

"Today the Society begins . . ."

When Pierre Colin wrote to Bishop Devie on October 29, 1824, "My Lord, today the little Society of Mary begins...." he had his own reasons for specifying that it was *that* moment which marked the beginning of the Marist project. It was the first occasion when a group of priests had set out as a team to be on mission in the name of Mary. In fact, this day has not been recognised as the day the Society of Mary began. But what would happen if we in our time were to decide that *today*, in this moment of our history, the Society of Mary were to begin? That the original idea of the Marist project did not eventuate is a matter of historical fact, and no one would suggest trying to re-establish the project as envisaged. But what would it mean to begin - or begin again - the Marist project in this particular moment of history?

Probably, in the first place it would involve an exercise of *remembering*. Remembering first of all the common history, the common origins that each branch shares, along with the history particular to each branch. It would also mean a process of "re-member-ing", or of somehow finding ways to bring the members of each branch together in some shared way.

Beginning the Society would mean discovering ways of *making decisions* in the light of the Marist way of life, and finding ways of checking those decisions to ensure that they are in fact "Marist" decisions. One of the tests of such decisions is whether they are motivated by the mercy which Marists see as a characteristic of Mary. Beginning the Society again would then mean that Marists made a commitment to be *instruments of mercy* wherever they found themselves, and in their decisions to act according to mercy.

Marists would be helped by their common tradition in preparing themselves for this task through the special relationships which they see in Mary, and which they are challenged to develop: a relationship with the Word of God, with the person of Jesus, and with the Church.

After that, it would mean *getting on with the job* for which the Marist enterprise was begun; getting on with the project, not as originally envisaged, perhaps, but according to the charism which is common to the Marist Family. While each of the Branches of the Marist Family has its own characteristics, there is a certain "family likeness" that is shared by all. Beginning the Society again would mean capturing and developing some of the "family likeness" that lies at the heart of each of the congregations.

1837

In Rome, a religious spoke to Father Colin at length against new Orders, saying that people should join the older ones. When he had said his piece, Father Colin said, "Forgive me, Monsieur, if I do not share your opinion. Each age has seen new Orders come to birth. God has brought them to birth to meet current needs. Each Order has its vocation, its mission, its time. When we read the history of the Church we see that some have appeared in every age. Strictly speaking there is only one body which must always continue in existence: the Church, which has Jesus Christ as its head. The others acknowledge men as their founders, and do not have to endure, but fall when the need for which God created them has been met. If they do endure afterwards, they no longer thrive with the dash and prosperity which blessed their early days. They fall back into the common run when their mission is ended."

The Mayet Memoirs

Divided branches

Hitherto, with all the good will in the world, each of our congregations – all branches of the general project of the Society of Mary – tended, with honourable exceptions, to withdraw within itself and to draw from its own resources. This led to ignorance or limited knowledge of the common charismatic trunk, and even of the founders and the spiritual riches of the Sisters' branches.

Basilio Ruedo Guzman, fms

Mission accomplished?

The Marist heritage has not been given to us for our own individual betterment only. It has an importance for the Church. Religious orders especially, as our Founder was well aware, have a special contribution to make to the Church of their time. "Each Order has its vocation, its mission, its time." And so, the spiritual heritage we have received is at the same time a trust. It is something entrusted to us for the good of the Church. And for that reason we are responsible for it.... What have we done with the five talents that our Marist Founders passed on to us? Shall we be like the faithful servant who produced five more talents from the ones entrusted to him? Or shall we be like the wicked and lazy servant who returned the talent entrusted to him, saying; "I hid your talent in the ground" (Matt 25:14-30)?

The question to ask is therefore not, Will the Society of Mary survive? The question is rather, "Have we indeed fulfilled our mission? We do not have to worry about our communal survival. We do have to worry about the talents entrusted to us. We shall be asked to give account of our stewardship, not of our survival.

Jan Snijders, sm

Common heritage

The commitment of men and women, ordained priests and laypeople, religious and people living married life and "secular" professions, all to the same mission of embodying Mary's intervention in this present age, that commitment was part of the core of the original Marist vision prior to the divisions imposed by history.

This does not mean we must try to do away with the divisions. All our Founders soon realised that other structures would be unworkable. Cardinal Castracane was right. It does mean that we should try to grow closer together as together we rediscover our common mission – to the secularised world as such; a common undertaking – the Work of Mary; a common superior – Mary; a common message – the mercy of God for the people of today; a common approach – hidden and unknown; a common desire – to involve the whole people of God.

It cannot be without providential guidance that the Marist family has grown closer together already in the last twenty-five years while beforehand we seemed to be drifting even further apart.

Jan Snijders, sm

Living body

Jean-Claude Colin, you spent your life fighting for a Society in whose future you believed. You traced it with features marked by your time. Forgive us if at times we are very far from it, but what you wanted we still want today. This body, which you passionately loved, we intend to bring alive. For this we will be helped by that profound vision which encouraged you: that of Mary's support of the Church at the beginning and at the end of time.... All during your life you had a certain idea of the Society of Mary. Help us, after so many changes, to remain in communion with it, to accept that God can speak to us through the poverty of your person and your work. Help us to understand that a word spoken yesterday may still resonate in hearts today, that a body born yesterday may find within itself the energies of a new youth.

Jean Coste, sm

