



*In your midst I will leave a humble, lowly people,
and those who are left will seek refuge
in the name of the Lord.
Zephaniah 3: 12*

7. Humble people

The "Peaceful Revolution" in the Philippines in 1986 was an event which stunned the world by its effectiveness, and by the fact that it was a bloodless event. People who watched the action on television were amazed by the simplicity of the whole event. Seeing the tanks halted by women praying the Rosary, and arms laid down not in response to violence but in response to eyes of love burning down any opposition, one wondered whether it was really possible to understand this whole peaceful revolution unless one was a Christian. Here were played out some of the central paradoxes of the Gospel teaching: that God's weakness is greater than human strength; that simplicity overpowers all the schemings of the great; that humility disarms the strong; that love conquers all things; and that real power belongs not to those who trust in the symbols of war and aggression, but to those whose trust is in the name of the Lord. Watching the television reports of the event was like seeing lived out the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zephaniah:

*I will remove your proud boasters from your midst,
and you will cease to strut on my holy mountain.
In your midst I will leave a humble, lowly people,
and those who are left will seek refuge in the name of the Lord. (Zeph. 3: 11-12)*

This paradox of power in weakness and strength in simplicity which lies so deep in the heart of the Christian life is also the foundation of the Marist experience. Mary's first prayer was in praise of the God who "scatters the proud hearted", and who "casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly". Her fundamental trust was in the name of God and the power of God's name. Marists who follow Mary's way of living the Gospel never see themselves as anything but a "humble, lowly people" in the midst of the Church. The "battles" that Marists are called to fight may be less dramatic than that of the Filipino people, but the instruments – prayer, faith in God, and love - are to be the same. Nothing defeats the Spirit when it comes in purity and power.

Tree and branches

The original idea of the Marist project was never to see the light of day. The plan of a vast congregation of priests, brothers, sisters and lay people, all working under one leader or Superior General, was too complicated for the authorities in Rome to grasp, and too full of potential difficulties. It was something hither to unheard of, and neither the Canon Law of the day nor the Church's theology had any way of seeing clearly how and where this idea fitted in to the life of the Church. Nevertheless, the idea of the Marist project as a tree of several branches was never completely abandoned by the founders of the project. From the beginning and until it was definitively quashed, the idea had always been favoured by the early Marists. When Jean-Claude Colin made his first trip to Rome in 1833, his purpose was to present the idea to the authorities to see their reaction. He was left in no doubt about their thinking. The plan was judged as "gigantesque, monstrous" and "could not be approved under any aspect."

Marcellin Champagnat died in 1840, and was replaced as Superior of the Brothers by Brother François. The union of Brothers and Fathers was not intended to be broken by this fact, however, and when Colin made his second visit to Rome in 1842, he invited Br. François and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn to present their views on the continuing union. The Brothers sent a petition pleading for continued union. The petition recalled that the Brothers and Fathers had begun together, and asked that they should continue to grow alongside each other. Champagnat had always lived in the hope that the enterprise would retain the union of all the branches. The same feeling was expressed by Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn regarding the Sisters. However, Colin's visit to Rome in 1842 convinced him that the project of a congregation of several branches would never be approved. He began to see that a separation of branches was inevitable. He put the question to the General Chapter of 1845: "Is it appropriate that the Superior General of the Marist Fathers be also the General of the Brothers of the same name?" The Chapter replied "NO". A second question put to the Chapter concerned the Marist Sisters: "Should the Society of Mary accept control of religious communities of women?" Again the answer was "NO". The years that followed this two-fold decision were painful ones. By 1852 the Brothers had been approved as a Congregation in its own right, independent of the other branches. In 1884 the Marist Sisters were also approved as a separate Congregation.

September, 1842

Father Colin spoke to us in a charmingly cheerful and carefree fashion about the business he had had to deal with in Rome, and especially of the difficulties he had encountered with regard to the Marist Brothers.

Then with much laughter he recounted the questions put to him by Cardinal Castracane. "How many of you are there?" – "There are six hundred, Eminence." – "And yourself, you are superior general not only for the Fathers, but of the Brothers and the Sisters too?" – "Yes, Eminence." – "And that works, all the same?" – "Eminence, it works all by itself." The Cardinal, he told us, could not get over it. "In Rome they do not have any idea of the religious societies in France." He then returned to the Brothers and their affairs, and how he had felt when he saw so much opposition on the Cardinal's part. These feelings had made him doubt whether God wanted the Brothers to be united to us other than by the bonds of the Third Order.

The Mayet Memoirs

Colin and Marist Fathers

We know very well that Jean-Claude Colin was not the one who gave the idea of the Society of Mary; he did not even give the name. The name was given by Jean-Claude Courveille, the first one to launch the idea. In spite of this, I have no scruple whatsoever in giving Colin the title of Founder of the Marist Fathers, for it was he who put down the foundations which allowed for its establishment. It was Colin who gave us a structure, a spirit, a manner of acting. And I believe that his role as Founder, which crowned all his activities, came from the fact that he really based the Society, not simply on a vague idea, but on precise and solid foundations - there was a rule of life and, when he sent the Fathers on mission, there were directives to be followed. He not only launched an idea, like Courveille, but, as a Founder, he also conveyed a true spiritual and apostolic experience to those whom he gathered together.

