



*See, I am doing a new deed;
even now it comes to light;
can you not see it?
Isaiah 43:1*

2. Something new for our times

In Scripture, God's choice of human beings for a particular mission often seems to have been a mystery quite beyond the laws of human logic or reason. Certainly, this choice hardly ever seems to have had much to do with personal talent or worthiness. Moses' first response to God's choice of him was, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh? I am slow of speech and a stammerer." God chose David, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, and the last one that Jesse would have thought would be chosen. Isaiah protested against God's call, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Jeremiah questioned God's choice, saying, "Ah, Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." Ezekiel threw himself to the ground in fear at God's presence, while Jonah ran away from God, and prayed: "Take my life. I would be better dead than alive." Even Mary was "deeply disturbed" at the angel's message, and questioned how it could possibly come about. As for personal worthiness, we have only to remember the apostles: one of them betrayed Jesus, one denied Him, and the rest ran away. And yet, while God's choice may not have had much to do with worthiness or talent, it had a lot to do with usefulness. These men and women were chosen because they would be useful in God's plan. It was God's plan; it was God who was the crafter, God whose fingers would mould and shape the chosen person. "Do not call yourself a child," God says to Jeremiah. "I will put words into your mouth." And to Ezekiel, "I will make your brow like adamant, harder than flint. Do not be afraid." The first Marists had no illusions about the unlikely material that they were; but after all, that wasn't the point. What was more important was that they had been chosen, and chosen for a particular task. They were prepared to let themselves be shaped and formed into something they would never have imagined for themselves. Colin never envisaged that Marists would be a breathtakingly beautiful or delicately refined ornament in the Church's showcase; but he knew that the Society of Mary would be something new, and above all, something "useful" for God, for the Church and for their times.

It makes a difference

Within six years of the Profession of the first 20 Marists in 1836, the whole Marist enterprise already numbered 60 priests, 400 brothers, 100 sisters, and many lay people, spread throughout a dozen dioceses. By then, 41 of them had set out for the missions of Oceania, and one had already been martyred. In a such a short time, and from such a small part of France, nearly 600 people had joined an enterprise, convinced that *this would make a difference to their own lives*. Furthermore, these people were driven to “go from place to place”, even to go to the ends of the earth, convinced that *this would make a difference to the lives of others*. And despite Champagnat’s conviction that they were just rough and unpolished stones, the Marists’ preaching *did make a difference to people’s perception of the Church*. Parishioners who had ridiculed and abused the missionaries at the beginning of their missions fell at their feet by the end. What was the secret? Statements by the pioneers reveal that their energies were mobilised by three convictions. In the first place, they believed that the name “Society of Mary” had been reserved for their time and for each of them personally, and that they were privileged to be “the first children of Mary.” As well as that, they believed that living by Mary’s attitudes of mind and heart was a particularly effective way of meeting what they saw as “the great needs of the people”. And this, they believed, would make a difference to their own lives, to the lives of others, and to the way the church was perceived and experienced. However, by 1842, it was clear that the plan of a many-branched Marist enterprise was impossible, and that each branch would need to be independent. Marcellin Champagnat had died in 1840, and the Brothers already had their own Superior General. If from now on in this book we seem to follow the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin, the founder of the Marist Fathers, it is because it was Colin whom Mayet followed with notebook and pen, and it was Colin who more than anyone else articulated what might be called the spirituality of the Marist project. There is only one aim of Marist spirituality and that is to live the life of Jesus; and there is only one source of Marist spirituality, and that is Mary herself; but each of the original congregations, and each of the congregations that developed over the years, has added its own particular instruments and its own variations to this one theme.

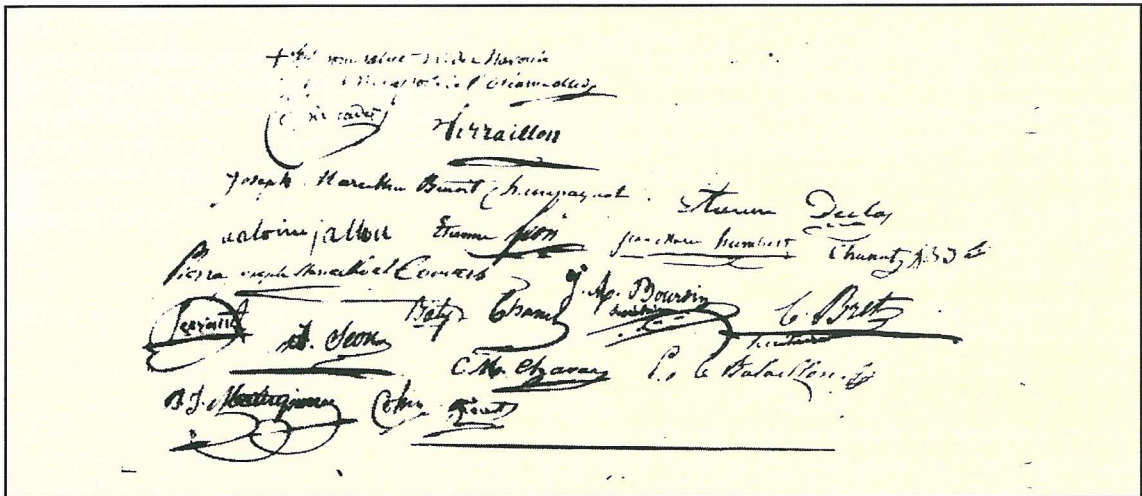
"The place where we used to meet most frequently was the woods in the garden of the country house. We used those meetings to inflame our zeal, at times with the thought that we had the happiness of being the first children of Mary, and at times with the thought of the great needs of the people."

Father Terraillon on the beginnings of the Society.

Specially chosen

Terraillon speaks of the first companions’ happiness in being the first children of Mary. This is a recurrent theme in the consecrations to Our Lady which concluded the annual retreat. We don’t relate easily to this notion of being the privileged children of Mary, or at least we find it difficult to give it acceptable theological content. At the same time, let us not dismiss too easily a theme which I believe is an essential ingredient in the kind of total commitment that the Marist project elicited. Jesus experienced God as a voice saying: “You are my beloved Son. On you my favour rests.” (Mk.1:11) Mary heard the angel say: “Rejoice, O highly favoured daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.” (Lk. 1:28) When the early Marists experienced themselves as the privileged children of Mary, as the objects of a loving choice, they were saying something about what the Spirit does in those who are led by the Spirit. “You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’).” (Rm.8:15)

Gaston Lessard, sm



The signatures of the first 20 men to become Marists. Among these men were Marcellin Champagnat, founder of the Marist Brothers, and Peter Chanel, first martyr of Oceania. Three months after their profession, four of these twenty priests, along with Bishop Pompallier and three brothers, set out for the vast area of Oceania at the bottom of the world's map. Within five years of that profession ceremony, both Chanel and Champagnat had died.

Gracious choice

The first Marists were convinced that the work of Mary was of her own initiative.... And today, though we have no tangible sign of her actual intervention on behalf of the Marist congregation, we cannot forget the invitation to ever keep in mind the origin of our personal vocation: it is by a gracious choice that we belong to the family of Mary.

John Jago, sm

It's up to us

What needs to be renewed, refounded or perhaps re-found, is the common vision that enthused the young seminarians in Lyon during their last years of preparation for the priesthood; the vision that led them to the chapel of Fourvière, that enabled them to persist in a common project throughout the years of dispersion, and after twenty years was vigorous enough to make them adopt what at the time must have seemed the most daunting of mission fields.

Jan Snijders, sm

Writing an obituary

Writing an obituary can help us to discover just where the centre of our lives is, and this can be a real eye-opener.

Suppose for a moment
you had a sudden heart failure
or met with a freak and fatal accident.
Your life is all over.

What you have done goes down in history,
and everything that you planned to do
or were going to get round to do
vanishes with the mind that considered it.
Imagine that you are a friend of yourself
and are writing an obituary for yourself.

What would you write?

On what was your heart set?

Whatever you built your life around -

was it what you dreamt for your life?

And was it worth all the effort?

The dream of those young seminarians
remained with them all their lives.

They thought it was worth living for -
and dying for.

