

## The end times

If the Marist project was "something unheard of", how does one actually describe what it looks like? A good way is to go back to what brought it into being: the story which Jean-Claude Courveille told his companions in the seminary at Lyon. Four people have left accounts of what they understood Courveille "heard" at the shrine of Le Puy. Courveille himself said he heard Mary talk about a Society founded for the battle for the faith at these end times. Déclas and Terraillon were struck by the parallel between the Society of Jesus and the Society of Mary. But what stayed with Colin was another parallel: the parallel between the beginning of the Church and the end times. What Colin retained from the Le Puy story were these words of Mary: *"I was the mainstay of the new-born Church; I shall be again at the end of time."* According to historian Jean Coste, this is the sentence which "Fr. Colin repeated most often, most consistently and most regularly during his whole life." Colin himself says that the words attributed to Mary served as a "foundation" and an "encouragement" in the Society, indicating the direction in which the Founder was to go. Jean-Claude Colin made a clear link between the "end times" and the times that he lived in. He was convinced that his age was the prelude to the end of the world, and this gave him and his contemporaries a sense of urgency, expressed in the style of language he used in the Constitutions. Today, we may find it difficult to accept Colin's view in a literal sense, and even his contemporaries were a little confused about that connection. In fact, Jean-Claude Colin never indicated that this personal belief was to be part of the Society's idea of itself. And the striking thing is the way he avoids the temptation of suggesting that Marists turn their backs on the world and cultivate the model of the church of the past. On the contrary, he sees the present age as the opportunity to create a new model of church which would ensure that all are gathered and welcomed. The point of Colin's image of Mary at the beginning of the Church and at the end of time is to see her standing as it were in a huge arc of time that stretches from the beginning of the church to the end of the world. In a sense she is already at the end of time, and she draws us forward, not backwards, into preparing for that end of time which will come not because God has tired of the sinfulness of humans, but because the *world* has become "united in mind and heart" as the *church* was at the beginning.

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Father Colin's tone became solemn, "Yes, I do not mind repeating it here once more: the words 'I was the mainstay of the new-born Church; I shall be again at the end of time' served us, in the very earliest days of the Society, as a foundation and an encouragement. They were always before us. We worked in that direction, so to speak."

The Mayet Memoirs

## The time has come

A study of all the texts recorded by Mayet in which Colin speaks of Mary supporting the Church at its beginning and at the end of time, shows that, for Jean-Claude Colin, meditating on this theme always led to a sense of *mission*; a realisation that Marists have a job to do – and urgently – in the world; and that because of this, they can be full of courage because *"Mary is at our head"* and *"the time has come to make her power burst forth."* Here are some of the texts from Mayet.

*I have always had the idea that the Society was called to work for the salvation of souls at the end of time.*

*Times are bad, but Mary who consoled, protected and saved the new-born Church will save it in the last days. I am not saying that judgement day is almost upon us, but still, it will be soon enough when it does come. Mary will make use of us, her sons.*

*The Blessed Virgin has said: I was the support of the Church at its birth: I shall be so again at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me.*

*Nineteen centuries after the founding of the Church there comes a small society. The name of Mary has been held in store for it, as it were, and given to it by God. The Blessed Virgin has said to it: I supported the Church at her birth: I shall support the Church at the end of time.*

The Mayet Memoirs



## *A Church re-born*

It would seem that Colin, without entirely losing his sense that the world would end soon, or at least within a few generations, did not think of the Society's mission exclusively in terms of emergency action to brace Christians for the end, but could also envisage a new age of faith before the end: a church re-born, a new conquest of the age of pride and unbelief by a faith purified and restored to the simplicity of its beginnings.

*Edwin Keel, sm*

## *No fire-brand preaching*

In no way does Father Colin resemble one of those repentance preachers, full of pessimism, and inclined from the start to restrain God's grace and to limit the number of the elect. Where threatening disaster compels haste, but where the situation of the sinner suggests patience, it is the patience of the pastor of souls that overrides the rush to condemn. And Mary, the woman of the end of the world, is not solely the Mother who gathers her fearful children; she is also the Virgin who marches at the head into battle, breathing courage and confidence into her sons:

*"She is saying to us: 'I am marching at your head' .... Given that thought – the Blessed Virgin is marching with me – who would not feel full of courage and confidence in any trial?" The Mayet Memoirs)*

*Jan Hulshof, sm*



## *A Marian people of God*

For Father Colin, the charism of the Society does not consist in meeting precise concrete needs on the social, educational or pastoral level. Nor does it consist in an inclination to certain pious practices or devotions. Father Colin sees the charism of the Society in terms of his reading of the signs of the times. In these times which are the last times, times of indifference, of pantheism and of materialism, the Society is called – guided by Mary and adorned with the name of Mary – to work at gathering a Marian people of God.

*Jan Hulshof, sm*

We can see that the very structure of the Society Colin has in mind – with priests, brothers, sisters, and an enormous association of lay people – is linked to this vision of an age of mercy represented by Mary, the woman who dreams not of judging or picking and choosing, but rather of gathering together and reuniting all her children.

*Jean Coste, sm*