Jean Coste, sm

Chavoïn and Marist Sisters

When he returned from his second journey to Rome in 1842, Jean-Claude Colin's behaviour towards Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn changed very much indeed. He had gone to the Curia to present the Constitutions recently approved by the Marist Fathers' General Chapter. Despite the Curia's refusal in 1833, Colin still hoped the Society of Mary would have three branches – a fourth with the addition of the Brothers - and in the Constitutions there was even an article which foresaw their union under one Superior General. Furthermore, a request by the Brothers – which had also been approved by the Chapter – was in the dossier for the Curia. When, after lengthy discussions concerning the union of Fathers and Brothers, Colin realised that the Curia's opposition was final, he did not even mention the Sisters. During the year 1843, he studied more deeply than ever before the juridical situation of women's congregations, and came to a number of conclusions. The first was the natural result of the replies he had received from Rome: the time for three or four branches was over; the Sisters' congregation, like that of the Brothers, must be independent of that of the Fathers. The second conclusion was the result of the juridical study which he had made. His initial idea – that of Cerdon – was null and void. He had been thinking of the big Orders with solemn vows where cloistered nuns depended on the male branch of priests. That was no longer possible.

Antoine Forissier, sm

Marist Missionary Sisters

I am amazed at the confidence the first Marists – bishops, priests, brothers and Pioneers – had in the young ladies of Oceania. It is striking to see how soon they suggested consecrated life to them. Some of them became Tertiaries; others were formed into diocesan congregations. For many years they were guided by an SMSM; today they are completely autonomous:

* The DAUGHTERS OF MARY, in New Caledonia and on Vanuatu, founded in 1875 by Bishop Vitte and Sister Marie de la Croix, approved in 1962.

* The SISTERS OF OUR LADY OF NAZARETH, in Fiji, founded in 1891 by Bishop Vidal and entrusted to Sister Marie de Jésus, approved in 1950.

* The SISTERS OF NAZARETH, in Bougainville, begun in 1930 by Sister Marie Ignace Schaal, with the encouragement of Bishop Wade. This congregation disbanded during World War II but reorganized in 1947 and was approved in 1962.

* The DAUGHTERS OF MARY IMMACULATE, in the Solomon Islands; founded by Bishop Raucaz in 1935, scattered during the war, it was reorganized and approved in 1947.

These four congregations inherited the Marist spirit of the first missionaries. Today they are a forceful presence in their respective dioceses.

Claudine Nakamura, smsm

Champagnat and Marist Brothers

All his life, Marcellin Champagnat clung tenaciously to the original dream of a Marist family with several branches. It was Champagnat who kept the group of Marists together in Lyons after the division of that diocese found Colin in Belley and Champagnat in Lyon. Champagnat had formed eight or nine of the first group of 20 priests to be professed as Marists in 1836. In fact, the Society of Mary may never have seen the light of day had not Champagnat pressed for the election of a Superior General in 1830, at a time when Colin was being excessively cautious and hesitant. Champagnat directed many candidates to the Marist Sisters, and in a letter to Bishop Devie he supported Colin's idea of the Third Order at Belley in the 1830's. Moreover, he had written: "The Society of Brothers cannot be considered the Work of Mary by itself, but only as a branch of the Society itself. There is nothing I am not prepared to sacrifice to save the Work of Mary from shipwreck. I assure you that I believe more than ever that God wants this work." And in his spiritual testament, dictated only three weeks before his death, and when Marists still hoped for a single congregation with several branches, Champagnat insisted on the unity of spirit, of heart, of mind and of soul that should exist between Fathers and Brothers, under the leadership of a single Superior General.

"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."

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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



Family likeness

The Marist project has this special feature: it is not the work of one Founder. The differences in the congregations reflect not only the gender differences of the founders, but also the differences in their personalities and temperaments. Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, for instance, understood clearly what Jean-Claude Colin meant when he spoke of the insight that gave birth to the Marist project, but her ideas of a Marist congregation were quite different from those envisaged for her by Colin. Marcellin Champagnat was captured by the original plan, and saw that it led inevitably to a congregation of Brothers - something the rest of the group never really understood. Jean-Claude Colin himself developed the original plan along lines that reflected his own personality and spiritual experience. These differences which come from gender and personality go to make an extremely rich and multi-faceted spirituality. And while each branch has its own characteristic features and spirit, there is a clear family likeness, and there are common elements in all the Branches of the Marist Family.

A common undertaking. All Founders of the Marist project speak of "The Work of Mary" as being the common task to which Marists are called. This phrase was "heard" at the very beginnings of the enterprise, and was used by all the Founders.

A common mission. Marists of all congregations know that their proper place is in this secularised world. Further, they are missioned to the margins of this world, and to the edges of the Church, to people who have lost or have never had faith.

A common desire. The pioneer Marists understood that they were called to share Mary's desire to "gather all" into one new People of God, and to form among themselves "one mind and one heart" as in the early Church.

A common leader. From the beginning, the first Marists were captured by the realisation that they were the first congregation to have Mary as their leader. All branches look to her as their first and perpetual superior.

