

## *The great "No's"*

Society of Mary historian Jean Coste uses the phrase "the great NO's" to refer to the stand Marists are to make against greed, pride and power; and he sees in this attitude one of the essential elements of the Marist way. Colin's approach was not so much a critique of the Church itself – his loyalties lay too deep for that – but rather a critique of many who represented "church", and particularly the clergy of his day. Jean Coste points out further that each of these convictions of Jean-Claude Colin was founded on a significant personal experience; each was related to the attitude of Mary as Colin understood it; and each found some concrete expression in the Rule he wrote for the priests and brothers of the Society of Mary. Chief among the experiences of Colin were his personal background, and two incidents which profoundly marked him. Years after the event, Colin spoke of a traumatic experience which occurred when he was a young man. He was sick, and presumed to be dying, and was horrified to discover that those who gathered round his bedside could talk only about who was to receive his inheritance at his death. There even seemed to be some attempt to prevent him from taking the medicine which would cure him. This childhood experience created in him an instinctive horror for any form of greed. Later, he noticed the same spot of greed in meetings of priests, where the two recurring topics of conversation seemed to be money and criticism of bishops. Probably these two experiences, more than most other experiences in his life, made Colin aware of how easily and subtly the desire for money, power and personal aggrandisement can enter into people's lives, and cripple them spiritually. Colin was influenced by the writings of Mary of Agreda, a Spanish mystic, and from these writings, and from his own personal reflection on the mystery of Mary in the early Church, Colin could see how much these attitudes were at variance with the approach of Mary. As a young priest at Cerdon, when he was jotting down his first ideas for a Rule for Marists, he laid down specific rules to counter the possibility of these attitudes taking root in Marists' lives. In fact, some of these rules were unrealistic and were subsequently removed from the Constitutions, but they enshrined a very realistic conviction: that greed, pride and power limit the effectiveness of one who wishes to present the Gospel of Jesus.

1838-1839

*Father Colin told us that... when he was eighteen he fell ill. "I was on the point of death", he said, "when I saw my bedside surrounded; the talk was all about a testament, the notary; each one was looking out for himself."*

*The physician had prescribed to the young Colin a potion through which he hoped to save him. Someone who thought he would inherit something persuaded him not to drink it, telling him, "It's poison." He refused it, without saying why. When his brother saw this, he started crying. To please him, then, young Colin drank it. One understands how this memory instilled in him a horror for attachment to earthly goods.*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## *Ministry for money*

From time to time Mayet would offer his own comments on Marist life. Here is a reflection he made on Marists who took on work for the sake of making money.

*When, in the Society, people will no longer do works of zeal without money; when superiors will boast of their skill in finding and choosing works which produce money; when there will be much talk about a ministry which produces much money and little glory for God, and little talk about a ministry which gives much glory to God and no money; when members will be rated according to the money they bring in; when there will be incessant talk about stipends for masses or sermons or about the money brought in by the preaching of Advents, Lents, or missions, etc, then there will no longer be a Society of Mary, an apostolic society, but a society of trade, an association of merchants; honest, conscientious, christian even, if you like, living a pleasant, respectable and bourgeois life. That will never happen. But it is important to resist openly those who have that mindset — no matter who they are — by all legitimate means.*

## A treasure hunt

Here is one of the stories from Mayet's *Memoirs* :

*Around the year 1844, a man asked permission to visit Puylata, and as he passed through the different parts of the house, he picked up some dust or some object or other. He sought out Father Colin and told him, "Monsieur, there is a treasure in your house." "How do you know? Have you any documents?" "Yes, monsieur, I have." "Then hand them over to the family. They must be still alive." The man then became embarrassed and admitted that he was a magnetic diviner (he had, I think, already found several bits of treasure on the hillside of Fourvière) and that this was how he knew of the Puylata treasure, which he estimated to be about 400,000 francs. Its value, he said, was depreciating from day to day, because it lay in a drain covered by a good foot of mud. He concluded his conversation by asking permission to do the excavation himself and then go halves with him. Very Reverend Father Superior would not hear of it. Father Favre, the principal theologian in the Society, told him that he could easily have the search done himself, particularly as he had not prompted the move made by the diviner. Father Humbert, Bursar General, was very keen on making a few probes, but Reverend Father Colin would never permit it. Even though he knew a search might be made lawfully his decision was based on an attitude that is easy to appreciate. This is of more value to the Society than any 400,000 francs – namely dependence on the help of God and the protection of Mary without which all the assistance of this world is of no avail.*

Anthony Corcoran sm, in a study of this text, wrote:

Notice how Father Mayet has written a kind of fable of the Founder, a kind of parable. Faced with the question of the treasure hunt are three characters, three Marists with three different outlooks. First there is the theologian, Father Favre, who looks at the question from a moral theology point of view, and sees that it is morally permissible. (We also know something else about this good man who will become the next Superior General. He does not think or feel as Father Colin. Later Father Colin will say that although he was a good theologian Father Favre did not really have a feel for the spirit of the Society.) Then there is the General Bursar, Father Humbert, who looks at the question from an economic point of view, and is keen on the idea, presumably hopeful of augmenting the Society's coffers! Both are good men: both with high office in the Society. And then there is the Founder, Father Colin, who looks at things from the point of view of the Spirit of the Society and says "No". Father Mayet gives the moral to the story. Father Colin does not wish to go digging round for the money. He feels that, although it is morally permissible, and economically beneficial, it is not the best thing for the Society. There is something more valuable to be gained for the Society than 400,000 francs. Marists find their support in the help of God and the protection of Mary. The Superior must show where their trust truly lies; it is not in treasure hidden under the house.

## Surplus money

In 1847, Mayet noted the following remark in his *Memoirs*:

*Reverend Father Colin said to the Abbé de Charbonnel, "Our union (with the bishops) must be such that the bishops can look upon the Society 'as their own', such that when our houses are sufficiently well established, the surplus funds of each house must go into the bishop's coffers."*

Colin found it necessary to review his attitude, and in 1849 Mayet recorded his change of mind in the margin of his *Memoirs*, adding a personal note of caution:-

*Father has changed his mind. Nevertheless it is well for it to be known that, had it been possible to leave this article without harm to good government, he would have done so. It is a desire he has cherished for thirty years."*

Commenting on these texts, Marist historian Jean Coste writes:

Colin is renouncing the power that the free disposition of money gives to religious. If a religious order is very rich and even if it gives all its superfluous funds to good works, the fact that it has given so many thousand dollars to this group is a sign of power. "I give my money to those I want to!" And that is a sign of power. And the idea of Colin is to destroy that, to destroy this possible corruption that this power will create in us. And this money will be used for good works, but by the bishop. It will be for the bishop to decide; either the money will go into the bishop's funds, or the bishop will decide whether to give it to somebody, and that will be his charity, not our charity. And I think that goes very far, and that is full of meaning.