

"Unheard of ... a monster"

Jean-Claude Colin's work on the early rules of the congregation was especially intense for three years while he was at Cerdon. The idea was simple and clear: Mary had been present in the early Church like a mother supporting a child. And today she still continues to do this. Like a mother, she cannot bear anyone to be left out or abandoned: her work in these days is to gather all those who are on the edge of life or on the edge of the Church, and lead them to an experience of the love of God, so that what was evident in the early Church – "a group of believers united in mind and heart" (Acts 4: 32) – may be seen again in our days. This "work of Mary" needs a group of people – a multi-branched organization of priests, religious and lay people all working together for this one goal: to gather all into the body of Christ, and to make happen again what happened in the early Church. Colin had found scope for this right at his back-door. In the mountain area of the Bugey, he discovered many people who had abandoned the Church, or felt they had been abandoned by the Church, as a result of the Revolution. In 1824 he and his brother and Father Déclas formed a team to preach missions in the area. The significance of the day they began was not lost on Jean-Claude's brother. He wrote to the Bishop on October 29, 1824: "Today the little Society of Mary begins..." This ministry to the abandoned, though it lasted only four years for him, was to be profoundly significant in shaping Colin's Marist spirituality. He had already been touched by special insights at Cerdon. In the Bugey he experienced a second element: the mercy and compassion of God who will go to any lengths to gather those on the edge. In 1825, the three priests at Cerdon moved to Belley, where later on Colin was asked to take over the administration of the college/seminary. This was a third significant experience. Colin could see how realistic the Marist "way" was for the broken world he lived in. It was now time to take the plan further – to Rome. Colin had already written to the Pope in 1822, and before then he had made a vow to visit the Pope. Now it was time to present the Marist project. It was already a working reality: Marcellin Champagnat's Brothers were increasing rapidly; Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn's Sisters had been approved by the bishop in 1823; priests were gathering together around Colin in Belley and Champagnat in Lyon; and lay groups already existed. But the vast plan he presented was something Rome had never heard of..... it was quite untenable "a monster."

Father Colin in Rome - 1833

In all, Father Colin made five journeys to Rome. His first one was in 1833, when he presented the case for the Marist plan. Mayet gathered reports on Colin's journeys to Rome from Colin himself, and from Father Victor Poupinel, who was later to play an important role in the life of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary.

MAYET:

Father Colin, feeling urged to work for the setting up of the Society, had also vowed to dedicate himself completely to it until he could go and place his project at the feet of the Holy Father in Rome and know what the Holy See thought.

POUPINEL:

In the presentation he made in Rome, he showed the Society as divided into its three distinct branches gathered under the superior, and also a third order.

COLIN:

I wanted to know what Rome would think. I presented my whole plan; people had never seen anything like it.... I laugh when I think how informally, how simply I acted. I just put down in my request for approval of our confraternity of the third order that people would see at the end of time what they had seen at the beginning: one heart and one soul. Cardinal Castracane started laughing and said to me: "What do you mean? Will the whole world be Marist?" "Yes Eminence," I told him. "The Pope too; he is the one we want for our leader."

POUPINEL:

Cardinal Castracane was the relator; he found the plan gigantesque, monstrous, and was convinced that such a society constituted in this way could never function, so he made out his report to this effect.

COLIN:

I told those Cardinals who told me it was a gigantic plan: "I have come here simply to find out whether God wishes it or not, that is all. Give me a straight yes or no; that is all I came to Rome in search of." They didn't know what to say when they saw this poor priest standing in front of them, talking to them in this way.

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What did they say?

What Colin presented in his plan, and what Cardinal Castracane proposed to the Cardinals, may be gathered from this extract from the long report he presented on January 31, 1834.

"Father Colin from the diocese of Belley has presented a request to the Holy Father in which he outlines that from 1816, in the city of Lyon, 12 priests laid the foundations for a Society called the Society of Mary, with the idea of making it in time into a Religious Order. This Society embraces three different Congregations: of priests dedicated to missions at home and abroad, and to the education of youth in seminaries and colleges; of brothers called Marists, who resemble the Brothers of the Christian schools and who are involved in the education of poor children in the villages; and finally a branch of sisters who from their convent are involved in the education of girls, and of penitent women in separate houses. Each of these so called Congregations has its own rules, its own houses, its own Superior. The Congregation of Brothers is governed by a priest with the title of Provincial; that of the Sisters has a Superior whose jurisdiction extends over all the houses of the congregation; but both the Provincial of the brothers and the Superior of the Sisters are dependent on the Superior General of the Fathers. Over and above these three Congregations, it is planned to set up a Confraternity in which people of both sexes everywhere in the world can be enrolled; these would be regarded as Tertiaries of the above Congregations, and could participate in their spiritual benefits, in dependence on the Superior General of the above named Congregations.... Father Colin has been persuaded that the plan is monstrous... and that he could not at the moment hope for any act of approval from the Holy See."

The minutes of the meeting stated, "by unanimous vote they judged the proposed plan of the Marian Society did not fall into the category of an Institute of the Church and could not be approved under any aspect."

On his visit to Rome in 1833, Jean-Claude Colin wrote to one of his confrères: *My stay in Rome is becoming more and more delightful. Here, the atmosphere is, in a way, pure and sanctified. Here you really do enjoy the liberty of the children of God. Religious principles are not harsh; whether in their decisions or practices, the way of heaven is comfortable and easy. They are much less rigid and punctilious than we are in France.... It's impossible to describe the devotion that the Romans have for the Blessed Virgin. You have to be here to get some idea of it. During the whole of Advent, public novenas are made before the street shrines of the Madonna, and these prayers are accompanied by folk music, which I don't find beautiful, and which makes a deafening noise all day.*

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