A common approach. Conscious of who their leader is, Marists of all congregations know that they are called to live a life of simplicity and openness to God, seeking God alone, and bringing to the Church a maternal spirit.

In three particular areas Marists share a common likeness: the name they bear, the spirit they share, and the virtues which are the cornerstones of their lives.

September, 1842

Father Colin said:

"If a Marist sees about him someone who could profitably work in the Society of Mary, he will perhaps say a word or two, but without departing from the spirit of the Society. This concern, this interest and attachment, should extend to the other branches of the Society: we all form one body. Without any collusion, everything appeared at the same time and without effort. Let us then love the family that God has given us."

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Rich inheritance

Our four congregations have developed differently with emphases that bring out the rich diversity of the Marist inheritance. And each highlights key elements in that inheritance. The Marist Brothers have preserved a strong sense of family and of the zeal of the first missionaries in the Bugey. Year after year in many countries they bring the Gospel to new generations of young men. The Marist Sisters have kept in a striking way the simplicity and graciousness of the Holy Family at Nazareth. The SMSM Sisters have preserved in its primitive purity the missionary impulse of the first Marists. In their new Constitutions they write: "Missionary service and the Marist vocation were but one single call for the pioneers and those who followed them." (No. 47). We would nevertheless expect congregations with different histories to reflect their differences in their work with the laity. The approach adopted by the Marist Brothers in the Champagnat Movement, for example, is very different from what Father Colin had in mind though both approaches have something in common. Each branch of the Society should respect the initiatives taken by the others and give them full support.

Frank McKay, sm

The family likeness and the special characteristics of each of the Marist congregations are clearly seen in the Constitutions of the different Marist Congregations. Though each of the Constitutions is written for one of the Branches and applies specifically to that Branch, nevertheless some of the common elements appear throughout: – phrases with which members of the other Congregations could identify.

To be a Marist is to be called and chosen, through a love freely bestowed on us, to live the Gospel as Mary did, in a Society which bears her name.

Marist Fathers' Constitutions

Our Congregation is characterised by the desire to make the mystery of Mary in the Church the daily inspiration of its life and action, and not by any special work nor by the promotion of any particular form of Marian devotion.

Marist Sisters' Constitutions

Whatever we do, the value of our witness will be strengthened if we avoid drawing attention to ourselves, simply fitting in wherever we can be of service, seeking in return neither esteem nor acknowledgement. The personal inspiration of our Founders, "Hidden and unknown in the world", forcibly recalls this ideal for us.

Marist Sisters' Constitutions

We wish to respond to the calls of today with the daring and zeal of the pioneers. We want to keep alive this daring – simple, joyful and prudent – based solely on the love and power of God in order to announce the Gospel in its force and integrity, learning to adapt ourselves to different cultures and conditions of life.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions

We do our best to remain faithful to the Spirit of the Risen Saviour, who gives us, as he did the first Christians, the grace to live "one in mind and heart".

Marist Brothers' Constitutions

Power in the name

When Alberica Filo della Torre, an Italian Countess, was murdered in Rome in 1991, the enquiry cast a net round a number of suspects. One was a 30 year old former drug addict. His interrogation lasted a long time, and at the end of it, he cried out: "I'm bringing action against you all. You have smeared the name of my family, and of my father – a name that is beyond reproach." The young man was angry because his family name contained his personal history, his roots, his sense of belonging, even his sense of personhood. To have called his name into question was to question not only his own integrity, but that of his whole family and his ancestors. For him, and for most people, one's name is not simply a means of identification. In some cultures, a person's real name is so sacred that it is revealed only to a small group of privileged people. To reveal one's name to another is to hand over power to that person. This truth is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. The Bible story of creation tells that God enabled Adam to name all the animals. The truth being taught in this story is that the descendants of Adam and Eve have power over the rest of creation. The first question Moses asked in his encounter with God was, "What is your name?" and when God revealed what that name was, it was the first sign of an intimate relationship between God and humanity.

All this helps us to understand the significance of covenants in Old Testament times. A covenant was always a two-way agreement, in which both sides accepted privileges from the other, and committed themselves to responsibilities towards the other. One of these responsibilities was that of ensuring the protection of the other, and coming to the other's aid in any time of need or crisis. This responsibility obliged each of the families down to the second and third generation and beyond. It was for this reason that Covenants involved the exchange of the family name. Each family incorporated the name of the other family somehow into their own, and thereby carried some part of the other family for whom they had taken on those responsibilities. So, when God made a covenant with Abram and Sarai, part of the name of Yahweh was incorporated into Abram's name, to make his name Abraham, and Sarai's name Sarah. From the beginning, Marists have seen their relationship with Mary as a sort of covenant with rights and responsibilities on each side. Those who bear her name can presume on her protection, but they are also called to be worthy of the name they bear.

September 17, 1849

Father Colin said: "If I reflect on the name I bear, what a source of hope, of reassurance! But the name is no longer enough. For I profess to belong to Mary, and I want to profess my belonging to her even more. I want my devotion to her to redouble, that my dependence on her be total and continual. I shall always hold her by the hand. In my troubles, in my difficulties, I shall say to her, 'Blessed Virgin, help me, I falter. I cast myself into your merciful lap, help me to pick myself up again'."

