

"A bridge to souls"

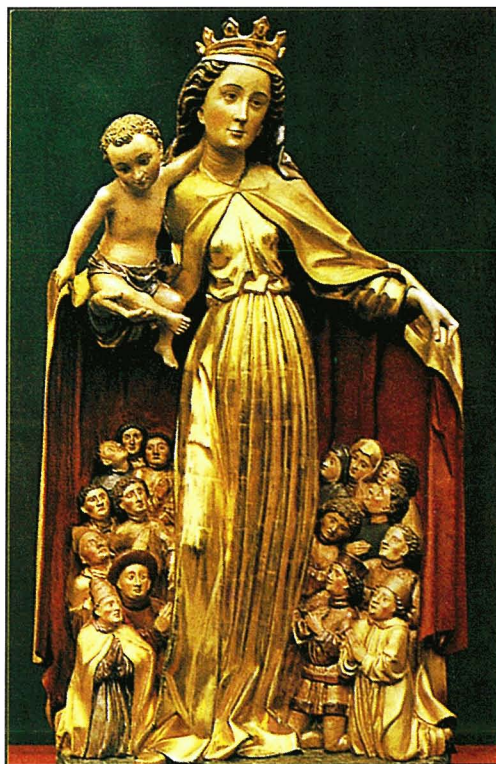
When Mayet recorded Colin's description of his voyage to Rome in 1833, he noted that one of Colin's aims was to present the broad plan of the Society as divided into distinct branches, with a Third Order for lay people. People in Rome had tried to persuade him that the plan was too big, and would never be approved in that form. Mayet noted Colin's words: "It seemed to me that everyone would laugh at me; it didn't matter. I wanted to know what Rome would think." Despite the negative reaction of his advisors and of the Curia in Rome, Colin felt that the whole plan of a multi-branched Congregation needed to be presented to Rome. The image of the "tree of several branches" was one of the things that had captured the imaginations of the young seminarians at the very beginning. Within six months of his ordination Marcellin Champagnat had formed his first group of Brothers. From 1819, the beginnings of the Marist Sisters were evident at Cerdon. And whenever Jean-Claude Colin spoke officially or unofficially about the Society of Mary and its special call to "begin a new Church over again" his mind and his pen inevitably went to the lay branch of the Society. So, in 1833, when he made his Summary of the Marist project to be presented to Rome, he wrote: "The general aim of the Society is to contribute in the best possible way both by its prayers and its efforts, to the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, and to gather so to speak all the members of Christ, whatever their age, sex, or standing, under the protection of the Blessed Mary Immaculate, Mother of God... so that at the end of time, as at the beginning, all the faithful may with God's help be one heart and one mind in the bosom of the Roman Church.... For this reason, entry to the Society is open to lay people living in the world in the Confraternity or Third Order of the Virgin Mary." Thirty nine years later, at the age of 82, Colin is still captured by the same ideal: "You will be astonished to hear that I have a great ambition - to seize the whole world under the wings of Mary by means of the Third Order...." The lay association was to be a confraternity of people from all walks of life. Its aim was to be a means of carrying out the Work of Mary in the world, and in Colin's words, "to be a bridge to souls". Its spirit was to be the same as that of the Society of Mary. Its organisation was to be flexible and open. It was to be a vast association open to all - including sinners and even the unborn. Here in fact the seeds of difficulty were sown. No one knew quite what he meant by it all!

The Society of Mary has four branches: the fathers, the brothers under the name of the Little Brothers of Mary, the sisters under the name of religious women of the Holy Name of Mary, and the Third Order. Isn't the Society like the mantle of the Blessed Virgin which offers shelter to all God's children? And aren't the four branches like avenues which lead us beneath the folds of that protecting mantle?

In the Third Order, Mary extends her arms to every age, sex, condition, degree, shade of meaning which can be found in souls. Men, fathers of families, young men, children, women, mothers of families, young women, little children, those who are perfect, advancing, beginning, strong, weak, sinners, impious, even the children....

The Mayet Memoirs

The image of Mary as one who "gathers all" is an ancient theme in Christian piety. This 15th century statue shows everybody – men, women, children, rich, poor, and even the Pope – gathered under the mantle of Our Lady. Colin saw the Marist Third Order as a privileged way by which the whole world could be gathered for Christ.



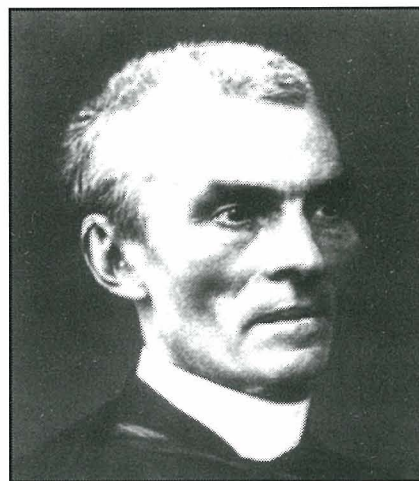
First lay group

There are indications that groups of lay Marists began in different parts of Lyon and Belley, but the first recognisable form dates from 1833 when a group of laymen began to live as "Tertiary Brothers of Mary" under the direction of Marist Fathers. We have the names of 13 of these men, they were aged between 26 and 37, and were from many different walks of life and included lawyers, officers, a teacher, an artist, an architect and an accountant. These men lived a way of life something like what we now know as a Secular Institute. What is striking about them is their involvement in the apostolic mission of the Church. Four of them became teachers in a catholic secondary school which they founded. Another member of the group went to Oceania as a layman attached to the Society of Mary. Four more were the members of the "Central Council of the Propagation of the Faith". This remarkable association of lay people developed a systematic, sustained and European-wide collection for the Church's mission throughout the world. The first meetings of the Tertiary Brothers of Mary were held in this tower house which still stands today near the Chapel of Fourvière where the seminarians made their promise in 1816.



Man of the spirit

Mayet reported that Jean-Claude Colin was waiting for someone to promote the Third Order throughout the whole world. *Ah gentlemen, he said to us one day wrote Mayet, "please ask God to send someone to spread the Third Order all over the world. I want this with all my heart. I ask God for this. I need someone with an apostolic enthusiasm, someone filled with the Spirit of God, someone who can preach like the apostles.* This prayer seemed to have been answered in Pierre Julien Eymard, a Marist priest whom Colin appointed in 1845 as director of a small group of laywomen who called themselves the "Christian Maidens". Mayet did not hesitate to call this moment "the beginning of the Third Order", and Eymard "the founder" of the Third Order. Pierre Julien Eymard was a man of extraordinary energy, zeal and holiness, and is recognised by the Church as a saint. When he took over the direction of the "Christian Maidens" in 1845, they numbered 14. Within a year Eymard had begun to form other groups: a group for mothers, a group for married men, a group for young men, and a group for young women. By June 1850 there were more than three hundred members in the various groups. Eymard said to Mayet: "Things have reached such a point that if they let me loose now, I would soon cover France with members of the Third Order." In 1856 Pierre Julien Eymard left the Society of Mary to become the founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament.



From the beginning the Marist project envisaged a branch open to lay men and women. In Father Colin's mind it was to be a broadly-based association available to all people, whatever their situation, age, or condition. It could assume many forms, and, where appropriate, might even be given another name.

Marist Fathers' Constitutions n.31