

## "Losing itself in the church"

Whatever difficulty Jean-Claude Colin may have had in making clear his ideas on the scope of the lay branches of the Marist enterprise, it seems that somehow from the very beginning these ideas were instinctively grasped, at least by the first two recognisable groups, the "Tertiary Brothers" and the "Christian Maidens". Even a cursory glance at these groups reveals some significant things.

In the first place, it is striking that at a time when there was no shortage of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, there were also significant numbers of lay people who wished to live a deep Christian life *as lay people*, and who found that the Marist way - "living the Gospel as Mary did" - was a good way of doing this.

A feature common to both these groups was their active apostolic and missionary attitude. The men in the "Tertiary Brothers" were deeply involved as lay people in the apostolic work of the Church, some even being involved directly in the Church's work of evangelization in the Pacific. Something similar was evident with the "Christian Maidens". These women clearly felt that they belonged to the Society of Mary and were caught up in its mission, especially its mission in Oceania. Sentences from the minutes of their meetings show this very often: ".... it must not be forgotten that we are united with the whole order of the Marists...." "After Father informed us that the missionaries' ship, bound for Polynesia, had arrived in Valparaiso at the end of June and that they were probably already in their Islands, he urged us to increase our prayers for them and for the success of their mission...." ".... it was recalled that, although we are dispersed in secular society, we belong to the order of the Marists, and we ought to work by our prayer in co-operation with the great work these holy missionaries have undertaken for the glory of God."

Both these groups at the beginning were distinctly lay groups. They saw themselves as lay people with their own vocation in the world, and they worked as lay people for the Church. They took responsibility for the organisation and activities of their groups. They also saw themselves as Marists, with the same spirit as the Marist priests, brothers and sisters; submerged in the Church, working quietly but effectively for the support of the Church in their parish, in the diocese, and in the missions. Later, a Marist priest would describe the essential point by saying that the spirit of Mary, passing through the priests, religious and laity, would eventually "lose itself in the Church".

1838

Father Colin said:

*"Our Third Order has the advantage that it is not only for the conversion of sinners but also for the perseverance of the just, and so, consequently, it includes all Christians.... Moreover, I have asked that the simple inscription of one's name in the register of the confraternity would be enough in order to share in the prayers and good works of the members, because I foresaw that many sinners who might need such prayers and good works would be reluctant to have recourse to Mary. Also, when a family has someone who needs conversion, his relatives could have him registered secretly.... For those who would want to carry out the recommended practices, these will be very short and very simple."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## *Not what he wanted*

Despite the success of Eymard's Third Order groups, Colin was not happy. A spokesman for Colin said, "The Third Order as it exists is not at all, not at all what he would wish." For Colin, it was important that the lay branch of the Society of Mary should, like the other branches, "do good without fanfare." It should be a group for all Christians, with practices which would be "very short, very simple." And lay Marists should be fully inserted into the life of the local Church, or in Colin's words, 'support parochial and diocesan apostolates and be their hidden force.' Colin felt that Eymard's groups were growing too fast, and perhaps too noisily. He also felt that the scope of the groups was too centred on personal spirituality, and too close to being something for the spiritual elite. Finally, it seemed that these groups were not sufficiently inserted into the life of the parish and diocese. Through another spokesman, Colin warned Marists: *The way you understand it presently, you will accomplish nothing.*

## *A beacon*

In 1873, Mayet had written to Colin begging him to put down on paper how he understood the involvement of lay people in the Marist project. Mayet candidly reminded Colin that while he had told people that the Third Order as it existed did not meet his views he had never quite said what those views were! In fact, Colin's thinking on the practical details developed, while his understanding of the essentials didn't change. The lay association should be open to everyone, with "short and simple practices", the sorts of spiritual practices "which seem suitable to all the faithful." Colin distinguished between "what is essential, fundamental, or properly constitutive", and all the rest. There was to be unity in spirit - the same spirit for all Marists - but a healthy flexibility in the practical details, and a great variety in types of groups. Colin may have disagreed with Eymard on some of the major points of Marist lay life, but he certainly agreed with him about the diversity of groups. Colin's final act before he died was to write a set of Constitutions for the lay association, which he completed in 1875. Mayet on this occasion wrote his "final word": "May God be blessed. At last... we have what we so much desired.... Very Reverend Father Founder has been able, despite his 84 years, and his infirmities, to give in 30 pages, in Latin, all his ideas on the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the form of the Third Order. Nothing has been lost by waiting. Everything has been gained. It will be a beacon."

Actually, it was not Mayet's "final word". Evidently realising the importance of all this for the life of the Society of Mary, Mayet gathered together all the notes he had taken, and placed them together under the heading: *"Third Order. Everything that I have been able to find from 1837 to 1891"*. This too has been a beacon.

## *Blending in the church*

There is a positive side to the confusions and disagreements over Colin's understanding of the place of the laity in the Marist plan, because it enabled a greater clarity to emerge, at least in writing if not in practice. In 1874, Colin spoke of his ideas to a young Marist, Alphonse Cozon, who then made it his life's work to keep reminding Marist priests of Colin's understanding of this branch of the Marist project. A persistent man, Cozon said he would keep presenting these ideas if necessary until he died. For 20 years he did just that, until 1900 when the administration of the Society of Mary made a decision about how it would develop the Third Order. Cozon's way of describing Colin's view of the lay branch of the Marist plan is still a blueprint for today.

*"In the mind of the founder, the Third Order ought not to be confined within the limits of the Society. It ought to be, in a sense, a work outside the Society, to which the Society ought to communicate its own spirit, which is the spirit of the Blessed Virgin. Its development, therefore, ought not to be restricted to the proportions of the Society; we are not to retain it in our hands, but only let it pass through them. Thus, it is not a piece of the mechanism in the Society's clockwork, it should not revolve around us, so to speak, like a planet around its constellation, but it should shine into the Church. Thus it is no longer a precious way to help the Society by drawing the interest of pious faithful to the Society, but rather it is a way to extend the Society's action over the world in such a way that the same thrust, going forth from Mary, passing through the Fathers and the members of the Third Order, might go forth and lose itself in the Church without any personal consideration."*

*Both within and outside our religious communities, we shall, in a spirit of poverty, share our time, our talents, our spiritual riches with others, and receive with gratitude whatever they may wish to share with us.*

*Marist Sisters' Constitutions n.23*