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What's in a name?

What's in a name?

Short but paradoxical answer: nothing and everything. A name can mean nothing, if it's used in the sense that "it's just a title" or "he's a nominal catholic". But a proper name like Mary can also mean everything because it stands for the whole person, body, soul, mind, heart.

Every religious Order or Congregation has one important feast which in some way expresses and confirms its spirit, charism, or reason for being. We might have had one of the relatively clear-cut and defined feasts of Our Lady, such as the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation or the Assumption. Instead the Founder has landed us with this rather vague and seemingly unimportant feast of the "Holy Name of Mary". The choice of this feast rather than any of the other more definite ones also stresses that our aim is to be Mary.

When in the Marist Fathers' Constitutions Father Colin listed 32 virtues of Mary that Marists should show, one of the first Novice Masters was perplexed. Father Colin might as well have listed a thousand and 32 virtues of Our Lady. Colin really wanted Marists to BE Mary in a real sense. And being a person she is more than the sum of her virtues and her greatness is more than the sum of her individual glories which can be isolated and delineated, but only by and for the mind.

Peter Janssen, sm

"Worthy of it?"

Historically, it is impossible to maintain that this name was first coined for our Congregation. It cannot be denied, however, that no other congregation was approved by the Holy See before ours under the name of Society of Mary. This fact had been brought to the attention of Father Colin in Rome itself and he did not fail to see in this a special grace of God. But more than a source of vanity, this name was for him a source of responsibility.

The important thing is not to know whether this name gives us a certain pre-eminence over other congregations dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, but rather whether we are faithful to what it implies for us. In that sense, the question which Father Colin asked of the Marists of 1848 should still be heard by us: *"It is a remarkable thing (they told me so in Rome) that no one until now had thought to adopt the name which our Society bears. Are we worthy of it?"*

Jean Coste, sm

Covenant relationship

If our name is full of meaning for us, it is because the very fact that we bear it places us in a very special relationship with the Blessed Virgin. The fact that she gave us this name and the fact that we accepted it established between her and us a kind of covenant in the biblical sense. From then on, Mary and her little Society are linked together, in a sense, and the conduct of the latter has a bearing on the honour of the former. Father Colin was acutely aware of this alliance and he used to expound with great spiritual assurance its two complementary aspects: prayer to Mary in difficulties so that she will look after her own glory by coming to the aid of those who bear her name; generous acceptance by the Society of its obligation to render honour at all times to the name which it bears.

Father Colin, when speaking of the name which we bear, does so less in the manner of some modern author than in the manner of the Bible, where the receiving of a name from someone creates a very special relationship with him.

Jean Coste, sm

Let us live their life

"We stand by our state and by our duty in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and of His Divine Mother; let our every thought, every stirring of our hearts, our every step be worthy of our august models. Let us live their life; let us think as they thought, let us judge things as they themselves judged them. Let our union with them through prayer be such that we never lose sight of them and that the world with its deceitful glory be to us what it was to the great Apostle:

'The world is crucified to me and I to the world'."

This fine passage is taken from a Circular Letter written by Father Colin in April, 1842 when he informed the Marist Fathers that he had finished his work on the Rule.... In it, after writing the key words: "Let us live their life", Father Colin enlarges this thought by pointing out to us two ways of carrying them out.

The first consists very concretely in looking at what we know of the life of Jesus and Mary in order to liken ourselves to it: "Let us think as they thought, let us judge things as they themselves judged them". By placing ourselves before Jesus and Mary in such a way that we know them historically through the Gospel, we come upon a standard which is as objective and reliable as it is highly exacting. In this way, without audacious or over-strong phrases, without deviating from the most simple path of Christian tradition, Father Colin lays down for us such a programme as opens up to our good wills an unlimited field of action.

The second attitude proposed to us is prayer. It is not enough for us simply to meditate on the lives of Jesus and Mary. Union with them through prayer is the only means of not losing sight of them and of entering the supernatural world in which they lived themselves.