Something never thought of

A clear picture emerges from Mayet's *Memoirs*. As far as Jean-Claude Colin was concerned, and as far as the founding Marists understood, the project they were initiating was to be something new, and the Society of Mary was not to be modelled on any other religious Congregation. It was not to take up something that was already being done by others; it was to begin something new. This "new" thing came from a key fact and a key image shared from the start by those pioneers. The key fact was their conviction that they were the first group in the history of the Church to have been called by the name of Mary, to have been called "Marist". Historically, this could perhaps be disputed; but for that group of Marists it was an unshakeable conviction: the name "Society of Mary" had been reserved for that century, and for that group: "we are the first of the children of Mary". To be called Marist was a source of hope, and also a challenge to take up a certain way of thinking and acting. That way was summed up in the key image which Colin put to his followers: Mary in the early Church. For the first time in history a Religious Congregation appears in the Church, drawing its inspiration not from Mary in herself, seen as the embodiment of all the great virtues, but Mary seen always in *relationship*: to Jesus, to the Church, and to the contemporary world. It was a very simple and clear idea: what would happen if a group of people built their way of thinking and acting round the model of Mary's presence in the Church? This indeed was something new, and it enabled Jean-Claude Colin to envisage – and to encourage Marists to build – a new Church, a Church that is different. But then, having taken this idea, he envisaged a structure to make it work: a body of priests, religious and lay people. And having envisaged this body, he presented it with a way of acting which would enable a "new church" to take shape. Colin envisaged a way of dealing *with* the world, not against it; a way which meant pushing the limits of mercy to the utmost extreme to ensure that everyone was able to be gathered into the Church, and no one was excluded, except those who wished to exclude themselves. When Colin presented his idea to Rome, he said that "people had never seen anything like it." And when Cardinal Castracane criticised the project as being something unheard of, he was exactly right. That was the whole point. It had not been heard of before. Perhaps even the founding members themselves had no real idea of what this new project would mean.

Father Colin said on September 23, 1846

"It was foretold that the Society of Mary was to take as a model none of the congregations which preceded it; no, nothing of all that; but that our model, our only model, was to be, and indeed was, the early Church."

The Mayet Memoirs

New structure

The Society of Mary was not to be the sort of clerical congregation that had become the norm since the Reformation. Unlike the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, etc., the Society of Mary had to break through the restraints of that clerical pattern, for the sake of its specific mission.

If we read our founding texts carefully, one idea that we tend to consider marginal proves to be rather central: that the Society of Mary must be a tree of many branches. It was at the heart of the original Marist vision not to become a clerical organization like the Jesuits, but a much wider movement: and this was intrinsically linked to the specific mission of the Society of Mary. The secularized world cannot effectively be reached through the pre-Enlightenment clerical structures: it takes men and women, priests and laity working harmoniously together. Many evangelizing tasks can be done better by women and lay men than by clerics. The traditional Third Order was a form of lay involvement tied to a particular period; it is good, but it must not blind us to the wider responsibility of the Society of Mary to promote and anticipate a church in which the clergy abandon their privileged role, step back among the People of God, and work with them on a basis of equality. Our First and Perpetual Superior is a lay person, and a woman.

Jan Snijders, sm



"Here is what I want..."

In 1809 when Jean-Claude Courville bathed his eyes in the oil from one of the votive lamps in the Cathedral of Le Puy, his blindness was cured. When he returned to this same spot in thanksgiving for the extraordinary cure, he heard "with the ears of his heart" the voice of Our Lady saying: "Here is what I want... a Society which will have my name, which will call itself the Society of Mary, whose members will call themselves Marists." This is what "singularly struck" and "left kind of stupefied" the seminarians at Lyon. It was of this that Jean-Claude Colin told himself: "That suits you!"

"Here is what we want..."

In 1816, in the chapel of Fourvière, before this statue of Our Lady, the twelve seminarians of Lyon were prepared to make their promise: a commitment of themselves in response to Mary's request. On that occasion they declared: "We have the sincere intention and firm purpose of consecrating ourselves at the first opportunity to founding a congregation of Mary-ists.... and we solemnly promise to spend ourselves and all that we possess in saving souls by every kind of apostolate under the sacred name of the Virgin Mary and with her protection and help." The Marist vocation comes from a meeting of these two desires: the desire of Mary that something new happen in the Church, and the desire of an individual person to be part of that work.



Men of fire

The seminarians who climbed the hill of Fourvière were caught in a dream. They were convinced that Mary wanted something. She wanted to transform the Church into a Kingdom of Mercy. In God's providence she was to be the instrument to renew the Church into a servant and pilgrim people. She was to bring a new sensitivity and compassion. A compassion which saw in the scepticism of the time a desire of people to be authentic, to cast off all masks and illusions. A Church which would be gentle with unbelievers because it recognized in their disbelief the possibility of a deeper and sounder foundation for the faith. The men of Fourvière burned with a vision. They were innovators and prophets. They wanted to create something new. For the sake of their vision they were willing to set aside all desire for personal power, for fame, for possessions. The invitation to go to Oceania had not yet been made, the question had not yet been asked, and yet one knew that the answer would be "yes". They were men available. They were men on fire, the men of Fourvière.

John Jago, sm

Jean-Claude Colin: founder

At the dawn of the last century he felt that the response to the new needs then arising was to be found in the Virgin Mary, but to express this conviction he did not take up the pen of a theologian or a spiritual writer; nor did he start a new devotion or build a sanctuary to attract crowds, any more than he launched an original form of apostolate. He was convinced that for the work of Mary there was needed a body, a social body whose structure, internal life, and way of acting would be inspired by the place occupied by Mary in the Church of Christ. His irreplaceable contribution was to bring into existence a group of men who would take seriously the fact of bearing Mary's name and accept the consequences. In a word, his role is that of a founder, namely the one who provides the foundations and brings into existence, even though, as happened in his case, he was not the first to launch the project. Although his was not the original idea, it was he who gave it flesh; a Marian task if ever there was one.

Jean Coste, sm

The end times

If the Marist project was "something unheard of", how does one actually describe what it looks like? A good way is to go back to what brought it into being: the story which Jean-Claude Courveille told his companions in the seminary at Lyon. Four people have left accounts of what they understood Courveille "heard" at the shrine of Le Puy. Courveille himself said he heard Mary talk about a Society founded for the battle for the faith at these end times. Déclas and Terraillon were struck by the parallel between the Society of Jesus and the Society of Mary. But what stayed with Colin was another parallel: the parallel between the beginning of the Church and the end times. What Colin retained from the Le Puy story were these words of Mary: *"I was the mainstay of the new-born Church; I shall be again at the end of time."* According to historian Jean Coste, this is the sentence which "Fr. Colin repeated most often, most consistently and most regularly during his whole life." Colin himself says that the words attributed to Mary served as a "foundation" and an "encouragement" in the Society, indicating the direction in which the Founder was to go. Jean-Claude Colin made a clear link between the "end times" and the times that he lived in. He was convinced that his age was the prelude to the end of the world, and this gave him and his contemporaries a sense of urgency, expressed in the style of language he used in the Constitutions. Today, we may find it difficult to accept Colin's view in a literal sense, and even his contemporaries were a little confused about that connection. In fact, Jean-Claude Colin never indicated that this personal belief was to be part of the Society's idea of itself. And the striking thing is the way he avoids the temptation of suggesting that Marists turn their backs on the world and cultivate the model of the church of the past. On the contrary, he sees the present age as the opportunity to create a new model of church which would ensure that all are gathered and welcomed. The point of Colin's image of Mary at the beginning of the Church and at the end of time is to see her standing as it were in a huge arc of time that stretches from the beginning of the church to the end of the world. In a sense she is already at the end of time, and she draws us forward, not backwards, into preparing for that end of time which will come not because God has tired of the sinfulness of humans, but because the *world* has become "united in mind and heart" as the *church* was at the beginning.

January 19, 1848

Father Colin's tone became solemn, "Yes, 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 very earliest days of the Society, as a foundation and an encouragement. They were always before us. We worked in that direction, so to speak."

The Mayet Memoirs

The time has come

A study of all the texts recorded by Mayet in which Colin speaks of Mary supporting the Church at its beginning and at the end of time, shows that, for Jean-Claude Colin, meditating on this theme always led to a sense of *mission*; a realisation that Marists have a job to do – and urgently – in the world; and that because of this, they can be full of courage because *"Mary is at our head"* and *"the time has come to make her power burst forth."* Here are some of the texts from Mayet.

I have always had the idea that the Society was called to work for the salvation of souls at the end of time.

Times are bad, but Mary who consoled, protected and saved the new-born Church will save it in the last days. I am not saying that judgement day is almost upon us, but still, it will be soon enough when it does come. Mary will make use of us, her sons.

The Blessed Virgin has said: I was the support of the Church at its birth: I shall be so again at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me.

Nineteen 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.

The Mayet Memoirs

A Church re-born

It would seem that Colin, without entirely losing his sense that the world would end soon, or at least within a few generations, did not think of the Society's mission exclusively in terms of emergency action to brace Christians for the end, but could also envisage a new age of faith before the end: a church re-born, a new conquest of the age of pride and unbelief by a faith purified and restored to the simplicity of its beginnings.

