

## Jean-Claude Colin

When Jean-Claude Colin's parents married in 1771, his father Jacques was 24 years old, and his mother Marie Gonnet was not yet 14. Jean-Claude, born on August 7, 1790, was their eighth child. All told, nine children were born into the family. Claudine, Jean, Mariette, Sebastien, Jeanne-Marie, Pierre, Anne-Marie (who died at birth), Jean-Claude, and Joseph. Jean-Claude's oldest sister Claudine was his godmother, and his brother Jean was his godfather, hence the baby's name Jean-Claude. His parents owned and cultivated a piece of land, and during the winter turned to weaving. The home in which Jean-Claude was born was as secure and loving as any of the ordinary homes of Les Barbery where they lived, considering these were the cataclysmic times of the French Revolution. The Revolution and the subsequent Civil Constitution of the Clergy brought a split into the Church, separating priests who supported the Constitution from those who remained faithful to Rome. Jean-Claude's parents supported the clergy loyal to Rome. An order of arrest was issued against Jacques Colin who had openly supported the parish priest, Father Cabuchet. Jacques had to hide for a year; his house was boarded up and all his goods were sold. Both he and his wife suffered through this, and in 1795 Marie Colin died, aged 37. Jacques Colin died not quite three weeks later, leaving the children orphaned. Jean-Claude was put under the care of a paternal uncle, Sebastian, who lived at St. Bonnet-le-Troncy. Sebastian was a bachelor who employed a housekeeper, Marie Echallier, to look after the children of the Colin household. This lady was a deeply religious woman, but one of those for whom religion and guilt seemed to go hand in hand. In these years Jean-Claude developed a scrupulosity which gave him much trouble, but which was in later life to make him sensitive and merciful to burdened people. His early experiences left him with an intense longing for a life of solitude and a desire to serve God alone. Since he could see no way of doing this while being caught up in the world, he decided to satisfy his desire for solitude by studying for the priesthood. It was in the major seminary of St. Irénée in Lyon that he came into contact with Courveille and the Marist project. Jean-Claude's life is the story of a man touched by God in a remarkable way; a man whose temperament and personality, transformed by grace, enabled him to find a particularly effective response to the deep spiritual needs of his time.



Nothing remains of the house where Jean-Claude Colin was born, but a cross erected in 1936 marks the site. What is perhaps more interesting than imagining what the house may have been like is to stand at the site of the house and look outwards to the countryside that is much the same as in Colin's time. Rolling hills and carefully tended paddocks, where the hamlet's population of 600 made their living, still breathe an atmosphere of tranquillity and peace. To the left of this picture one can see the edge of the forest which played an important part in Colin's spirituality. He told Mayet on one occasion: *"My one thought was to be a hermit; to go out and live in a forest, to be alone with God alone."*

Six years after his parents' death, Jean-Claude went to live with his uncle Sebastian at St Bonnet-le-Troncy, little more than 2km away. The large house where his uncle lived still stands. Today it is a museum of early Marist history.





## What did they think?

Three different people with three different perspectives give their view of Jean-Claude Colin. The first is Mayet, a contemporary of Colin, the second is a modern novelist, and the third is a present-day Marist.

At first sight, he appeared to be one of those good, little old country priests, very simple, very withdrawn, not knowing where to curl himself up to occupy less space, and at the same time, so abounding in goodness. I must add, however, that you felt he was a saint, and as soon as I had spoken to him for the first time, I had this strong feeling in my heart: "That is the man you are looking for".

*The Mayet Memoirs*

He was a visionary man. I myself have seen the accomplishment of his vision in a tiny mission in Japan, in the South Pacific, in the lives of the dedicated men and women who still follow the rule of life which he laid down for them, and the merciful enterprises to which he pointed the way.

He was not in any sense of the word a liberal man, but he had a fund of compassion which still enriches the lives of his followers and of those whom they continue to serve.

They are in the best sense of the word liberal Christians. In them the paradox of the life of Jean-Claude Colin is resolved. They are the good fruit of a strange tree that reared itself gnarled and strong in the stormy landscape of the nineteenth century.

*Morris West*

Colin was the anonymous apostle, unnoticed because he was so like everybody else, easily approachable because there was no gulf between his mind and the mind of his age. For him, to go among people quietly without offending sensibilities or arousing opposition was a first principle of preaching, pastoral work, education, writing, and the whole range of priest-people encounters. In the last analysis, Colin's true greatness was his ability to adjust himself to his own time and to build an organization imbued with the same quality.

*Stan Hosie, sm*

## If he could speak today ...

Of all the founding figures, Jean-Claude Colin was the one whose life was most marked by the French Revolution. If he could speak to us today, we might imagine him saying something like this:

"They were searing times, especially for someone of a sensitive and timid temperament. Yes, I attended Masses said secretly in barns at night, or in houses where the priest without vestments said Mass into a cupboard, while the people were ready to act as if they were playing cards if the police came. I remember the priest disguised as a shoemaker hearing confessions in the cellar of a house. You know, of all the areas in the Lyon district our area was probably the one most torn apart by the split between those who supported the schismatic priest and those who supported the priest loyal to Rome. That's how I lost my parents; that's how our family was divided. It's no wonder that for me, 'the world' was not a friendly place at all. The world after all had killed our gentle King; it had killed my father and mother; and it would have liked to kill my God. You can see why I wanted to be unknown, to be hidden from the world.... To be alone with God alone was more important to me than anything else. But there was another idea that kept coming back to me like a constant master-thought. What did Mary do in the Church after the Ascension? And what if we copied her way of life in the Church? Gradually, I came to realise that my call was not to be hidden *from* the world, but *in* the world. There were worlds to conquer, souls to save, and the best way to do it was by not imposing myself, by being unobtrusive, by putting myself in the shoes of others. How I came to this understanding, I'll never know. Only the grace of God, on which I depended all my life, could ever explain it."