Jean Coste, sm

Marist spirit

When Jean-Claude Colin told Marist priests that "simply bearing the name of Mary was not enough", he was pushing them to realise how deep the bond was between Mary and those who carry her name, and how great the responsibility is for Marists who have been given her name. The first generation of Marists looked on the name they bore as the result of Mary's choice of them. A favour like this implied a very special relationship between Mary and Marists, and this obviously led to consequences, chief of which was for Marists to imbue themselves as far as possible with what they understood to be the "spirit" of Mary. It is hard to explain exactly what is meant by "spirit", and Colin himself had great difficulty in trying to capture it in words. The "spirit" of a person is that way of looking at life, that unique way of doing things which belongs to each individual person. The "spirit" of Mary then, is Mary's way of judging reality, of making decisions and acting on them. This spirit of Mary should be the spirit of Marists because of the special relationship which exists between Mary and Marists, a relationship established, on Mary's part, by her free choice of them, and on the part of Marists, by the way they look on her as Mother, model and superior. Marist writer Jean Coste suggests three ways in which Marists can absorb the spirit of Mary. In the first place, by deepening their sense of Mary's presence and place in their lives. This they do by meditation on her life and personality, and reflection on the virtues most typical of her. Marists absorb Mary's spirit also by direct prayer to her, establishing a real and personal relationship with her; and at the same time by getting in touch with the spiritual inspiration of each of the Founding figures: Colin, Chavoin, Champagnat, and the Pioneers, and by learning from them how they lived the Marist life. The life of Mary the disciple of Jesus is filtered through the life experience of different Marist personalities – something like a prism reflecting the sun's light. Finally, Marists will absorb their Marist spirit by keeping in touch with the body of people who today are trying to live the Marist spirit and interpret it for our times. A spirit cannot be separated from a body: the Marist spirit is embodied today in those men and women, priests, brothers, sisters and lay people, who live it out. Each founding person in the Marist story shaped a body which would incarnate some aspect of the Marist spirit. A Marist will keep these features alive to the extent that he or she remains connected to the men and women who belong to the body of Marists.

1845

Father Colin said: "It is useful to repeat what has already been said, to preserve the spirit of the Society. Otherwise each one seeks to put his own spirit into it; and that interferes with the harmony and puts us on a false path. A society is like an individual. Each individual has his own genius, his own character, his own temper of spirit, a certain breadth of judgment. Well, then, to expect an individual not to follow his own spirit, his own character, is to expect the impossible. It is God who has given him that spirit, that character. He has to make the best of it and not worry about the rest. A society too has its own spirit. Who gave it to it? If that spirit is enshrined in the rule, it is obvious that it is God who gave it to it. Well, then, we shall not do any good except by following that spirit. If we do not follow it, we may make noise and win the esteem of men, but we shall not do all the good that God expects of us."

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A liveable spirit

It's basically a very liveable and ordinary spirit. We are called to live our Christian lives as Mary lived her Christian life. This cannot be threatening to anyone, as Mary could not have threatened anyone. It is a spirituality which accepts the ordinary realities of any life but quietly seeks to make God the centre of that life just as Mary the "perfect disciple" did. Its simplicity is that of Mary. All this will mean a radical but simple following: as Mary did at Nazareth without fuss or show; brave and suffering as Mary was at Calvary; joyful, generous and loving as Mary was in the infant Church after Pentecost.

Being ordinary

It is sometimes referred to as "being ordinary". But when you come to think of it, in the present day – or at any time for that matter – "being ordinary" doesn't mean "being like everyone else", for the simple reason that "everyone else" is *not* "being ordinary".

Most of us are acting a part or many parts, trying to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet". All of us could make our own that beautiful prayer of St. Augustine: "Lord, let me know myself, let me know you."

In a special way, the "spirit of Mary" is precisely the knowing of these two people, myself and God.

I suppose this attitude, to ourselves, to others, and to God, has always been attractive, because it is unobtrusive, sincere, and empty of all self-seeking, and perhaps because in any age it is always so rare. But there is no doubt it is particularly attractive today.

Kevin Maher, sm

First line of approach

The first line open to Marists in their attempt to get a clear idea of their spirit, is to accept in the spirit of faith and thanksgiving the reality of their vocation, the bond which it sets up between them and Mary and the resultant obligation to live the life of their mother. Calling these spiritual facts to mind... and recognising in them the principles of their common vocation, they carry its message throughout their whole lives, striving constantly to deepen their sense of living in Mary's presence. They have two means to achieve this: meditation on the spiritual personality of Mary as we find it in the New Testament, and direct prayer to her as she reigns in glory beside her Son, inspiring and supporting them in their struggle. Insofar as they find a place in their lives for these fundamental "exercises" – the life-breath of a Marist soul, – insofar as the person of Mary and the Christian values of which she is the incarnation become for them a source of light and strength, will the members of the Society be really penetrated and animated by her spirit.

Jean Coste, sm

Unifying principle

Should we go... in search of a unifying principle for the Marist spirit, we can find it only in fidelity to the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who guided Mary and fashioned her soul; it was the Holy Spirit who inspired and helped Father Colin to understand the mystery of Mary; it is the Holy Spirit who, working in the Church and in the Society which forms part of it, enables Marists to discover today how they can follow in the footsteps of Mary and of their Founder. In this sense, to live the Marist spirit is to listen to the Holy Spirit who speaks to us through our position in the Society of Mary. The Society is completely defined by its belonging to Mary, whose life it wishes to live; it was moulded by the spiritual intuitions of a founder who, more than any other, realised the religious and apostolic value of effacement; it strives to bring that Marian and Marist life into the Church of today. It is insofar as they take all these elements of their vocation together that Marists are faithful to the Holy Spirit, and it is this fidelity to the Holy Spirit on the part of all Marists in their common vocation which constitutes the Marist spirit.

Jean Coste, sm



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 Chavoïn 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".

Take a second look!