Edwin Keel, sm

No fire-brand preaching

In no way does Father Colin resemble one of those repentance preachers, full of pessimism, and inclined from the start to restrain God's grace and to limit the number of the elect. Where threatening disaster compels haste, but where the situation of the sinner suggests patience, it is the patience of the pastor of souls that overrides the rush to condemn. And Mary, the woman of the end of the world, is not solely the Mother who gathers her fearful children; she is also the Virgin who marches at the head into battle, breathing courage and confidence into her sons:

"She is saying to us: 'I am marching at your head' Given that thought – the Blessed Virgin is marching with me – who would not feel full of courage and confidence in any trial?" The Mayet Memoirs)

Jan Hulshof, sm



A Marian people of God

For Father Colin, the charism of the Society does not consist in meeting precise concrete needs on the social, educational or pastoral level. Nor does it consist in an inclination to certain pious practices or devotions. Father Colin sees the charism of the Society in terms of his reading of the signs of the times. In these times which are the last times, times of indifference, of pantheism and of materialism, the Society is called – guided by Mary and adorned with the name of Mary – to work at gathering a Marian people of God.

Jan Hulshof, sm

We can see that the very structure of the Society Colin has in mind – with priests, brothers, sisters, and an enormous association of lay people – is linked to this vision of an age of mercy represented by Mary, the woman who dreams not of judging or picking and choosing, but rather of gathering together and reuniting all her children.

Jean Coste, sm

New world – new church

Father Colin asks Marists to find in the early Church a model for the Society of Mary. He doesn't mean that we turn the clock back and imitate the physical lives of the early Christians; but he does invite us to try to understand what took place at the beginning of Christianity. It could be put like this: a group of ordinary people from the world of their times gather together to remember Jesus, and form a communion of mind, heart, and love. This "community" was simply a gathering or a grouping, not a building or a structured group. And in that community of love – called a "church" – the Gospel was heard, transforming the lives of the people who then submerged themselves in their world, and began to transform it. So it was like a cycle: men and women from the world – gather in a communion – are transformed by the Gospel – submerge themselves in their world – and transform the world which becomes another communion – where the Gospel is heard, and so on. The essential point is that the Gospels were written originally not for individuals, but for these "churches" or communities. Even today, if the Gospel is to be heard effectively, it is to be heard in the "community". So, the first requirement is to build a community of people who form "church". And since the world from which people come and to which they return is constantly changing, so will the shape and texture of the "church" constantly change. The Society of Mary's origins lie precisely at a moment of extraordinary change in the history of Western civilization: the great cultural shift of the Enlightenment. The world in which men and women lived was evolving into something quite different: a world which no longer assumed that God had an intimate part in their lives; a world which was jealous of its freedom and independence, and hypersensitive to any authority. At base, it was a world which was becoming more and more allergic to the Church as it was perceived, and Colin seemed to have an intuitive grasp of what was happening around him. Given his temperament, he could easily have joined those who saw this as the end of the world and the time for Divine Judgement. In fact, the remarkable thing is that he saw his age as a time of challenge to present the Gospel in a new way. He caught the wave without knowing on what part of the shore it might cast him. He realised that the work ahead is to begin a new "church" where the Gospel can be heard. The task is to enable "church" to happen in our day, because it is only when church happens that the Gospel can be proclaimed, heard, believed and inculturated.

September 27, 1846

Father Colin said: "The Society must begin a new Church over again. I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church. The Society of Mary, like the Church, began with simple, poorly educated men; but since then the Church has developed and encompassed everything. We too must gather together everyone through the Third Order. Heretics alone may not belong to it."

The Mayet Memoirs

As if starting again

Colin did not mean that Marists were to construct "another church", but rather "a church that is other"; not "a different church", but "a church that is different". One could say that he envisaged Marists as agents for the Church beginning again, being born again. Recent Popes have spoken about a "new Church."

"It is a new humanity and a new Church which must be reborn from the maelstrom of our present times."

Pius XI 1930

"If we have our eyes fixed on Mary, we will be able to re-constitute in ourselves the line and the structure of the renewed Church."

Paul VI 1973

"The Church must be constructed in this present century.... For us it is not a question of constructing the Church but of re-constructing it."

Paul VI July 14, 1976

"Our times require us to take up the building of the Church, almost psychologically and pastorally, as if starting again."

John Paul II August 4, 1985

"We must be prepared to leave atrophied schemes and be ready to move to where life is beginning."

John Paul II September, 1985

No antique drum

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.

We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum

T.S.Eliot. Little Gidding

* * * * *

An entirely new civilization has arisen, deeply secularised to the point that the very existence of God and His merciful call is for many people meaningless and irrelevant. The message of the Father must be preached again in a new language, in terms of a new culture. The incarnational movement of the Church is to start again in this new civilization. She must meet this new world on its own terms. This is how we must read today the call of our Founder: "*The Society must begin a new Church over again.*"

New missionaries are needed, with a new approach, to manifest the mercy of the Father in such a way that it will be understood....

Jan Snijders, sm

Transformed Church

And the Church must be forever building,
and always decaying,
and always being restored....

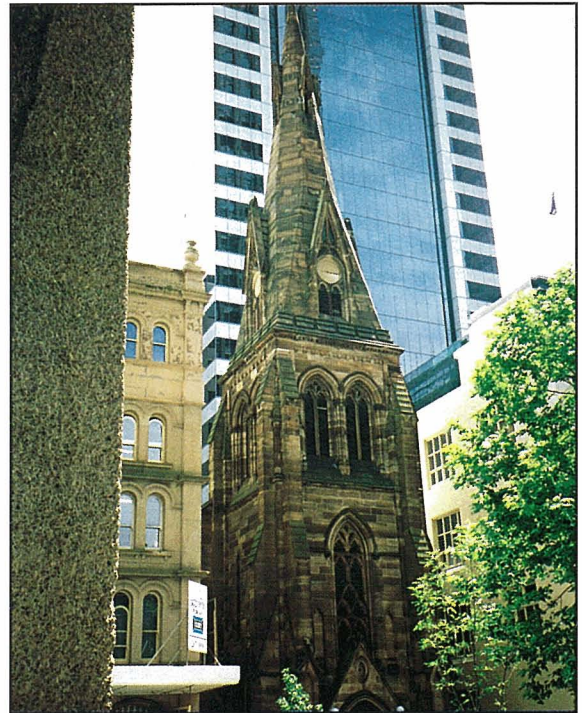
T.S.Eliot The Rock

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As Marists, we must dedicate ourselves to the more important and radical task of transforming the Church into a communion and a people....

Such a Church will demand a different form of leadership, one based not so much on hierarchy as on the ability to create an atmosphere in which people can recognize their gifts and have the courage to offer them for the task of the Kingdom.

John Jago, sm



Natural environment

In the natural world a loving God has designed each creature for the environment in which it is to live. There are fish that can thrive in the coldest waters and move easily through the most turbulent of rivers. The royal albatross can fly thousands of kilometres over gloomy and solitary oceans. God has designed Marists, too, for their environment, and our environment is a time characterised by unbelief, ignorance, confusion and sinfulness. Our Founder even said we were called to serve the most abandoned and the most profligate of sinners. That is our milieu, that is where we are at home.

Frank McKay, sm

Where is the anchor?

Although most Western Europeans, if asked, would describe themselves as Christians, even Catholic Christians, they would also have to admit that Western Europe is increasingly secular. What that means is that people have developed the bad habit of dropping their anchor inside the boat of their own earthly resources, rather than outside the boat into the living waters and the rock that is Christ.

The "Work of Mary"

"To enable church to happen" may be a useful way of describing the Marist enterprise. Or perhaps it may be clearer to say, "to be present wherever 'church' is happening", because forming a communion of mind and heart is the work of the Spirit, and not something brought about by human means. The specific task of Marists is to be there – as Mary was at the beginning – wherever 'church' is coming into being, and enabling Mary's spirit and attitude to touch this emerging church. This appears clearly from what Jean-Claude Colin retained of the words Courveille heard at Le Puy, although much of the point is lost in the English translation. Mary's words are recorded as: *"was the mainstay of the new-born Church."* What translates into English as "new-born Church" is, in the original French *"Église naissante"*, which really means *"the church in the process of being born."* This makes a significant difference to our understanding of Mary's place in the church. Mary's concern at the beginning was not simply for the Church which *had already* come into existence, but for the Church *in the very process of coming into existence*. And today and for the future she is concerned for the places where the Church is coming into being. The Marist pioneers spoke of this as "the Work of Mary", which they described in this way: that there be a group of people – a Society – whose task on earth is to support the Church in the same way as Mary did at the beginning; that there be a group of people who would be present wherever the new Church is coming to birth, and like a good midwife assist this Church into life. This is why to the end of his life Colin envisaged the Marist project as a vast enterprise embracing all people: priests, religious and lay people, all working for the same goal. In our times, there are many places where the Church is being born or re-born, where it is emerging or re-emerging. There are individuals who are searching for God or rediscovering their faith. There are individuals and groups who find themselves on the edge of the official church and who struggle to find a community in which they can hear the Good News spoken to them. There are whole countries which are emerging from non-belief or from suppression of faith. Colin's insight is that Mary is especially concerned to gather these people, and to be among them by means of the men and women who bear her name and the marks of her personality. However much they may feel their personal weakness or the smallness of their numbers, Marists are invited to take part in this work, and to do it with urgency.

