

# Chapter IV

## *Constitutions*



Government

All Marists, especially those in authority, see Mary as the founder and perpetual superior of the Society. They will constantly imitate her delicate responsiveness to the promptings of the Spirit and to the needs of God's people. All must recognise that they share responsibility for the government of the Society, for fostering its life and welfare, and for the fulfillment of its mission.

... they belong by a gracious choice to the family of the blessed Mary, Mother of God, from whose name they are called Marists ...

1872 Constitutions, 49

## Leadership and responsibility



Etienne Séon was once asked why he thought Jean-Claude Colin had become the leader of the group of Marists. He gave three reasons: Colin had worked hardest for the Society; he had a certain spiritual understanding of its place in the Church; and he was the one who had the broadest vision.

Jean-Claude Colin gave a fourth reason when he was asked. It was to do with what he understood as a Marian attitude towards the Church and to the Society with her name. Colin resisted the temptation to act independently of the bishops. (OM II, 467; cf 425:8) The mother does not want to divide her child.

Colin could see that belonging to a family bearing the name of Mary had consequences in the way he governed the Society. People living with him recognized these qualities, which remain good criteria for Marist leadership.

Séon said about Colin:

“We all looked to him, and we regarded him as the superior of the Society, the one who had to be in charge of it one day. He was the one who had worked most for the Society; we knew it, and moreover we knew also that he had come to a certain understanding with God with regard to the work. In the end we saw well that he was the one out of all of us who had the widest vision.”  
(OM II, 625: 19)

# 157

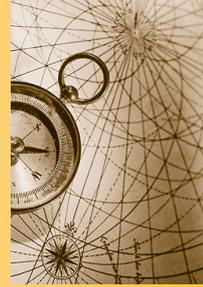
## *Constitutions*

Since September 24, 1836, when the first Superior General was elected, Marists have understood the Society as a single body, dispersed for the sake of their mission, but united in spirit. Gathered from time to time in General Chapter, they remain bound together through the Superior General whom they have chosen as their head.

The Society's duty is to ... assist (the superior) in determining matters of great importance ...

1872 Constitutions, 341

## Participating and learning



Jean-Claude Colin would have liked the general chapter to involve all the members of the Society, as had happened in 1836. Even though this became impossible, Colin's style encouraged full participation in decision-making. Mayet observed that style during the general chapter of 1845:

"There I marveled to see in him everything I have admired when he is at the head of his council. I picture him, as I watch him, as a pilot quietly seated at the helm, letting the waters bear the ship along and buffet it on all sides. The pressure of his guiding hand is scarcely felt, but nevertheless he is the one who governs its course." (FA 321:5)

He followed this way in council meetings. He called these meetings "the soul of the Society" (FA 288:2), and he valued them as ways in which the Society could participate in governance. He also used them to teach other Marists the style of leadership he wanted to see practiced in the Society.

Mayet records:

"When he wanted to form a subject, acquaint him deeply with the spirit of the Society and the approach to be followed in its administration, he called him to the Council. Then they discovered new horizons, and I would even say that the only ones who knew and have known Father Colin are those who were called to the Council by him. ... there he revealed in himself a level of ability that astonished all the assembled members."  
(FA 288:6)

# 158

## *Constitutions*

In the course of its history, the Society has become international. Those who exercise authority in the government of the Society develop between provinces, communities and individuals, a network of interchange and solidarity to promote unity for mission while, at the same time, treasuring the richness and variety that come from its international character.

... (the superior general) may: ... assign people to the foreign missions and recall them; transfer religious from house to house, from province to province, from country to country, from one position to another, for the greater service of God and for the sake of the individual or common good.

1872 Constitutions, 388:1

## An international Society



In 1886 in Ireland:

*Pierre Pestre* graduated as Doctor of Theology at the Catholic University of Dublin. Pestre taught in seminaries in France, Ireland and the United States. He became the first Rector of the Scholasticate in New Zealand, then second provincial of New Zealand, before returning to the United States.

*Francis Redwood* graduated as Bachelor of Theology at the same University.

Born in England, Redwood came to New Zealand as a child. At age fifteen he left New Zealand and studied in France at the Marist College of St Chamond. He studied theology in France and made his novitiate in Dundalk, Ireland. He was the first New Zealander to be ordained a Marist, and was the first New Zealander bishop.

*Jean Leterrier* was at St Mary's College Dundalk.

Leterrier came to St Anne's, London, from France in 1861. In 1862 he became the first superior of St Mary's Dundalk, Ireland. He later became the first superior of the Vice-Province of England, Ireland and the United States, then first provincial of New Zealand, and finally assistant general in France.