In the Jesuit church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, the visiting tourist, on entering the church and looking up, sees what appears to be a curved ceiling and a massive dome reaching far upwards. It is only after some time that the tourist begins to realize that the "dome" is after all only a painting! By a brilliant trick of perspective, the visitor has been deceived into thinking that what was in fact a flat roof was a dome. It is a typical piece of Baroque "trompe-l'oeil" or visual deception. The tourist in Rome soon begins to learn that things are not always what they seem, and that it is often necessary to "take a second look" at things. Taking a second look is also an important christian attitude. When Jesus cured a man of his blindness, the man at first could see humans, but "they looked like trees walking round" (Mark 8: 24). Only after a second look did the man see things clearly. St James tells us in his letter to take a second look at the Law of God, otherwise we would be like people who take just a casual glance at themselves in a mirror and go away, remembering nothing (James 1: 25). Important things need a second look, which is why Jean-Claude Colin said that the Marist spirit could only be gained through meditation and prayer. Absorbing the spirit of Mary is a work of art and requires all the delicacy and sensitivity, as well as all the hard work of any craft. In the days of the ancient silversmiths, a piece of silver, refined by fire, was burred and polished day by day with great labour. The work was finished when the face of the silversmith could be seen clearly in the metal. The image is a useful one to help us understand the process of assimilating the spirit of Mary. Marists are the silver, and Christ is the silversmith who works on their transformation. At his side is the Woman, Mary. And as he finishes his work, he says to her: "Have a look." And there, in their deepest centre, shining in reflection is the face of the Woman, the perfect disciple of Jesus. That is the transformation Christ has in mind when he calls men and women to be Marists. And the measure in which Marists do allow God to bring about this transformation will be the measure in which the Marist project can be made to happen and be fruitful. But like any precious gift, the spirit of Mary is not something to be hoarded and hugged to oneself. Its real value becomes apparent when it is passed on to others. It is for Marists to look again and again at the image they see in the depths of their being, and reflect that image to their world.

1839

Father Colin said: "I do not condemn those who follow another way of making God loved, of working for his glory. They do right, because that is the spirit of their vocation, and each should conform himself to the spirit of his vocation. Not everyone is called to be a Marist: the Church would have good cause for complaint if it had only the little Marists to serve it! But the spirit of our Society is different. We must behave like our mother."

1842

Father Colin said: "We must study the spirit of the Society more and more. I feel, alas, that unless we renew ourselves, our treasure will run out. We must wind ourselves up, as people do with clocks to make them go. Unless we are attentive and generous, the spirit of our Society will soon be lost."

The Mayet Memoirs

Spirit for service

To cultivate Mary's spirit is also to cultivate a sense of service: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." Singing the Magnificat frees me from all self-concern: I am fully available for service. To know how to serve is another way of disappearing, of making oneself hidden and unknown. What is required for service? Two things: identify the need, be equipped to respond to it. To identify the need means having the skill to see and hear what my sister or brother wants to tell me. This presupposes that I have learned to silence all that makes noise in me: only the most scrupulous and disciplined attentiveness will enable me to perceive the pulse, the heartbeat of my neighbour on the side of the road. Nor does it suffice to be able to hear. One must also have the skills to intervene. Here again, this means lengthy apprenticeships, boring exercises, an accumulation of notions which are the price to pay to prevent service from becoming one more torment in the life of one who is suffering.

Gaston Lessard, sm

Give me your freedom

Let me tell you a story... a tale so old and so often told in many forms that the names of the people involved have been forgotten.

The story tells of a holy man coming out from his mountain of contemplation, down towards a village in the valley. As he approached the village, a peasant came running to meet him. "Are you come out of the hills?" he asked the holy man breathlessly. "Oh, if you are, then give me the stone, please give me the stone."

"Stone?" said the traveller. "What stone?"

"The stone of my dream", said the peasant. "Oh, please give it to me!" He drew breath a little and then went on: "Last night, an angel of the Lord spoke to me in a dream, telling me that today a holy man would come out of the hills and that he would give me a stone that would make me rich beyond my wildest hopes. All morning I have waited and watched... and now, you have come. You must give me the stone.... it is mine.... I have been given it by the Lord."

"Ah," said the holy man, "you must be talking of the stone that I picked up back in the mountains." And he rummaged among his few possessions. "Yes, here it is. Take it, my friend, and be glad." And he handed over a stone as big as a man's fist.

The peasant took it in trembling hands, and his eyes grew wide with wonder: "But... but.... this is a diamond! Surely the largest diamond in the world!" he gasped.

"Yes, it is a diamond," said the holy man, "and now it is yours; may it bring you gladness, since the Lord has meant it for you."

The peasant, clutching his treasure in both hands, turned and sped back to the village, his feet scarcely touching the ground. And the holy man settled down in the shelter of a tree, and drank in the beauty of the ordered valley, after the weeks he had spent among the mountain harshness.

As evening drew on, a figure emerged from the village, and with slow steps climbed up towards the tree; it was the peasant to whom the holy man had given the diamond. He came and sat down beside the holy man, and for a long time neither of them spoke. Finally the peasant reached into his pouch, took out, unwrapped and put the diamond on the ground between them.

"Here is the stone," he said, "now I want something more from you... something greater... give me what you have. Give me the power to give away such treasure, freely, gladly, without regret. Give me that freedom, that spirit which you have."

