

The "Work of Mary"

"To enable church to happen" may be a useful way of describing the Marist enterprise. Or perhaps it may be clearer to say, "to be present wherever 'church' is happening", because forming a communion of mind and heart is the work of the Spirit, and not something brought about by human means. The specific task of Marists is to be there – as Mary was at the beginning – wherever 'church' is coming into being, and enabling Mary's spirit and attitude to touch this emerging church. This appears clearly from what Jean-Claude Colin retained of the words Courveille heard at Le Puy, although much of the point is lost in the English translation. Mary's words are recorded as: *"was the mainstay of the new-born Church."* What translates into English as "new-born Church" is, in the original French *"Église naissante"*, which really means *"the church in the process of being born."* This makes a significant difference to our understanding of Mary's place in the church. Mary's concern at the beginning was not simply for the Church which *had already* come into existence, but for the Church *in the very process of coming into existence*. And today and for the future she is concerned for the places where the Church is coming into being. The Marist pioneers spoke of this as "the Work of Mary", which they described in this way: that there be a group of people – a Society – whose task on earth is to support the Church in the same way as Mary did at the beginning; that there be a group of people who would be present wherever the new Church is coming to birth, and like a good midwife assist this Church into life. This is why to the end of his life Colin envisaged the Marist project as a vast enterprise embracing all people: priests, religious and lay people, all working for the same goal. In our times, there are many places where the Church is being born or re-born, where it is emerging or re-emerging. There are individuals who are searching for God or rediscovering their faith. There are individuals and groups who find themselves on the edge of the official church and who struggle to find a community in which they can hear the Good News spoken to them. There are whole countries which are emerging from non-belief or from suppression of faith. Colin's insight is that Mary is especially concerned to gather these people, and to be among them by means of the men and women who bear her name and the marks of her personality. However much they may feel their personal weakness or the smallness of their numbers, Marists are invited to take part in this work, and to do it with urgency.

His modest simplicity has never stopped him from believing that the Society of Mary was called to do great things in the Church of God. Mary, he said, protected the Church in her cradle; she will protect her in a very special way at the end of time.

The Mayet Memoirs

Worthwhile task

The first Marists were young and inexperienced when they started. They lacked information, finance, or contacts in high places. Colin was always stressing the importance of the inner, spiritual life, but he also said, "We did not build the Society on our knees." Champagnat, recalling the grinding labour of the early days, declared, "We built the Society, literally, with our hands!" The Sisters had sometimes to eke out a living by what was simply sweated labour. Yet all were buoyed up by an immense confidence in a call to further "the work of Mary" as they called it.

Denis Green, sm

Special mission

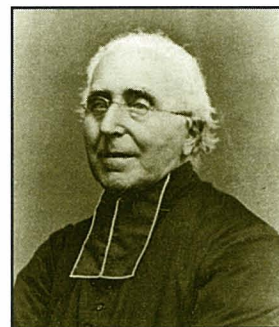
Colin was very strong on the idea that, now that we are approaching the end of time, Mary has a special mission. She who is present to the Church at all times is going to redouble her efforts at the end of time, for it is when a child is sick that a mother leans over the infant with even more love. Her Society is a means of allowing her to go everywhere, to bring back sinners, to show mercy; and the Society is to act in such a way that Mary can reach all her children, can reunite them, and can save them. The mission of the Society of Mary is therefore that of Mary herself. Moreover, as much for Champagnat as for Colin, in their correspondence of the early years, they do not speak of the "Society" of Mary, but of the "Work" of Mary. That is a very beautiful concept – doing what Mary wants one to do; that is what the work of Mary is all about.

Jean Coste, sm

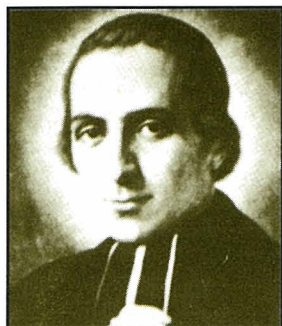
All the founders of the Marist project spoke of the "Work of Mary". They all saw it as something bigger than the Society of Mary or the works of the Society of Mary. The Marist project was a part of the Work of Mary; a means of enabling her Work to take place.



JEANNE-MARIE CHAVOIN, writing to Bishop Devie, says: "We have never doubted that God wanted the work of the Blessed Virgin in this diocese." At the end of her life, she said: "I desire only the preservation and prosperity of the work of the Blessed Virgin, but I fear very much its downfall."



JEAN-CLAUDE COLIN, writing to Marcellin Champagnat, said, "It is with a deep feeling of joy that I see your zeal and your devotion to the work of Mary..." "I have always hoped that you would be given a great spirit of courage, a great desire for your own growth and a willingness to suffer for the work of Mary."



MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT, writing to Monsignor Cattet, the Vicar General, makes a distinction between the Congregation of the Brothers and the work of the Blessed Virgin. "The interest which you have shown up till now for the work of Mary encourages us to make further efforts for its growth.... The Society of the Brothers cannot positively be regarded as the work of Mary, but only as a branch of the Society itself."

Welcome

If the name of Mary meant anything, it meant welcome.

The dream of the early Marists was that there would be in the Church, or rather that through the Society of Mary the Church would become, a place where everyone could feel welcome, including those labelled "sinners".

This openness of structure and multiplicity of branches was characteristic of the Marist plan from the beginning.

Gaston Lessard, sm

Entering into her work

The call of Colin... is not to launch a special devotion to Mary, nor even so much to imitate her and present her as a model of sanctity. It is to enter into her work, a work designated for her by divine providence in these "last" times, the work of gathering in mercy and compassion all the people of God into a Church which is not triumphal and legalistic but attentive to the fears, doubts and allergies of men and women of our time. We are to be extensions of Mary in her work of renewing the Church into a kingdom of Mercy.

John Jago, sm