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.

The Mayet Memoirs

Worthwhile task

The first Marists were young and inexperienced when they started. They lacked information, finance, or contacts in high places. Colin was always stressing the importance of the inner, spiritual life, but he also said, "We did not build the Society on our knees." Champagnat, recalling the grinding labour of the early days, declared, "We built the Society, literally, with our hands!" The Sisters had sometimes to eke out a living by what was simply sweated labour. Yet all were buoyed up by an immense confidence in a call to further "the work of Mary" as they called it.

Denis Green, sm

Special mission

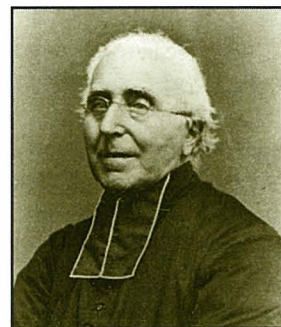
Colin was very strong on the idea that, now that we are approaching the end of time, Mary has a special mission. She who is present to the Church at all times is going to redouble her efforts at the end of time, for it is when a child is sick that a mother leans over the infant with even more love. Her Society is a means of allowing her to go everywhere, to bring back sinners, to show mercy; and the Society is to act in such a way that Mary can reach all her children, can reunite them, and can save them. The mission of the Society of Mary is therefore that of Mary herself. Moreover, as much for Champagnat as for Colin, in their correspondence of the early years, they do not speak of the "Society" of Mary, but of the "Work" of Mary. That is a very beautiful concept – doing what Mary wants one to do; that is what the work of Mary is all about.

Jean Coste, sm

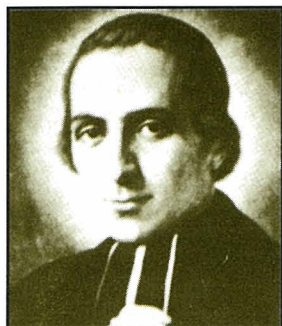
All the founders of the Marist project spoke of the "Work of Mary". They all saw it as something bigger than the Society of Mary or the works of the Society of Mary. The Marist project was a part of the Work of Mary; a means of enabling her Work to take place.



JEANNE-MARIE CHAVOIN, writing to Bishop Devie, says: "We have never doubted that God wanted the work of the Blessed Virgin in this diocese." At the end of her life, she said: "I desire only the preservation and prosperity of the work of the Blessed Virgin, but I fear very much its downfall."



JEAN-CLAUDE COLIN, writing to Marcellin Champagnat, said, "It is with a deep feeling of joy that I see your zeal and your devotion to the work of Mary..." "I have always hoped that you would be given a great spirit of courage, a great desire for your own growth and a willingness to suffer for the work of Mary."



MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT, writing to Monsignor Cattet, the Vicar General, makes a distinction between the Congregation of the Brothers and the work of the Blessed Virgin. "The interest which you have shown up till now for the work of Mary encourages us to make further efforts for its growth.... The Society of the Brothers cannot positively be regarded as the work of Mary, but only as a branch of the Society itself."

Welcome

If the name of Mary meant anything, it meant welcome.

The dream of the early Marists was that there would be in the Church, or rather that through the Society of Mary the Church would become, a place where everyone could feel welcome, including those labelled "sinners".

This openness of structure and multiplicity of branches was characteristic of the Marist plan from the beginning.

Gaston Lessard, sm

Entering into her work

The call of Colin... is not to launch a special devotion to Mary, nor even so much to imitate her and present her as a model of sanctity. It is to enter into her work, a work designated for her by divine providence in these "last" times, the work of gathering in mercy and compassion all the people of God into a Church which is not triumphal and legalistic but attentive to the fears, doubts and allergies of men and women of our time. We are to be extensions of Mary in her work of renewing the Church into a kingdom of Mercy.

John Jago, sm

"In this world"

While the "work of Mary" is something clear and simple, it can never be defined in fixed activities, because *how* the work of Mary is to be done will depend on the changing times, cultures and needs of the world. Two of Colin's early realisations will help us here.

The first one is summed up in three words he uses in his Constitutions: Marists find their rightful place *in this world*. This realisation was probably an element in Colin's transformation at Cerdon. From one whose only thought was to retire into the forest, Colin emerged as a Founder and Superior General of a Congregation whose horizons extended to the end of the world. He began to realise that the arena for the work of Mary, where she wants Marists to be, is *in this world*. In the *world*, because Marists are not to be monks or hermits, but people of the market place. In *this* world, because Marists find themselves in the world as it is, and not in an idealized world of the past, or a utopian world of the future. And finally, they are *in* the world, and not on the sideline watching with regret the passing of an age.

The second conviction for Colin was that if this world, and the whole of this world, is the arena for Mary's work, then a vast organization is necessary: priests, religious and laity all working in their own environment and according to their own vocation. This idea was clearly grasped at the beginning, especially by the lay people. Even in the early years at Cerdon, the Colin brothers had gathered about 30 lay men together in the presbytery. In Lyon another group of men formed, showing astonishing initiative. In the course of time, several other branches developed: groups for single women, for mothers, for girls, for young men, for married men, and for diocesan priests. These people knew they belonged "in the world". But because of the decision of the Roman authorities, "Society of Mary" came to mean only "order of priests". And by 1872 the "Third Order" was no longer considered as one of the branches of the "Society"; it had become a loose appendage of the Marist priests. Something of the cutting edge of the original plan was lost. When a congregation is defined as a "congregation of priests", then inevitably lay people become objects of the ministry of the priests. As we understand the project today, lay people are not the objects of the priests' ministry, nor even sharers in their ministry. Rather, all Marists – priests, religious and laity – are to involve themselves in "the work of Mary" and to do it "in this world".

December 1832

Father Colin said: "The Congregation of Jesus is a simple body. With the Jesuits you must have talents and many other things. In the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, it is not so. She is the mother of mercy. Her congregation will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people."

This applies above all to the Third Order.

July 1838

"Gentlemen, let us live up; our undertaking is a bold one; we want to march in everywhere. When will the moment come?"

September 1846

Father Colin said, "We too must gather together everyone through the Third Order."

September 1846

Then [Father Colin] spoke about the Third Order and told us: "During my last trip (his third trip to Rome) Cardinal Castracane did not act the way he did the first time when he laughed a lot and said, 'The whole world will be Marist then?' This time, as he heard of the spread of this Third Order, he took the matter quite seriously. 'Gentlemen, our Third Order will be open to everybody except heretics and pagans.'"

The Mayet Memoirs

No afterthought

One of Colin's early ideas – what he held on to and meant to leave to the Society – is that the Society essentially includes a branch for lay people "living in the world." ...The lay branch is part and parcel of the plan of the Society he presented in Rome in 1833. In 1837 he spoke of a world-wide Marist mission, saying that ...*the congregation of the Blessed Virgin... will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people* from which Mayet deduces: *This applies above all to the Third Order.* The recurrent emblem of a multi-branched tree also serves as a reminder of how the lay branch is integral to the full Marist vision. The lay members were certainly given to understand in 1837 by their director, Pierre Colin, that they "belong to the order of the Marists." The point is this: The Laity are no mere afterthought; without them the Society of Mary would be truncated. Lay people belong in the Marist thrust.

Charles Girard, sm

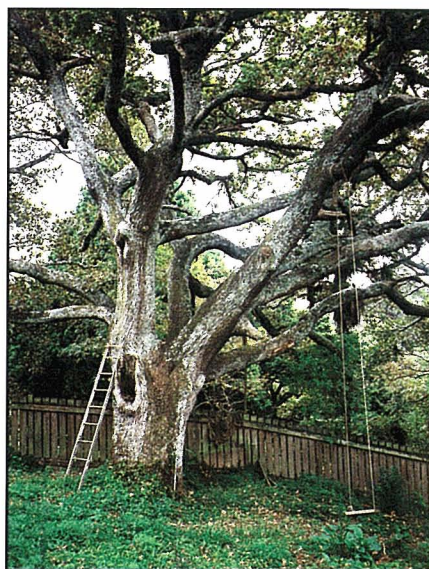
A tree of many branches.....