This story has its point when we come to consider our Marist Marian heritage, because we are asked to go beyond the work we do in the Church... the work of schools, hospitals, parish work, missions.... all the multiple ministries that Marists are engaged in... to the spirit that underlies and gives life to them all. The work we engage in is, in a sense, the stone we give, that others might be enriched; but what enables us, indeed impels us to give this stone, this ministry to the needs of the Church? This question brings us into touch with the Marist spirit, the animating presence of Mary, the inner heart of the Marist congregations.

Romuald Gibson, fms

Portraits and last words

The Marist project has this special feature: it is not the work of one founder. Each of its different branches had its own collaborator whose personality and temperament shaped and coloured the original insight. The portraits and last words of each of them can tell us a great deal about their contribution.

Jeanne-Marie Chavoin's portrait reveals a woman of strength and basic down-to-earth humility and realism. She quickly grasped the essence of the Marist project, giving it an interpretation that was fresh and new; and, despite the difficulties and contradictions she experienced, all that she envisaged for her Sisters and which Colin wished to change has become real. Just a month before her death she wrote to Colin urging him to write the Rule for her Sisters, insisting that this was his responsibility and gift to the Marist project.

The only image we have of *Jean-Claude Colin* is a photograph taken when he was an old man of 76. Mayet found it difficult to recognise Colin. "The pose he was obliged to take is really quite out of character, totally contrary to his real self and manner of bearing", he wrote. Of all the founders, Colin was the one who reflected most on the original Marist insight. He was a man of a single idea: "Mary supported the Church as it came to birth: she will do so again at the end of time." On that idea a whole spirituality has been built.

At the end of his life, as *Marcellin Champagnat* lay on his death bed, his Brothers realised that they had no painting of him. It was only after he died and before he was buried that a portrait of him was made. His face was already ravaged by his terminal illness. The energy, dynamism and expansive love which were so much part of the spirit of this man who carved his congregation's house out of the rock and built his whole life on the rock of faith, are not evident. But that energy and love for the Marist project is breathed in his dying words.

The only photograph we have of *Françoise Perroton* does little justice to the lay woman who at age 49 left everything to go to the end of the world. She would hardly have imagined being photographed in the habit of a religious sister. Yet she and the Pioneers always saw themselves as Marist, missionary and religious. More than once she was offered the chance to be other than Marist. She refused each time; and despite neglect, misunderstanding and conflict from the very people from whom she may have hoped to find help, she remained true to her wish to be Marist.



Chavoin's last words

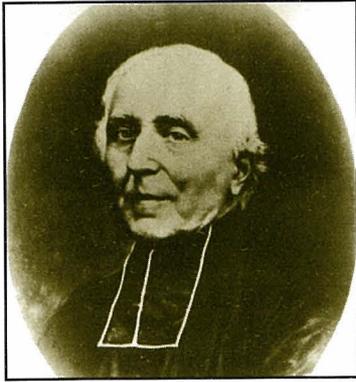
Pray for me, be very united among yourselves, love simplicity.

Look, (Mary) is your Mother, you must promise her inviolable fidelity; but remember, if you want her love and protection, you must love and imitate her: be always humble and unassuming like her, docile to superiors; love work and the hidden life. Simplicity, the very greatest simplicity, should be your only ornament; never imitate those communities who seek to please the world by adopting its ways.

A Marist sister's sole desire should be to resemble the little family at Nazareth – there she will find the perfect models of poverty, simplicity and love.

Always be a bond of union between your sisters so that all may have but one heart and one soul and so draw down heaven's blessings on this house.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chavoin".



Colin's Last Testament

The idea of a religious Society under the name of the Mother of God, and utterly consecrated to her, filled my heart with consolation and joy. This joy was accompanied by a confidence that I would say amounted to certitude. I was in my innermost self convinced that the idea came from God and that the Society would succeed.

Now that the drafting of our Constitutions is finished, let us bless God! Everything tells me that my mission is accomplished and that all that remains for me is to prepare for death.

I leave everything in the hands of that Divine Providence which until now has cared for the Society in so fatherly a manner, and which will surely guide the Society towards its goal by the paths of mercy known to it alone. If God deigns to show me mercy when I appear before Him, I shall have you ever in mind. I shall beseech Mary to preserve and increase in you a love of the poor and hidden life, a spirit of humility, of self-denial, of close union with God and brotherly love.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Colin".



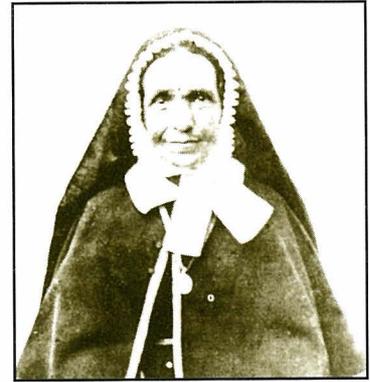
Champagnat's Last Testament

Dear Brothers, I beg of you with all the love of my heart, and by all the love you bear me, keep ever alive among you the charity of Christ. Love one another as Jesus Christ has loved you. Be of one heart and one mind. Have the world say of the Little Brothers of Mary, what they said of the first Christians. "See how they love one another!"

