

Cornerstones

Any attempt to tie a "spirit" down to particular qualities is doomed to failure, just as any attempt to describe a person in a few words is doomed. Jean-Claude Colin spent his whole life trying to capture something of the spirit of Mary in writing for his followers, and even when at the end of his life he managed to put something on paper he felt dissatisfied with what he was able to express. Denis Maîtrepierre, one of the first novice-masters, and one who in the words of Julian Eymard "founded the Society spiritually", heavily criticised what Colin had written. Maîtrepierre was a theologian and a precise man who wanted to see things clearly. He was frustrated by what he saw in writing, and with a certain amount of acidity he wrote: "The spirit of the Society consists principally in those things enumerated in this article. But how many are there?" He went on to enumerate 32 virtues which Colin cited as constituting the spirit of the Society! Maîtrepierre claimed that any person who could live by all these virtues would have to be a superlative being. But Maîtrepierre had missed the point. Colin was not trying to tie down the spirit of the Society to any specific virtues or any collection of virtues, nor was he trying to describe the concrete behaviour of Marists; he was rather trying to call up and catch the basic dispositions of Mary's spirit, which like the spirit of anyone else, will show different facets at different times.

Nevertheless, in writing the Constitutions for the Society of Mary, Colin did pinpoint four cornerstone virtues of Marist life: humility, obedience, love and poverty. He saw these virtues as basic to the survival and growth of the Society of Mary. Marcellin Champagnat cited the three virtues of humility, modesty and simplicity as the virtues which he wished his spiritual sons to regard as the cornerstones of their congregation. Jeanne-Marie Chavoin understood the Marian spirit as linked with village life. For her, the cornerstones of Marist life were poverty, simplicity and love of work. Making the Marist project work means making a serious and sometimes painful re-direction of our values towards the values of Mary. This means going against the current of modern life, biased as it is towards competition, ambition, advancement and achievement. Words and values like humility, simplicity, poverty and intimate union with God don't fall easily on modern ears. These values will be "something new for our times" just as they were for those of the pioneer Marists.

Father Colin said:

"Nothing of good will be done except insofar as it is done in the spirit of the Society."

"I have noticed that those who have the Marist spirit succeed even with little talent, while those who do not have it, even when they have talents, accomplish nothing."

"A society should have its spirit. The spirit of a society is like the soul which animates the body; if the spirit is good, everything goes well. The spirit of the Society of Mary is essentially a spirit of modesty. Our very name alone indicates it. It should be a spirit of humility, of modesty."

The Mayet Memoirs

Three themes

These themes lie at the heart of Marist action: to be humble of heart, to act prudently, and to act modestly.

To be humble of heart is to work without relying on ourselves, but depending on God alone. "My God, I am nothing, but this I know: you can do great things through me."

To act prudently is striving to find in every circumstance the right words or the practical decision that will assure the maximum spiritual benefit for these souls here and now. "Gentlemen, how I love that maxim which Rome follows: 'Everything for souls'."

To act modestly means avoiding as much as possible anything in our ministry that would throw us into the limelight and attract attention to ourselves. "Let us act in a hidden and unknown way."

Kevin Maher, sm

Humility, simplicity, modesty

The three virtues of humility, simplicity and modesty which Marcellin Champagnat put before the Marist Brothers as cornerstone virtues ring almost as a counter call to the French Revolution's catch-cry of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". This formula of three virtues is typical of 19th century spirituality, and was placed in the Society of Mary Constitutions in the article on the Society's spirit. From Colin's article, the formula passed to the Rule of the Brothers, confirmed by their General Chapter of 1852-1853. Champagnat was a living example of the three virtues he placed before his Brothers. His directness, authenticity, simplicity and sense of humour caused some surprise, not to say scandal, among some of his contemporaries. One contemporary priest wrote:

"His confrères criticised him a lot when he began his work. They would have liked to stop him doing it on the grounds that it was not in keeping with the priestly character, living as he did such a wretched life which was far too poor. When he built the Hermitage he did all the masonry work himself."

Spiritual tradition among the Marist Brothers likened the three virtues of humility, simplicity and modesty to three violets hidden in the garden, giving glory to God in their smallness and hiddenness.



A spirituality for our time

Marist writer Franco Gioannetti describes Colin's cornerstone virtues of Marist life in different terms in his book *A Spirituality for our Time*. He describes them as:

Interiority: which he describes as that sense of constant union with God, "tasting God" in prayer and "finding God in all things" which Marists do by "seeking only the interests of Jesus and Mary".

Poverty: which consists in not being possessed by one's possessions, in choosing a life-style which is in fact poor, and in being free from the desire for fame and personal power.

Precariousness: a word which Gioannetti uses to describe the choice Marists make to live for God alone, depending on God alone, working on spiritual means, without entrusting themselves to human means and capacities. It is that quality which lies at the heart of Marists' sense of being missionary, moving from place to place, being always ready to "set out and set out again" for the sake of the Gospel.

Communion: which means that union of mind and heart which was evident in the early Church among the believers, as well as a spirit of union with the Church and with the Bishops of the Dioceses where Marists find themselves. This union is to be such that Bishops can look on Marists "as their own".