

## *Least Marian yet most Marian*

The Marist approach to Mary, graphically mirrored in Icons of Mary in the Eastern Christian Church, helps us understand what seems to be a curious aspect of Marist spirituality. In the Constitutions that Colin wrote for the priests and brothers of the Society of Mary, he had a special section entitled "Marists are to be especially devoted to the Blessed Virgin." One would naturally expect to find such a chapter in the Constitutions of a Marian congregation. Yet when one examines what Colin recommends as "special practices", one finds nothing more or less than what was traditional practice for every Catholic! Furthermore, in the present Constitutions of the Marist Fathers and Sisters and the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, there is no section devoted to Mary in herself. In all its years of existence, the Society of Mary has not initiated any special form of devotion or place of devotion to Mary. No significant prayers to Our Lady or books on Our Lady have been written by Marists. Marists have not identified themselves with any particular image or cult of the Blessed Virgin. It seems that the Society of Mary is a Marian congregation with the least external reference to Mary. And yet, in a review of Marian Congregations made 60 years ago, a Jesuit researcher said of the Society of Mary: "No other institute seems to us so totally and exclusively Marian." How can one explain what seems to be a contradiction? The clue to this paradox can be seen, again, in the Icons of Our Lady. Instead of focussing attention on Mary, the Marist tries to identify with her, and so tries to be someone whose attention is focussed on the needs of people, and on the "extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation." The Marian Icons of the Eastern Church may help us also to understand another slant given by Colin himself in his Constitutions. Generally, Constitutions of Religious Congregations followed a set pattern. Article I of the Constitutions dealt with the aims of the Congregation; Article II dealt with the way to achieve those aims; and Article III with some distinguishing mark of the Congregation. Significantly, Article III of Colin's Constitutions dealt not with Marists and Our Lady, but with "Relationships with people in the Church and in Society". Clearly, Colin saw that the best way to describe the Marist was to situate him or her in relationship with the Church, with the world, and with other people. In this way Marists show their devotion to Mary by reflecting her attitudes and way of life in the world.

On September 21, 1846 Father Colin said:

*"Let us imitate our mother; she did not have people speak of her; the gospel named her four times only, and yet what good she did! The time has come when we must make her power burst forth. As for us, let us have her spirit, let us do good 'as if hidden and unknown in the world'. May the world not know of our works, but the eye of God will see them from heaven and we shall be rewarded for them."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## *In relation*

"I don't pray to her often, but vivid thoughts about her come to me...."

"Mary enters my life as a presence, in somewhat the same way that the presence of a woman is felt in a home, without one's knowing who precisely is there."

*Comments of Marist priests on Mary.*

What seems to me the most typical thing in the relationship of our congregation to Mary is the extremely interior slant given to it, and the consistency with which it leads people to seek the good suggested by Mary's life rather than devote explicit attention to her. With Father Colin the Blessed Virgin is meant to be seen essentially in her relation with the Church in which she lived, instead of being the subject of talk.

*Jean Coste, sm*



## *Marist paradox*

A Marist in a missionary country tells that at the beginning of their mission in that country the team of Marist missionaries lived with another Marian congregation. After two years of living together, members of the other congregation said to the Marists: "But you are not at all a Marian Congregation! You have been with us for two years now, and despite our encouragement you have written no hymns to Our Lady; you have composed no prayers or poems to her; you have not celebrated any special feasts in her honour. How can you call yourselves Marist if you do not give special honour to Mary?"

Jean Coste writes:

"Here we touch on what I am prepared to call the Marist paradox, which must be grasped if there is to be understanding of the way that the role of Mary is lived in the Congregation (of Marists) at the present time. It might be put like this: among congregations claiming to be Marian, that of the Marist Fathers is one of the least Marian and one of the most Marian of all."



## *Point of view*

Colin did not promote any new Marian devotion. For him, Mary is a person to be entered; a mind, a heart, a consciousness to be embraced, a vantage point from which to view the world and the Church in all its aspects. It is perhaps for this reason that the Society of Mary has been called "one of the least and yet one of the most Marian" of Congregations. The least in the sense that it promotes no particular Marian devotions, and does not look to Mary as a model placed in front of it to be emulated. And yet the most Marian, in that it attempts an identification with Mary's own consciousness, with Mary's own viewpoint. Its concern is not with Mary, but with the world and its needs and the mystery of salvation.

*Michael Fitzgerald, sm*

*To choose Mary's name is to enter into a special relationship with her, which teaches Marists to relate to their neighbour in such a way that through them Mary can be present to the Church of today as she was to the Church at its birth. Mary did not press her privileged position as the mother of Jesus, but was ready to be first and foremost his disciple, one who "hears the word of God and keeps it". (Lk.8:21)*

*Marist Fathers' Constitutions n.15*