Throughout his life, Colin remained consistent in his idea of the lay branch of the Society, even though he had difficulty in explaining to others exactly what he meant. Mayet wrote to him on one occasion:

"On the one hand you tell us that the Third Order, as it exists, does not entirely meet your views, and on the other hand, you do not tell us what these views are. No one knows them. I myself, who have had the happiness of living with you for a long time, of hearing everything and remembering much, would have very great difficulty in formulating your desires and plans..."

However, comparing the plan of the Society which he presented to the Roman authorities with what he wrote at the end of his life, one can see a remarkable consistency in his thought. We know that what Cardinal Castracane couldn't swallow was Colin's image of the Society as a tree with many branches. In his report to the Cardinals, Castracane wrote: "How outlandish and irregular would be the plan for this confraternity to spread over the whole world under a single superior. ... Consideration should also be given to the suspicion that might be aroused in princes by a confraternity of this kind, dependent upon a single superior."

Mayet records Colin's comment on this: *Would you believe that the little Marists caused great terror in Rome? When I pointed to this little cart with its three wheels and nobody at the reins, the Cardinal was amazed. "Are you the superior of all these branches?" "Yes, Eminence." "And does that work?" "Yes, Eminence, all of its own accord!"*



Early Church

In the early Church there was a strong awareness that each person had his own particular charism, yet in the course of the Church's history all the charisms became focussed on the priest. Associated with this was a general downgrading of the laity and their role. It was against this background that Vatican II encouraged both an active role and a pastoral co-responsibility for the laity. The priest can encourage this co-responsibility in the parish only when he is prepared to renounce his own possibilities for influence.

Although Colin grew up in this hierarchical system, he already felt that it was not enough to meet the needs of the Church of his time. For this reason he exhorted Marists to look back to the early Church for the model. He had the vision of a new Church which would not concentrate on power and domination, but which would only want to serve. He pursued this utopian idea of a spirituality for a religious order: an order of priests, sisters, brothers and laity. Even unbelievers would find a place there, in so far as they were of good will.

Friedrich Arnold, sm

Feminine face of the Church

Today there is much talk of the "feminine face" of the church, of a new self-understanding, abandoning old *animus*-oriented power structures.... Today there are many people suffering from the church, from her narrowness and the way she restrains herself to traditional values rather than showing the compassion of "*Gaudium et Spes*" for the world of our time. I would say that this is *the* time for our vocation: to show *through the laity* that Marist spirituality is able to change the "whole world" – not necessarily in a quantitative sense, but certainly in a qualitative one, i.e. in all areas of life.

Nothing but a vision.... It will be difficult to make it accessible to those brothers and sisters of our Marist family who were so dear to Father Colin himself, but to whom he could never give an appropriate place – for he, just like the church in general, did not know what to do with the laity.

Andrea Pichlmeier

"Instruments of divine mercy"

To do "the work of Mary" is not to do something directed *towards* her, but in a sense, to do something directed *by* her. It is to enter into her work. Our times require a new way of inviting people to believe in God and Jesus Christ, and as far as Jean-Claude Colin could see these times require an approach motivated always by mercy. Colin saw his age as one of "pride, madness and unbelief" where the human sickness had reached as far as the head. The spirit of the Revolution had left its mark; by means of power and violence a new form of society was to be established. Freedom, equality, fraternity were to be enforced with passionate effort – even with bloodshed. Unfortunately, the church's reaction to this new problem was not much better; she too stooped to using a similarly heavy-handed approach, with fiery sermons, imposition of spiritual power, stirring up guilt, and so on. Father Colin was convinced that the biggest obstacle to the Church's credibility was often the lives and attitudes of the priests and religious, who often enough seemed to be furthering their own recognition rather than promoting the Kingdom of God. The solution lay with people whose attitude did not place them at centre-stage; and more than that, whose attitude flowed from recognizing that Mary is a Mother of Mercy. It may be significant that the day that the first 20 Marists made their first Professions was the feast of Our Lady of Mercy. But one thing is clear: their understanding of Mary as a Mother of Mercy goes back to the first revelation at Le Puy, when she was heard to say: "Here is what I want..." What she wants is that all be gathered and brought to heaven, so that in the last days, as at the beginning, all will be united in mind and heart. Colin frequently uses the word "gathering" to describe the attitude of men and women called Marists. This word "gathering", and the other words he uses to describe the activity of Marists – "uniting", "harmonising", "in the bosom" "an embrace open to all" – are all distinctively "feminine" in tone, and the significant thing is that they are the sort of words used in the Scriptures to describe the attitude of God towards the sinner. When Colin asks Marists to be "instruments of divine mercy", he is asking them to portray the "feminine features" of God, and to help to build a church which is not perceived in terms of power, planning, control, administration and competitiveness, but rather in terms of community, compassion, simplicity, mercy and fellowship.

Words recorded between 1838 and 1848

"Let us learn to understand the human heart. Let us put ourselves in the place of those we are speaking to. Would outbursts of invective against us win our hearts? Let us on the contrary find excuses for them, congratulate them on their good qualities (there are always some), but no reproaches. I do not know of a single instance where invective from the pulpit has done any good, not a single one...."

"In the Society we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God...."

'For myself, I follow the same approach as the Romans do. I am very fond of those principles: 'All for souls' and 'Salvation before law'...."

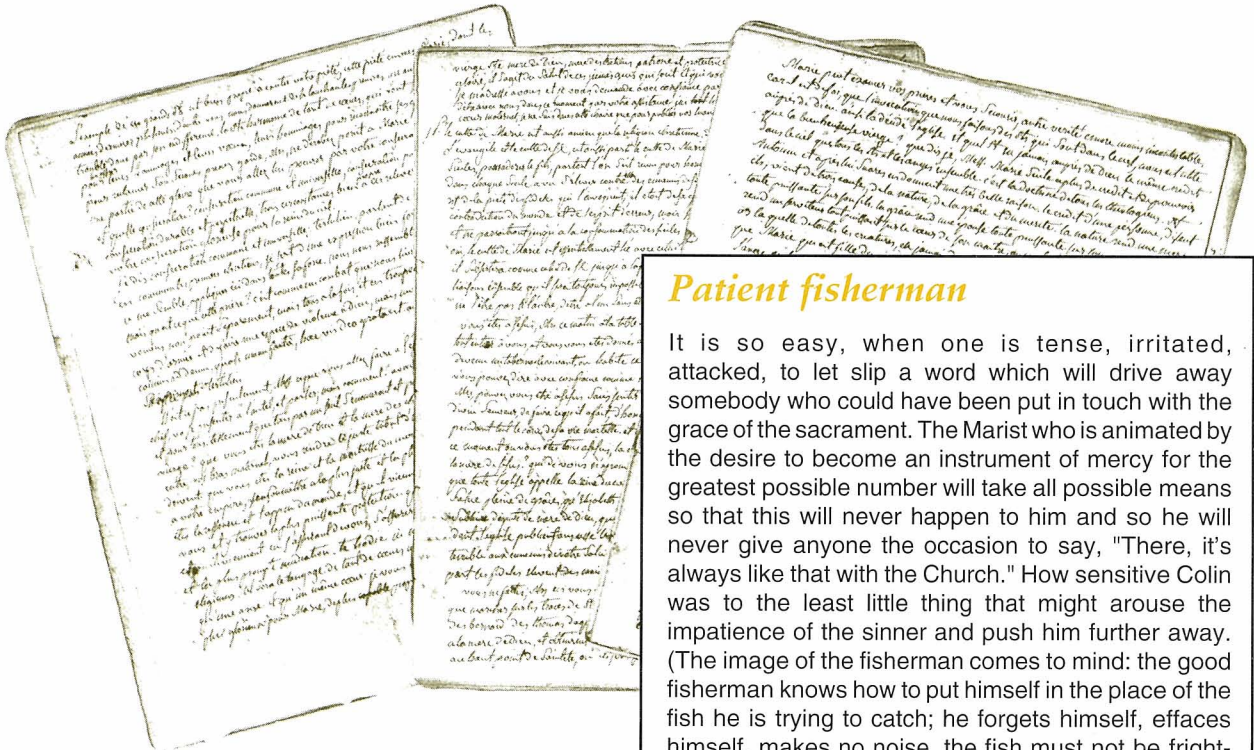
The Mayet Memoirs

Care for the fragile

If there is one characteristic about Father Colin that most impresses me, it is his deep sensitivity to the fragility of every human person. The goals he sets for Marists, the challenges he presents them, are formidable, but it seems to me that they are transmitted with a gentleness that seeks to inspire, to encourage, to urge on rather than to demand, to intimidate or to frighten. He knows how easily we and those whom we serve "get broken", so he urges us to live constantly in those Presences that mend – Jesus and Mary. He exhorts us to be present supportingly, understandingly, lovingly and frequently to one another, and he instructs us to deal sensitively, compassionately and gently with those we serve.

