

"In this world"

While the "work of Mary" is something clear and simple, it can never be defined in fixed activities, because *how* the work of Mary is to be done will depend on the changing times, cultures and needs of the world. Two of Colin's early realisations will help us here.

The first one is summed up in three words he uses in his Constitutions: Marists find their rightful place *in this world*. This realisation was probably an element in Colin's transformation at Cerdon. From one whose only thought was to retire into the forest, Colin emerged as a Founder and Superior General of a Congregation whose horizons extended to the end of the world. He began to realise that the arena for the work of Mary, where she wants Marists to be, is *in this world*. In the *world*, because Marists are not to be monks or hermits, but people of the market place. In *this* world, because Marists find themselves in the world as it is, and not in an idealized world of the past, or a utopian world of the future. And finally, they are *in* the world, and not on the sideline watching with regret the passing of an age.

The second conviction for Colin was that if this world, and the whole of this world, is the arena for Mary's work, then a vast organization is necessary: priests, religious and laity all working in their own environment and according to their own vocation. This idea was clearly grasped at the beginning, especially by the lay people. Even in the early years at Cerdon, the Colin brothers had gathered about 30 lay men together in the presbytery. In Lyon another group of men formed, showing astonishing initiative. In the course of time, several other branches developed: groups for single women, for mothers, for girls, for young men, for married men, and for diocesan priests. These people knew they belonged "in the world". But because of the decision of the Roman authorities, "Society of Mary" came to mean only "order of priests". And by 1872 the "Third Order" was no longer considered as one of the branches of the "Society"; it had become a loose appendage of the Marist priests. Something of the cutting edge of the original plan was lost. When a congregation is defined as a "congregation of priests", then inevitably lay people become objects of the ministry of the priests. As we understand the project today, lay people are not the objects of the priests' ministry, nor even sharers in their ministry. Rather, all Marists – priests, religious and laity – are to involve themselves in "the work of Mary" and to do it "in this world".

December 1832

Father Colin said: "The Congregation of Jesus is a simple body. With the Jesuits you must have talents and many other things. In the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, it is not so. She is the mother of mercy. Her congregation will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people."

This applies above all to the Third Order.

July 1838

"Gentlemen, let us live up; our undertaking is a bold one; we want to march in everywhere. When will the moment come?"

September 1846

Father Colin said, "We too must gather together everyone through the Third Order."

September 1846

Then [Father Colin] spoke about the Third Order and told us: "During my last trip (his third trip to Rome) Cardinal Castracane did not act the way he did the first time when he laughed a lot and said, 'The whole world will be Marist then?' This time, as he heard of the spread of this Third Order, he took the matter quite seriously. 'Gentlemen, our Third Order will be open to everybody except heretics and pagans.'"

The Mayet Memoirs

No afterthought

One of Colin's early ideas – what he held on to and meant to leave to the Society – is that the Society essentially includes a branch for lay people "living in the world." ...The lay branch is part and parcel of the plan of the Society he presented in Rome in 1833. In 1837 he spoke of a world-wide Marist mission, saying that ...*the congregation of the Blessed Virgin... will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people* from which Mayet deduces: *This applies above all to the Third Order.* The recurrent emblem of a multi-branched tree also serves as a reminder of how the lay branch is integral to the full Marist vision. The lay members were certainly given to understand in 1837 by their director, Pierre Colin, that they "belong to the order of the Marists." The point is this: The Laity are no mere afterthought; without them the Society of Mary would be truncated. Lay people belong in the Marist thrust.

Charles Girard, sm

A tree of many branches.....

Throughout his life, Colin remained consistent in his idea of the lay branch of the Society, even though he had difficulty in explaining to others exactly what he meant. Mayet wrote to him on one occasion:

"On the one hand you tell us that the Third Order, as it exists, does not entirely meet your views, and on the other hand, you do not tell us what these views are. No one knows them. I myself, who have had the happiness of living with you for a long time, of hearing everything and remembering much, would have very great difficulty in formulating your desires and plans..."

However, comparing the plan of the Society which he presented to the Roman authorities with what he wrote at the end of his life, one can see a remarkable consistency in his thought. We know that what Cardinal Castracane couldn't swallow was Colin's image of the Society as a tree with many branches. In his report to the Cardinals, Castracane wrote: "How outlandish and irregular would be the plan for this confraternity to spread over the whole world under a single superior. ... Consideration should also be given to the suspicion that might be aroused in princes by a confraternity of this kind, dependent upon a single superior."

Mayet records Colin's comment on this: *Would you believe that the little Marists caused great terror in Rome? When I pointed to this little cart with its three wheels and nobody at the reins, the Cardinal was amazed. "Are you the superior of all these branches?" "Yes, Eminence." "And does that work?" "Yes, Eminence, all of its own accord!"*



Early Church

In the early Church there was a strong awareness that each person had his own particular charism, yet in the course of the Church's history all the charisms became focussed on the priest. Associated with this was a general downgrading of the laity and their role. It was against this background that Vatican II encouraged both an active role and a pastoral co-responsibility for the laity. The priest can encourage this co-responsibility in the parish only when he is prepared to renounce his own possibilities for influence.

Although Colin grew up in this hierarchical system, he already felt that it was not enough to meet the needs of the Church of his time. For this reason he exhorted Marists to look back to the early Church for the model. He had the vision of a new Church which would not concentrate on power and domination, but which would only want to serve. He pursued this utopian idea of a spirituality for a religious order: an order of priests, sisters, brothers and laity. Even unbelievers would find a place there, in so far as they were of good will.

Friedrich Arnold, sm

Feminine face of the Church

Today there is much talk of the "feminine face" of the church, of a new self-understanding, abandoning old *animus*-oriented power structures.... Today there are many people suffering from the church, from her narrowness and the way she restrains herself to traditional values rather than showing the compassion of "*Gaudium et Spes*" for the world of our time. I would say that this is *the* time for our vocation: to show *through the laity* that Marist spirituality is able to change the "whole world" – not necessarily in a quantitative sense, but certainly in a qualitative one, i.e. in all areas of life.

Nothing but a vision.... It will be difficult to make it accessible to those brothers and sisters of our Marist family who were so dear to Father Colin himself, but to whom he could never give an appropriate place – for he, just like the church in general, did not know what to do with the laity.

Andrea Pichlmeier