I die with sentiments of grateful and respectful submission to the Superior General of the Society of Mary, and in the closest bonds of union with all its members, especially the Brothers, who in the designs of Providence were to come under my care and who have always had a special claim on my affection.

Dear Brothers, love your vocation, be faithful and steadfast to the end, with manly courage. What a consolation we have, to remember that we have lived in the favour of Mary, and in her own Society. May it please our good Mother to preserve you, give you increase and bring you to holiness.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Champagnat".



From the Letters of Françoise Perrotton

They think in France that I have done some good in Oceania. Don't you believe it, I haven't done anything yet.

For 12 years I was alone!

I thought in 1845 that I was going to do marvels in Oceania. Then after a year's travelling, I landed here. Now, let's set to work, I said to myself. What a disappointment! I was 30 years too old, my old head has been able to grasp very little of the Uvean language. The same thing applies to the Futunian: the result is that what I have been able to do is reduced to very little. But let me draw a veil over the past; a new era is beginning.

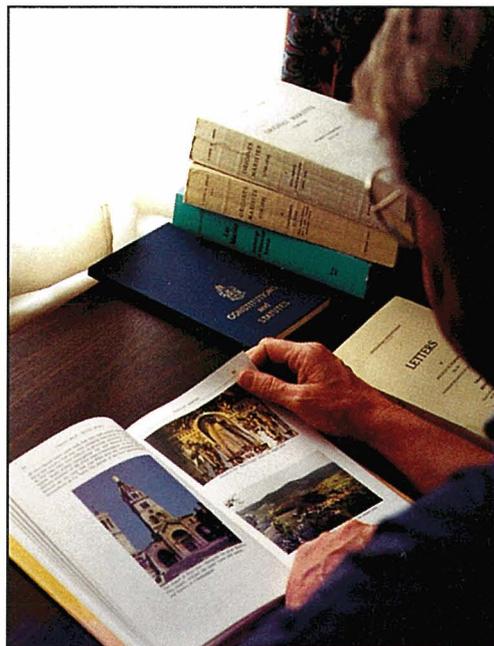
I am very happy and proud to have launched the movement; my 13 years of trial will be counted among the best times of my life. I would never have dared to hope for such happiness, for I had resigned myself to die here alone.

My gratitude to God should be as great as the ocean.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "F. Perrotton".

A dream or a certain way?

It's hard to explain the heroic commitment of the Founders to a plan which came to light among a small group of seminarians in 1815. It's hard to account for the extraordinary growth of the Marist project in its early years. But it's also impossible to avoid the facts as they present themselves. Less than five months after his arrival in La Valla, Marcellin Champagnat had drawn the first recruit to his plan for Brothers. Within a year there were seven young Brothers. And by the time of his death in 1840, Champagnat could count 421 young men who had joined the enterprise, of whom 280 were at that moment working in 48 schools in France and Oceania. When Jean-Claude Colin was elected Superior General of the Society of Mary in 1836, 20 priests took their vows. By 1854, when Colin resigned as Superior General, there were 258 priests and brothers of the Society of Mary working in 25 houses in France, Oceania and London. Within a year of the approval of the Marist Sisters, nine young girls had joined Jeanne-Marie Chavoin; and in one month in 1824, another seven arrived from the villages of Jarnosse and Coutouvre, whose combined population was just 3,000. A similar incredible story can be told of Françoise Perroton and the Pioneers in Oceania. From the start, three young girls had lived with Françoise, then more, till within three years she had as many as a hundred girls living or staying with her. A Bishop later noted that one of the Pioneers had formed families of 90, 150 and 200 young women where she was working. Nothing but the power of God in human weakness could explain how these unprepossessing seeds should grow into trees of such size and fruitfulness. The Marist story is a witness to the Christian truth that when a simple idea, rooted in the Gospel and lived out with conviction, meets the spiritual needs of people, a real power is generated, a real energy is released which will take people to the most dangerous places, and even to the ends of the known world for the sake of that idea. It will give those people the courage to spend their lives and even shed their blood for what they believe to be something significant for themselves and others. Right up to our own day, followers of the Marist life have given evidence that this Marist way was not just a certain way of living the Gospel, that is, just one way among many; but also a sure way, a sure path that would guarantee genuine holiness to those who followed it. The Marist project is not just a dream: it is a certain way.



Fermenting in the blood

You will have to ponder the Marist writings for yourself in meditation and prayer. Only if they ferment in your blood will the Spirit use them to transform you into the sort of Marist apostles the times demand. Like all classic texts, the Marist writings have the power of renewing themselves in contact with each generation. I believe too they are not to be seen as a kind of Koran – a sacred and unchanging text, but rather like the Gospel itself, as points of departure for a new age.

In the day to day fulfillment of your duties it is important to carry in your hearts something of the vision briefly suggested. You must be able to see past the appearances. What was said of Moses must be said of you: *"But Moses walked as if he saw the invisible."*

Frank McKay, sm



The tongue has said all it can.
The rest must come from the thoughtful heart.

St Augustine

The Spirit of Mary is something most delicate and most profound, obtained only through sustained meditation and prayer.

Jean-Claude Colin