John Sajdak, sm

To Jean-Claude Colin who never really knew his own father or mother, and who was brought up by an uncle and a difficult housekeeper, Mary became the ideal Mother, the one in whom we can take refuge in all our difficulties. Reproduced below is one of his earliest sermons, in which he gives a striking description of his image of Mary. "She is the mother, who in her tenderness, is more of a mother than all the mothers on earth, the mother of all Christians for whom she underwent at Calvary all the pain of childbirth; whose motherly heart is forever open to all, and whose boundless charity extends to all ages of the new Covenant, to all nations and all people; comforts all miseries, meets all needs, grants all prayers."



Patient fisherman

It is so easy, when one is tense, irritated, attacked, to let slip a word which will drive away somebody who could have been put in touch with the grace of the sacrament. The Marist who is animated by the desire to become an instrument of mercy for the greatest possible number will take all possible means so that this will never happen to him and so he will never give anyone the occasion to say, "There, it's always like that with the Church." How sensitive Colin was to the least little thing that might arouse the impatience of the sinner and push him further away. (The image of the fisherman comes to mind: the good fisherman knows how to put himself in the place of the fish he is trying to catch; he forgets himself, effaces himself, makes no noise, the fish must not be frightened away.)

Gaston Lessard, sm

A message of humanness

Today's society is far more interested in what a person can achieve than in what or who he or she is. This is a very uncompassionate way of dealing with people, since they are seen solely in terms of use.... It is against this move towards inhumanity that Marists are called to keep alive the message of mercy and humanness. We have to try and develop a climate where no one will be manipulated or excluded. This means that we have to try and break down carefully all forms of uncompassion within the Church itself (exclusion from the sacraments of remarried couples, of divorced people, and of married priests). Following Colin's intention we should try to build a community between the "just" (those at home in the Church) and "sinners" (those excluded from the Church). The first inspiration to found our society was given to a person who would later very much need the mercy of God and of his fellow men, Father Courveille.

Friedrich Arnold, sm

Compassion and forgiveness

"Neither do I condemn you."

Christ showed compassion and never condemned anyone who asked for forgiveness. To be compassionate is the first step in forgiveness. That is why I think a compassionate priest is really good to go to for reconciliation. I know one priest I used to go to was an alcoholic - and he had such a compassionate attitude - I could really feel him taking on my faults - not excusing them or anything - but from his heart he had compassion. I could tell that from his weakness he reached out to me - that was the first step in coming before God in reconciliation.

"Useful instruments"

If the arena for Marists is the world as it is, how will they be able to become "useful instruments" of the mercy of God to an era which Colin described as an age of "indifference, unbelief, pride and madness", to a period of history where "faith is disappearing", to a world whose "inhabitants are bowed towards the earth, stuck to it, breathing for it alone"? Given his personal background, Colin could be excused for looking somewhat negatively at his times; but his analysis of the age of the Enlightenment is not too far from the mark. More importantly, he doesn't leave his followers without spiritual resources for meeting this age in a compassionate way. Once again, we are led back to the experience of Jesus in his preparation for mission. Between his calling by the Father and his being sent on Mission, Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert in order to be tempted there." In the desert, Jesus struggled against three temptations: the temptation to greed, looking after His own interests ("turn these stones into bread"); the temptation to pride, doing the spectacular thing ("throw yourself from the pinnacle"); and the temptation to impose Himself on others, and control their lives ("I will give you all the kingdoms of the world"). Jesus struggled against these three temptations, and won the victory through His commitment to live for "God alone". He emerged from the desert and began to preach with authenticity and authority. If we are to speak of a spirituality of Jesus, or a christian spirituality, its centre is probably somewhere here in this experience of Jesus. He resisted those self-seeking attitudes which destroy inner freedom, and He committed Himself to live for the God who loves and forgives unconditionally. To be a disciple of Jesus is to absorb these attitudes of Jesus. Mary herself learnt these attitudes, bringing to them her own qualities as woman, as mother, as support of the newly-emerging Church. To speak of a Marist spirituality, then, is to speak of a way of being a disciple of Jesus, based on Mary's discipleship of Him. And again, Colin's insight is simple and practical. He invites Marists, following in the footsteps of Mary, to keep their eyes fixed on God alone and on the Kingdom, taking a personal stand against the crippling forces of greed, pride and power; and he urges them to approach the people of our times with delicacy and sensitivity, winning others over by putting themselves in their shoes, rather than by imposing – even in the name of truth.

Notes taken between 1845 and 1849:

Father Colin said to us:

"Each century has its sickness. In the past there was faith but the heart was sick; now the malady has risen to the head. We live in a century of pride, of madness. We must cure this spirit by our simplicity, by our humility. In the pulpit let us not seem domineering, or else we shall alienate people. Man is more jealous than ever of his freedom, and his independence."

"The human race appears to me today to be like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten into by a worm."

"It is necessary to instruct, to present the truths of religion, to preach doctrine, but it must be done with great tact. Ours is a difficult age: so, no innuendo or acid remarks."

".... In these days we are on top of a volcano, a volcano of all the passions. People have eyes and do not see, ears and do not hear. The most absurd errors pass for truths. Well, it is in the midst of this century that the blessed Virgin shows herself."

The Mayet Memoirs

Modern world

Colin could not have sketched the modern world better: it is jealous of its freedom and its independence. Mary's intervention was to guide the Church through this new crisis, a Society doing what the Jesuits had done, but in the way Mary herself had been present in the apostolic Church: hidden and unknown. This new Church, a Marian-type Church, prepared to strip itself of its rights, its glory and its privileges, for the sake of the Word. A Church, and apostles, so unassuming, so devoid of ambition and thirst for prestige and recognition, that nothing will stand in the way of the Word itself being heard.

Jan Snijders, sm

In 1985 a symposium of the Bishops of Europe was held in Rome. Pope John Paul II spoke of the need for a new evangelization of Europe, a new approach to this re-evangelization, and of a special type of missionary who would be needed for this task. Here is part of what he said on that occasion:

"This man (of the modern world) who would like to be so adult, mature and free is also a man who flees from freedom in order to settle down into conformism, a man who suffers from loneliness, is plagued by various disturbances of the soul, seeks to get rid of death, and experiences a frightening loss of hope. This is the Europe and this is the man that we are called to evangelize today. New and immense tasks await and solicit us, but at the same time great possibilities and vivid expectations open up before us.

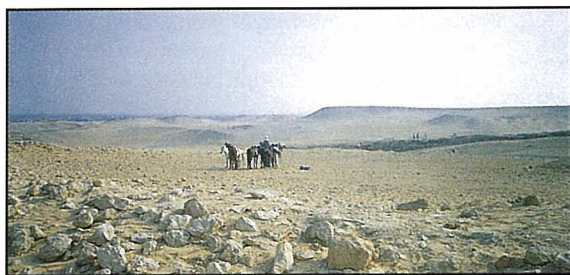
The work of evangelization is called to propose a new creative synthesis between Gospel and life.

The Church is called to give a soul to modern society ... and the Church must infuse this soul, not from above and outside, but penetrate within, making herself close to modern man. Thus an active presence and an intense participation in man's life is essential.

For this sublime mission aimed at the flowering of a new age of evangelization in Europe, evangelizers with a special preparation are required today. There is a need for heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who have a profound knowledge of the heart of present-day man, participating in his joys and hopes, anguish and sadness, and who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God. For this we need new saints."

Into the desert

"Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert"



We often use the word "desert" to describe an experience when one's life is brought into radical question, when things which were normally together seem to come apart. Those who survive these "desert" experiences emerge as more authentic and compassionate people. This was Jesus' experience as He struggled against the great illusions of greed, pride and power. Marists are invited to make the same journey with Jesus and Mary. Taking a stand against these crippling forces will enable Marists to become free people, "useful instruments" of God's mercy, and compassionate neighbours to their brothers and sisters.

Useful instruments

Later in his life, when Father Colin spoke about the sort of people he was looking for to be Marists, his criteria were clear. From his experience of the early Marist days, he was convinced that what was necessary to become a Marist was not great talent, or learning, or even great sanctity. What he wanted was people who could be "useful instruments" of God's mercy. And what made people "useful" in the eyes of Colin?

