one that was made to Jean-Claude Courveille in the Cathedral of Le Puy, on August 15 of that year, and which settled his priestly vocation. Here is an account of it, as reported by Fr. Mayet according to a letter written by its recipient in 1852, 16 years after he had joined the Benedictines at the monastery of Solesmes:

In 1812, while he renewed the same promise to Mary, at the foot of the same altar, "he heard, not with his bodily ears, but with those of his heart, interiorly but very distinctly: ... This is ... what I wish. As I always imitated my Divine Son in everything, and as I followed Him unto Calvary, standing at the foot of the Cross while He gave His life for the salvation of men, now that I am with Him in glory, I imitate Him in what He does on earth for His Church, for which I am a protector and like a powerful army, for the defense and the salvation of souls. Just as, at the time of a dreadful heresy which was to overturn all Europe, He raised His servant Ignatius to form a society which would bear His name by calling itself Society of Jesus and those who composed it Jesuits, in order to combat against hell which broke loose against the Church of my Divine Son, so also I want, and it is the will of my adorable Son, that, in this last age of impiety and incredulity, there should be also a society which will be consecrated to me, will bear my name, and will call itself Society of Mary, and those who will compose it will also call themselves Marists, to fight against hell..."¹⁸

"I did not hear any words; everything took place interiorly, in my heart," Dom Courveille would add a few months later, in his answer to a question put to him by Fr. Mayet.¹⁹ Hence, the text which one has just read is clearly the result of putting in writing, forty years later, a mysterious communication which, though made without the use of discursive speech, had nevertheless imprinted itself very distinctly on the mind of the young man. Through the terms which he uses, the Benedictine (who

¹⁸ MAYET, C. copy, t. 4, p. 2653.

¹⁹ MAYET, C copy, t. 4, p. 2655.

has certainly read St. Teresa)²⁰ implicitly classifies his own experience among what spiritual writers call “imaginary supernatural locutions.”²¹ It is not for us to settle here whether this communication was genuinely supernatural or not. What matters for us just now is that, keeping to the testimony of Dom Courveille himself, we are expected to concentrate more on the main idea expressed in this text than on the literary form into which it is couched in 1852, when he belatedly puts into writing the communication he had received.

And the basic structure of this text consists strictly in a twofold comparison. The principal one bears upon the role played by Mary while she was on ‘earth and the one which she plays now that she is in glory. A further comparison derives from this and draws, as it were, its consequence. Since Mary imitates Jesus in glory, it is natural that she should, in this last age of impiety, have picked out a society which would bear her name, just as her Son had raised one in the 16th century against the Protestant heresy..

Leaving aside the intermediary terms of comparison, what Our Lady asserts in this text relative to herself can be summed up in two propositions which constitute the two extremes of the text: She imitated her Son on earth by standing at His side in the work of Redemption; she picks out, in this, the end of time, a society which bears her name, to combat against hell. This is unquestionably something very much akin to the idea contained in the expression of Fr. Colin which is under comment.

Admittedly, Dom Courveille’s text makes no direct mention of the nascent Church, but only of Calvary, where a whole segment of theological tradition situates the birth of the Church; and, more generally, one would like to recognize more clearly in this flowing period the pattern of Fr. Colin’s almost stereotyped expression. Still, one must agree that it was quite possible, inevitable even, that there should occur a slight shift of emphasis between the oral confidences of Jean-Claude Courveille to his friends in 1816 and the written account sent by the Benedictine monk to Fr. Mayet in 1852. It was also inevitable that, among the seminarians who heard the story of Jean-Claude Courveille in 1816, some should have been struck by one aspect, some by another, and ‘that every one should have finally reduced this initial “revelation” on the Society to the one element of it which ‘had struck him most. A typical example of this is Fr. Terraillon, who only retained, from Courveille’s confidences, the parallel between the names and missions

of the Society of Jesus and of the Society of Mary.²² Fr. Colin, on the contrary, was probably impressed ‘by the idea of the part to be played by Mary at the end of time and its connection with the mission which had been hers at the origin of the Church.

²⁰ “Though perfectly formed, the words are not heard with the bodily ear; yet they are understood much more clearly than if they were so heard, and, however determined one’s resistance, it is impossible to fail to hear them” (*Life*, ch. 25, at the beginning).

²¹ Cf. TANQUEREY, *The Spiritual Life*, Desclée, 1948, u. 1494; ARHIGOU-LAGIANGE, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Herder, 1948, vol. II, p. 589.

²² Cf. *Notice bien abrégée des commencements de la Société de Marie*, p. 1; MAYET, B copy, t. 20, p. 17.

More conclusive still seems to be the fact that, in at least two of the texts quoted above, Fr. Founder linked the famous Words *I supported the Church at her birth, I shall do so again at the end of time* with a parallel between the mission of the Jesuits and that of the Marists. While it is only implicit in text B, this parallel is drawn out at length, on the contrary, in K. We can only invite the reader to compare for himself the latter text with that of the revelation made at Le Puy. In both of these, the similarity between the names of the Society of Jesus and of the Society of Mary forms the basis for a similarity between the missions of these two Congregations. In both these texts also, Mary herself is the one who imposes its name and its mission upon her Society at the end of time. Finally, both texts have this in common that, in each of them, the saying of Mary relative to her mission at the end of time through the Society is connected with the part played by her in the origins of the Church. The fact that one text speaks of her presence on Calvary while the other refers to her presence in the first Christian community does not seem sufficient to destroy the surprising symmetry of these two texts. Besides, it should be noted that, while Fr. Colin's statement is inspired by a desire to stress the importance of teaching in the Society of Mary, it is not this desire which creates the parallel between the Jesuits and the Marists. On the contrary, the whole point of Fr. Founder's argument lies in his conviction that the analogy between the missions 'of the two Congregations is part of the Divine plan which has willed this symmetry and similarity. Whereby we are again brought back to the most basic idea in the text of the revelation made at Le Puy.

Such are the main considerations which can be made to bring out the very strong probability that Mary's revelation concerning her role at the birth of the Church and at the end of time is purely and simply to be identified with the revelation made to Courveille at Le Puy. For the twofold convergence of dates and contents constitutes a very strong indication, which one would need serious motives to reject.

Do such motives exist? Full proof of the contrary would require an extremely long study which would have, among other things, to give an account of Fr. Colin's attitude, at the end of his life, towards the revelations received by Courveille, to examine the other revelations reported by Fr. Mayet relative to the origins, and to discuss the possibility of others having been the recipients of the revelation alluded to by Fr. Colin. Obviously, such a discussion cannot take place within the framework of this article. Let it be sufficient to say that the sum total of the texts which are apt to throw light on this problem have been gathered and collated with a view to the collection of documents on *Marist Origins* which is now being prepared. And, far from providing arguments against the identification just proposed, these texts converge invincibly towards the acceptance of this identification as the only plausible solution.

It does not seem, therefore, that one has the right to comment upon the expression in question without first giving the crucial problem of its origin a solution which has for it such a high degree of probability.

It is actually on what Abbe Courveille told his companions in 1816 that

Fr. Colin grounded his clear conviction relative to the role of Mary at the birth of the Church and at the end of time. Once this is admitted, however, it is important to realize that such a conviction could take root in Fr. Founder's thought, and could hold such an important place in it, only because this idea had already been prepared and carried along by a whole spiritual tradition. Abbe Courveille as well as Fr. Colin were both dependent on this tradition, and it is by studying it rapidly that we shall better prepare ourselves for a profound understanding of Fr. Colin's thought.

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Source: ACTA Societatis Mariae. N. 26. T. V. Junius 1959