*Benoît Forestier* arrived in Dundalk.

At age 27 he went to New Caledonia as a missionary. After 17 years there, he worked in Dundalk, then spent 11 years in Lyons and Rome as Procurator to the Holy See. He later became first provincial of America, where he founded the scholasticate in Washington. He then founded the scholasticate of Santa Fede in Italy.

160

*Constitutions*

This mission requires that the Society formulate policies and plans, and put them into action.

This is done, on the one hand, through structures of consultation and participation at the local, provincial and general levels, and, on the other hand, through superiors endowed with appropriate authority.

... an excellent governance of the Society largely depends on the subordinate ministers entrusted with particular affairs...

1872 Constitutions, 329

## Consultation and authority



During the year 1830, Jean-Claude Colin wrote 5 letters to Marcellin Champagnat on matters concerning the formation of the Marist group and the election of a central superior for the aspiring Marists. Phrases from these letters reflect the balance that Colin struck between consultation and the exercise of his authority as central superior.

“If I may say so, and if you agree, we shall tell you in what direction we think you should steer things; give us an answer, and if this is acceptable to you, we shall communicate our ideas to you at once.”

(OM I, 212:3)

“Write to us what you think of our way of seeing things.”

(OM I, 220:4)

“The more I look at it, the more I can see difficulties in making you a summary of the Rules. And the reason is this: it needs to be read and discussed by everyone together, so as to avoid serious problems in the future. See if that is not right.”

(OM I 222:4)

161

*Constitutions*

Unity in the Society and effective action require that its members be consulted and participate in decision-making, and that superiors have a well-defined authority. In this way decisions will be based on accurate information and reflect the needs of the people they serve, and at the same time decisions can be taken with flexibility and promptness.

... the superior ... shall be pleased humbly to ask advice in everything, small or great, even from his subjects, in private or in any other way ...

1872 Constitutions, 306

## Effective decisions



At the chapter of 1845, Jean-Claude Colin was 55 years old and was half-way through his 18 years as superior general. Gabriel-Claude Mayet noted that the members of the Chapter admired his skilful handling of the chapter. He knew how to avoid questions that were not ready for discussion; he did not rush; he gave everything due consideration; he took care not to pass legislation that might later have to be reconsidered; and he asserted his authority when it was needed .

Mayet noted that “every member of the Society was part of some committee, which increased conspicuously the interest and love for the Society in everyone. The thought even occurred to me that Father Colin had perhaps multiplied questions already almost settled, in order to get the whole constitution and all the interests of the Society to pass in some way under the eyes and through the hands of each Marist.”

Mayet concludes that this way of acting “notably awakens and considerably increases our affection for the body to which we belong. People thus grow accustomed to consider the constitution as their own affair, and espouse it in their mind and heart.”  
(FA 321:4)

162

*Constitutions*

(a) Government in the Society is to be exercised in a spirit of co-responsibility, so that Marists will plan their community life and pastoral initiatives together, working out solutions in a climate of trust and openness.

(b) For government to function well, it is necessary to distinguish at every level: (1) laws and policies which will be determined as far as possible by the competent representative bodies, and (2) executive decisions which will be taken by those authorised to do so, with the help of their councils or consultative bodies.

(c) In all cases, the principle of subsidiarity is to be observed. A superior must not look to a higher authority to replace his own, nor attempt to take on the responsibilities that belong to a lower level.

... (the superior) should delegate to suitable ministers ...

1872 Constitutions, 328

## Co-responsibility



An incident in the early years of the Society's history throws light on Jean-Claude Colin's style of exercising authority and leadership.

In 1846 the Marists in Paris were looking to buy a property. Fathers Morcel and Viennot were given the responsibility of locating a suitable site. They found two which were worth considering: one in Montparnasse, and one in rue Notre Dame des Champs. They wrote to Colin with this information.

Colin's reply speaks for itself:

"Dear Confreres

Having looked at everything carefully, it seems to me that the property of Montparnasse is preferable to that of rue Notre Dame des champs. If you think it's worth buying, having sought the aid of God and the Blessed Virgin, you could purchase it. So, we give you the authority to buy either the property of Montparnasse, or of the Benedictines, or any other that you think is suitable. But try not to go beyond the sum of 100,000 francs, because as Fr Viennot knows, we have only 60,000 francs available at the moment, and don't know where we could get extra.

Keep in mind the glory of God, the general good of the Society, the need of finding a place to live for the Fathers of Paris; pray to God for enlightenment, and then act accordingly. We approve in advance what you do, provided you don't spend much more than a hundred thousand francs.

Colin sup"  
(Colin sup III, 6060:1-2)