- * their interests:
"let them seek only the interests of Jesus and Mary."
- * their freedom:
"let them be ready to fly anywhere for the salvation of souls."
- * their point of reference:
"let us put on Christ's feelings for sinners."
- * their vision:
"like Mary, whose sole thought was the extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation."
- * their manner:
"we must win souls by submitting to them."

The great "No's"

Society of Mary historian Jean Coste uses the phrase "the great NO's" to refer to the stand Marists are to make against greed, pride and power; and he sees in this attitude one of the essential elements of the Marist way. Colin's approach was not so much a critique of the Church itself – his loyalties lay too deep for that – but rather a critique of many who represented "church", and particularly the clergy of his day. Jean Coste points out further that each of these convictions of Jean-Claude Colin was founded on a significant personal experience; each was related to the attitude of Mary as Colin understood it; and each found some concrete expression in the Rule he wrote for the priests and brothers of the Society of Mary. Chief among the experiences of Colin were his personal background, and two incidents which profoundly marked him. Years after the event, Colin spoke of a traumatic experience which occurred when he was a young man. He was sick, and presumed to be dying, and was horrified to discover that those who gathered round his bedside could talk only about who was to receive his inheritance at his death. There even seemed to be some attempt to prevent him from taking the medicine which would cure him. This childhood experience created in him an instinctive horror for any form of greed. Later, he noticed the same spot of greed in meetings of priests, where the two recurring topics of conversation seemed to be money and criticism of bishops. Probably these two experiences, more than most other experiences in his life, made Colin aware of how easily and subtly the desire for money, power and personal aggrandisement can enter into people's lives, and cripple them spiritually. Colin was influenced by the writings of Mary of Agreda, a Spanish mystic, and from these writings, and from his own personal reflection on the mystery of Mary in the early Church, Colin could see how much these attitudes were at variance with the approach of Mary. As a young priest at Cerdon, when he was jotting down his first ideas for a Rule for Marists, he laid down specific rules to counter the possibility of these attitudes taking root in Marists' lives. In fact, some of these rules were unrealistic and were subsequently removed from the Constitutions, but they enshrined a very realistic conviction: that greed, pride and power limit the effectiveness of one who wishes to present the Gospel of Jesus.

1838-1839

Father Colin told us that... when he was eighteen he fell ill. "I was on the point of death", he said, "when I saw my bedside surrounded; the talk was all about a testament, the notary; each one was looking out for himself."

The physician had prescribed to the young Colin a potion through which he hoped to save him. Someone who thought he would inherit something persuaded him not to drink it, telling him, "It's poison." He refused it, without saying why. When his brother saw this, he started crying. To please him, then, young Colin drank it. One understands how this memory instilled in him a horror for attachment to earthly goods.

The Mayet Memoirs

Ministry for money

From time to time Mayet would offer his own comments on Marist life. Here is a reflection he made on Marists who took on work for the sake of making money.

When, in the Society, people will no longer do works of zeal without money; when superiors will boast of their skill in finding and choosing works which produce money; when there will be much talk about a ministry which produces much money and little glory for God, and little talk about a ministry which gives much glory to God and no money; when members will be rated according to the money they bring in; when there will be incessant talk about stipends for masses or sermons or about the money brought in by the preaching of Advents, Lents, or missions, etc, then there will no longer be a Society of Mary, an apostolic society, but a society of trade, an association of merchants; honest, conscientious, christian even, if you like, living a pleasant, respectable and bourgeois life. That will never happen. But it is important to resist openly those who have that mindset — no matter who they are — by all legitimate means.

A treasure hunt

Here is one of the stories from Mayet's *Memoirs* :

Around the year 1844, a man asked permission to visit Puylata, and as he passed through the different parts of the house, he picked up some dust or some object or other. He sought out Father Colin and told him, "Monsieur, there is a treasure in your house." "How do you know? Have you any documents?" "Yes, monsieur, I have." "Then hand them over to the family. They must be still alive." The man then became embarrassed and admitted that he was a magnetic diviner (he had, I think, already found several bits of treasure on the hillside of Fourvière) and that this was how he knew of the Puylata treasure, which he estimated to be about 400,000 francs. Its value, he said, was depreciating from day to day, because it lay in a drain covered by a good foot of mud. He concluded his conversation by asking permission to do the excavation himself and then go halves with him. Very Reverend Father Superior would not hear of it. Father Favre, the principal theologian in the Society, told him that he could easily have the search done himself, particularly as he had not prompted the move made by the diviner. Father Humbert, Bursar General, was very keen on making a few probes, but Reverend Father Colin would never permit it. Even though he knew a search might be made lawfully his decision was based on an attitude that is easy to appreciate. This is of more value to the Society than any 400,000 francs – namely dependence on the help of God and the protection of Mary without which all the assistance of this world is of no avail.

Anthony Corcoran sm, in a study of this text, wrote:

Notice how Father Mayet has written a kind of fable of the Founder, a kind of parable. Faced with the question of the treasure hunt are three characters, three Marists with three different outlooks. First there is the theologian, Father Favre, who looks at the question from a moral theology point of view, and sees that it is morally permissible. (We also know something else about this good man who will become the next Superior General. He does not think or feel as Father Colin. Later Father Colin will say that although he was a good theologian Father Favre did not really have a feel for the spirit of the Society.) Then there is the General Bursar, Father Humbert, who looks at the question from an economic point of view, and is keen on the idea, presumably hopeful of augmenting the Society's coffers! Both are good men: both with high office in the Society. And then there is the Founder, Father Colin, who looks at things from the point of view of the Spirit of the Society and says "No". Father Mayet gives the moral to the story. Father Colin does not wish to go digging round for the money. He feels that, although it is morally permissible, and economically beneficial, it is not the best thing for the Society. There is something more valuable to be gained for the Society than 400,000 francs. Marists find their support in the help of God and the protection of Mary. The Superior must show where their trust truly lies; it is not in treasure hidden under the house.

Surplus money

In 1847, Mayet noted the following remark in his *Memoirs*:

Reverend Father Colin said to the Abbé de Charbonnel, "Our union (with the bishops) must be such that the bishops can look upon the Society 'as their own', such that when our houses are sufficiently well established, the surplus funds of each house must go into the bishop's coffers."

Colin found it necessary to review his attitude, and in 1849 Mayet recorded his change of mind in the margin of his *Memoirs*, adding a personal note of caution:-

Father has changed his mind. Nevertheless it is well for it to be known that, had it been possible to leave this article without harm to good government, he would have done so. It is a desire he has cherished for thirty years."

Commenting on these texts, Marist historian Jean Coste writes:

Colin is renouncing the power that the free disposition of money gives to religious. If a religious order is very rich and even if it gives all its superfluous funds to good works, the fact that it has given so many thousand dollars to this group is a sign of power. "I give my money to those I want to!" And that is a sign of power. And the idea of Colin is to destroy that, to destroy this possible corruption that this power will create in us. And this money will be used for good works, but by the bishop. It will be for the bishop to decide; either the money will go into the bishop's funds, or the bishop will decide whether to give it to somebody, and that will be his charity, not our charity. And I think that goes very far, and that is full of meaning.

"The only way to do good"

The Work of Mary – support for the Church and compassion for the world, loyalty to the mission of the Church and involvement in this world – when done in the spirit of Mary, will have a particular fruit and a characteristic feature. The fruit will be that the Gospel of Jesus will be able to take root in the ground of contemporary world and its individual cultures. The characteristic feature will be that the person who lives by this spirit will appear to be unnoticed while doing a great deal of good for others. Jean-Claude Colin found a way to describe this approach in a short phrase: "hidden and unknown in this world." Though not the motto of the Society of Mary, it has become a consecrated phrase in Marist thinking, and is in fact the touchstone of a life lived for God, a life whose focus of attention is the true needs of the other. Probably the phrase crystallised in Colin's mind during his years at Cerdon as he was putting together the first ideas on the Society. Interestingly, the first written record of the phrase is found in a letter written by Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn to Bishop Devie in 1824, which indicates that this was a phrase obviously used at Cerdon, and one whose importance was not lost on Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn who understood so well the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin. At the end of his life, Colin himself said, "When God speaks to a soul He says many things in a few words: for example that phrase 'Hidden and unknown in the world'." All of Colin's life had been spent in unpacking the layers of meaning and significance in that phrase. The mystery is that the God at work in this world of fractured faith is not a God who wishes to impose on us. God has endowed each person with reason and conscience and has allowed each one the freedom to decide, and the space to do so, never forcing, never dominating, but always encouraging, waiting, watching. This attitude of watching and waiting is one that christian tradition has applied especially to Mary. It is the special characteristic of a mother to let go, to leave free, to wait and to watch. Colin had another way of expressing the same idea: "We must win souls by submitting to them." Though Marists find their place "in this world", they take a specific stance in this world: a stance which places more attention on the situation of the other person, a stance which thinks only of helping the God hidden in the other person's life to emerge. To be "hidden and unknown" as one does "an enormous amount of good" is a sure sign that one's focus of attention is indeed on the needs of the other.

