

Free people

Our vocation is to go from place to place. This was how Jean-Claude Colin described the Marist enterprise when he presented his outline to Rome in 1833. It was one of the ideas that had fired the imaginations of the seminarians in Lyon in 1815. They had been impressed by the story of the life of St Francis Régis, a missionary who preached in the country areas of France. The same phrase, "our vocation is to go from place to place", appeared in the Constitutions which Colin wrote before his death, and it appears today in the Constitutions of the Marist Fathers.

Our vocation is to go from place to place. The statement implies a degree of freedom. Freedom from the things that may tie one down physically, in the first instance: freedom from possessions and from property and properties. But as well as that, freedom from the interior attitudes which make it difficult or impossible to move from place to place: freedom from the desire for comfort, or the desire to settle. Being willing to go anywhere in the world means being willing to be not "at home" anywhere in the world. And so, being on mission means not settling down. It means being unsettled as a permanent attitude. Colin's understanding of the vows that Marists take reflects this. Marists take the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience not only so as to be like Christ, but in order to be "more effective instruments of mercy" for others. The vows are to free people to be on the move. And so there's a sense of urgency in the statement. Colin's language was frequently spiced with this sense of urgency: "We are on top of a volcano", "Mary is sending you out in these hazy times", "a minister of souls must burn with the desire to fly to the salvation of others and be impatient for the moment when he can race to their aid". Whenever Colin spoke of saints who could be patrons of the Society, he always spoke of people like Francis de Sales, Francis Xavier, Francis Régis: outstanding missionaries with deep concern for others, people who went to the boundaries and beyond for the sake of the Gospel, and did so with a sense of urgency.

Our vocation is to go from place to place. The sense of urgent action for the sake of those on the margins is essential to the Marist enterprise.

On February 6, 1842, Father Colin spoke at the College in Belley: "Gentlemen, I will tell you something of my secret, and how I go about choosing men for foreign missions, when the time comes. If I notice a certain impetuosity in those who apply, a certain over-keenness, they are not the ones I choose. If, on the other hand, I see in them a desire that is calm and tranquil and humble, then I make my choice. And yet, if God wishes to make use of us, we must take courage, we must not be faint-hearted; that is not what pleases God. The faint-hearted will not accomplish great things for God. 'I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.'" (Phil. 4:13)

The Mayet Memoirs



"The fundamentals of the Society"

In 1846 Mayet noted in his journal what he called a "very remarkable incident". During a Council meeting, an interchange took place between Father Colin and Father Étienne Terraillon. Terraillon was one of the group of seminarians who had been in on the Marist project from the beginning. He would have known the mind of Jean-Claude Colin. Mayet took care to note that Terraillon was "one of the oldest members of the Society.... An otherwise admirable man.... An extremely virtuous man". But in another place he did comment that Terraillon "having been too long a parish priest, had not understood the spirit of the Society, and it was that which Father Colin found hard to put up with". It was precisely on the question of parishes that the dialogue took place. The Marists had been invited to take responsibility for Valbenoîte, a parish of about 5,000 people. When the topic was brought up in Council, Terraillon spoke in favour of the proposal. Hearing this, Mayet noted, Colin "stopped short, as if staggered", then, "in a tone of indescribable authority", he let forth a tirade against what he regarded as an attack on "the fundamentals of the Society". Mayet noted the key points of Colin's tirade, adding that "I have rarely seen him so worked up". Once again, it is fortunate that we have Mayet's record of the event, which touches on a fundamental feature of the Marist project. Mayet records Colin as saying: *"Gentlemen, if ever you start calling into question the fundamentals of the Society, the Society is lost! May that never happen again, never, never! If you want Marists to be parish priests, here and now I resign and I will begin again. If the Society can do good only by accepting parishes, it must come to an end, it must be wiped out, because it has no goal, no longer anything to do in the Church. There are already parish priests in the Church: that is not our mission.... Marist parish priests? Never! Gentlemen, never let anyone speak again of parishes for Marists!"* Colin's reasons for refusing to take parishes were based primarily on the fact that what Marists are called to do involves moving from place to place. Marists are to be an auxiliary force in the Church; they are not to be tied to a settled ministry, because then they lose the mobility and freedom that should characterise the life of a missionary congregation. If they were not mobile, their ministry would be one of maintenance rather than mission.

Mobile people

It is interesting that Father Colin's most frequent references to Mary are to Mary at Nazareth and in the early Church, the periods in her life about which least is known. I think this is because Colin did not wish to prescribe, to spell things out too much. He wanted Marists to meditate together on the mystery of Mary and to use their creativity. For him Marists are not tied to any one ministry any more than Christ was at Nazareth. The central Marist mission does not change; the ministries through which it is carried out may. Colin wanted us to have the freedom and mobility to meet the changing needs of society, to be mobile people with little baggage.

Frank McKay, sm

Take nothing for the journey

But there are things that will hinder us personally; not just our own personal failings, but obstacles that will attack the very heart of our common Marist vocation. Putting it bluntly, if people are not willing to live the spirit of renunciation, it will not work. Don't be possessed by possessions, I keep telling myself. For even if we have the right sentiments in our hearts, it will be ruined if our possessions reflect that we really haven't this detachment.

It takes more ruthlessness about possessions, power and pride with oneself, than is evident to others. What I am trying to say is that there is a mystery of one's sacrifice which is paralleled in the sacrifices Mary had to make - which few people ever appreciated.

Andrew Gunn

Recognising that to live in another culture means both an enrichment and a sacrifice of a certain development in our own, we accept courageously that loneliness is part of missionary life. Open to the service of the Universal Church, we will never be completely at home wherever we are.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions n.39