1847

On December 4, 1847, while speaking of the hidden life which must be that of the Society, Father Colin said, "That, gentlemen, is one of the characteristics of the Society, the one by which it should be distinguished, in accordance with the particular spirit of its vocation, from the others which have preceded it, which others I neither judge nor condemn. The animosity which some of them encounter does not all stem, it seems to me, from hatred for religion. In several cases, the alienation could also come in part from the style these communities have adopted... Let us... try to adopt a modest way of behaving, one which gives the least possible offence to those among whom we live, and which is in conformity with our vocation and the spirit of the blessed Virgin whose name we bear...."

1846

Returning to the Article, 'Hidden and Unknown', he said: "Really, that is the way to take over everything. It was the approach the Church followed, and you know that we must have no other model than the early Church."

1848

On November 19, 1848 I myself heard Father Colin say: "A layman told us recently, 'It is well known what the Marist Fathers do, but it is not talked about.' That gave me great pleasure, gentlemen."

The Mayet Memoirs

Hidden presence

God has placed within his Family,
as in every home,
the figure of a Woman,
who in a hidden manner
and in a spirit of service,
watches over that Family
and carefully looks after it
until the glorious day of the Lord.

Pope Paul VI

A style of mission

After the Revolution, mission preachers often adopted a heavy-handed style of preaching. The mood of the time was the re-establishment of the rights of God, and the re-installation of the power and presence of the Church. The culmination of the mission was the planting of a mission cross in the place where the mission was held. This was often a point of controversy among the people. Colin offered an alternative approach. He always preferred to be known as a "catechist" rather than as a "missioner"; he often asked no money for the missions the Marists preached; and as regards the mission cross, Mayet records him saying, *As long as the cross is planted in people's hearts, there is no need to plant it in the ground.*

It was all a way of winning souls by submitting to them.



A run-down school

In 1847 the Marists were asked to take responsibility for a school in Langogne, a small town of three thousand inhabitants. The school was in a disastrous state from every point of view: the condition of the buildings, the state of the finances, and the discipline of the pupils. Mayet writes in his *Memoirs*:

You would have no idea of the state in which our confrères found this house, the devotion which they showed to it, and everything they suffered there. Only the Society of Mary would have taken a College in such conditions. It was as bad as Oceania. The whole house was in a state of revolting filth; there was no linen. The rain and the snow came through in some rooms, the partitions were so badly made that you could join hands through the cracks in the wall, and in some rooms the draught put out the candles when the doors and windows were shut.

They walked past the dormitories and at that moment a legion of hungry fleas invaded the legs of the visitors, so that they had to beat a retreat. Then, one of the Confrères said, when they ran their hands over their arms handfuls of the annoying guests fell to the ground.

Pigs came into the dining room and the kitchen to find food, and they soiled all the rooms. Chickens climbed on to the pupils' tables and dirtied them.

And despite so many difficulties, so many privations, or because of such extreme poverty, they had an extraordinary cheerfulness which never left them for the whole year. They took everything with a laugh.

Mayet gives a long description of the transformation of the school. At the beginning of the Marists' time, the roll was 95, and after three years it had risen to 135. When the Marists had succeeded in transforming the school, the diocesan clergy expressed a desire to have it back. Fr Colin said he had no intention of entering into a struggle to remain there, and the Marists left in 1855.

Jean Coste comments on this moment of Marist history:

"That was Father Colin – that is really the sense of 'hidden and unknown'. I will not be the one interested only in my business, in the number of my colleges, of my parishes, and of the greatness that I represent in this diocese, in this parish, but I am interested in going where something has to be done. We are bound, says Fr Colin, to do what others do not like to do. And we will leave to them the opportunities, the great opportunities, in order to go where something has to be done. That is the real Colinian spirit!"

"Flesh to the Word"

One of the fruits of a life whose centre of gravity is God and the real needs of others will be that the Gospel will "take flesh" in the lives of people.

For a moment, let us put ourselves in the shoes of newly-ordained Jean-Claude Colin as he stood on the hill of Cerdon where the church stands. What was going on in the mind of this shy young priest as he looked down on the village below? Colin was a stranger to the place: the countryside was different, the people's accent was different, their mentality, way of life, interests, were all different. Yet later he was to say with some pride that he had learned to understand the Cerdonese people. And from being a preacher whose style was wooden and dead, he became the one whom the hardened men liked to listen to. He was the one to whom the bar keepers in the villages liked to go for confession. In time, he had begun to learn how to speak "a new language" or at least how to understand a different language. His transformation at Cerdon enabled him to give flesh to the words he spoke.

Contemplating the mystery of Mary in the Church can be an enormously liberating challenge. A great religious problem facing people before the time of Christ was the problem of God – "out there", beyond their reach, needing to be appeased, ready to judge and punish, and difficult to know or approach. In Christ, this "God problem" was solved. In Christ we have been able to see God. At one moment in time people have heard, seen, touched the very person of God. The Word of God has become flesh. And Mary, with her YES to God's invitation to be the mother of Christ, brought God to a level that the world can understand. Mary gave flesh to the Word. Today, it is Christ who is hidden and unknown to many. People need to see something of Christ, and they look to Christians to satisfy that need. The goal of the Marist is to give flesh to the Word, to make Christ come alive for people, to "translate the message of the Gospel in terms the world can understand." "Something new for our times..." It would be something new if in a world where so many people are searching to overcome the sense of alienation and separation, of emptiness and meaninglessness, there were a group of people who, because of Mary the first disciple of Jesus, took a stand for mercy, compassion, and communion of mind and heart. Then indeed the Word would become flesh, and small steps would be taken to make the world a place where people could experience the presence of the Spirit of Jesus.

1843

Father Colin, giving vent to his ardour, said, "Ah, I wish people would stir themselves, that they would wake up.... Really, nowadays, good Lord, the clergy are dead, they are asleep.... Give a sermon: nobody comes."

1839

"How I hope (Marists) will always continue as they are at Lyon. They work among the masons.... They go into the prisons, they serve the workhouse.... Those are the tasks I like to see the Marists employed in. People say, 'The Marists go into the prisons, look after the poor.... Yes, that is what must be done; that is truly a work of God.' They request admission to the Society, and it is that which has won their affection. Let us not be numbered among those who only want to preach in the towns, to give fine sermons."

The Mayet Memoirs

Authenticity

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

It is often said nowadays that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty. These "signs of the times" should find us vigilant. Either tacitly or aloud – but always forcefully – we are being asked: Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live?

Pope Paul VI

To translate

Our methods are perhaps not always adapted to the needs of modern man who also has a hunger for God and a homesickness for his home, without knowing it or daring to realise it. Our words perhaps leave him indifferent.

Pope Paul VI

A scene in Brian Friel's play *Philadelphia, here I come* depicts a young man about to leave his home in Ireland for a new life in the United States. The young man and his father are struggling unsuccessfully to find the right words to say as they farewell each other. In a corner of the room, the parish priest sits playing chess with himself, oblivious to the drama taking place between the father and his son. Suddenly, the young man turns on the priest and bursts out angrily:

You could translate all this loneliness, this groping, the dreadful bloody buffoonery into Christian terms that will make life bearable for us all. And yet you don't say a word. Why, priest? Why, arid priest? Isn't this your job? To translate? Why don't you speak then?

We need to transmit the message of the Incarnate Word of God in terms which the world is able to understand.

Pope Paul VI

Christ to the world

"Mary's role was to give flesh to the Word".

On those nine words, volumes might be written. What was Mary's role is exactly that of the Marist today - to continue "to give flesh to the Word", because it is only in human terms, in human example and human words that Christ will ever become actual to people in any age, including our own. Her spirit is essentially a prolonging, a keeping in being, of the Incarnation. She alone, of all humankind, gave Christ to the world. The Marist who endeavours to live by her spirit must be principally concerned with continuing just that work, to give Christ to the world. The Marist's role is to give flesh to the word.

Kevin Maher, sm



Speak to us of God

One of the touching legends that sprang up around the memory of St Francis of Assisi tells how one day he walked up to an almond tree and said: "Speak to me of God!" and the tree blossomed.

The same command is addressed to us by the world, bluntly or subtly, but always insistently: "Speak to us of God!"

And just as Mary made the Word of God, till then hidden and unknown, come to flesh in Jesus, so Marists in our day are to make Christ come to life for the world. Marists are to speak clearly to the world of Christ – not merely by words but by actions.