

Chapter V

Constitutions



Growth and Fidelity

217

Constitutions

Jean-Claude Colin and his companions believed that, in God's plan, the Society of Mary came into existence because Mary wanted it. Like them, Marists today are convinced that the Lord and Mary, whose work they do, will care for the Society, protect it, and make it grow.

... it was God himself who, at the intercession of the Mother of God, laid the first foundations of this smallest Society ...

1872 Constitutions, 422

A firm conviction



By 1842 the Marist enterprise numbered 60 priests, 400 brothers, 100 sisters and many lay people spread through a dozen dioceses in France.

The extraordinary growth of the Society in its first 50 years could be explained by the fact that the first half of the 19th century saw a rejuvenation of religious life in many parts of Europe. In Lyons alone, the Society of Mary was just one of 12 religious congregations of men founded between 1819 and 1855.

At the same time, there was a strong effort at recruitment for the work of the Society both in Europe and in the Pacific. When Bishop Bataillon visited Europe in 1857, he made great efforts to recruit support for the missions in Oceania. The following year, a total of 70 novices entered the three novitiates of the Society (Chaintré, Belley and Montbel). Many of these were directly influenced by Bataillon's preaching. (Graystone p.5)

Jean-Claude Colin had a simple conviction: it was Mary herself who wanted the Society of Mary to exist; and she would care for it, protect it, and make it grow:

"The idea of a religious society under the name of the Mother of God and utterly consecrated to her filled my heart with consolation and joy. This joy was accompanied by a confidence that I would say amounted to a certitude. I was in my inmost self convinced that the idea came from God and that the Society would succeed."
(OM III, 827)

218

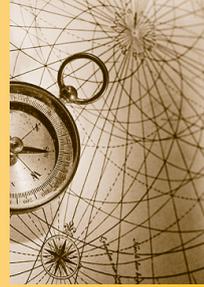
Constitutions

Alert to the dangers from within and without that may threaten the very existence of the Society, Marists, on their part, resolve to practise the four virtues which their Founder came to see as the cornerstones on which the Society would be firmly established: humility, obedience, brotherly love, and poverty.

... Nothing must be overlooked that would enable us to erect this Society upon the foundation of every solid virtue, and in the first place on the four unshakeable cornerstones: humility, obedience, charity and poverty.

1872 Constitutions, 422

The life-force lost?



After the difficulties and tragedies that the Marists experienced in Melanesia, the Holy See, at the request of Fr Colin, relieved the Society of Mary of its responsibility for Melanesia and Micronesia. The mission was entrusted to the Missionaries of Milan in 1851.

Jean-Pierre Frémont remained on Woodlark Island during 1852, to help the new missionaries to settle in to the mission. Then he spent time at Villa Maria, the Mission Procure in Sydney. In the tranquility of this place he experienced healing for his spirit, and he began to think back to his first experiences of Marist life. He wrote to Fr Colin, “Here I rediscover a life-force, a mysterious influence, a certain dynamism that makes me think of Puylata, and La Favorite and Valbenoîte, etc.”

From this place of tranquility he reflected on the mission in Oceania. He wondered whether the Society was starting to be destroyed by forces within itself.

“Father, I’m not sure if I could find the Society of Mary in the missions of Oceania. Certainly, one can find priests who have the name of Marists; priests whom one could say are virtuous and zealous; priests who are faithful to all the spiritual exercises that are carried out in our houses of Europe. But the spirit, the life-force, the way of governing, the influence of our mother Society are difficult to find here, I think. What is the reason for this? Could there be a remedy? And what could it be?”
(LRO IX, 1320:1, 7)

Constitutions 219-220

In their life and apostolate Marists will often be aware of their own limitations and the resistance of those to whom they minister. The temptation is to blame themselves and others. Anxiety, bitterness, and cynicism are ever present snares capable of reducing the Society to powerlessness. Humility frees them from such crippling attitudes; it gives them courage to rely on God rather than themselves alone, to seek not their own interests but those of Christ and Mary.

In this way, liberated from undue self-concern, they will be useful to others and do great things for God, and so the Society will achieve its goals. They leave it to the Lord to say the healing word that brings inner peace and the freedom to serve their neighbor.

In fact, while a truly humble man ... deems himself totally useless, God, who "chose what is weak in the word to confound the strong" (1 Cor 1:27), renders him useful to all.

1872 Constitutions, 427

Useful to others



Gabriel-Claude Mayet was already ordained when he joined the Marists. The throat disease he had developed before his ordination prevented him from undertaking public ministry in the Society, so he decided to be the recorder of the early history of the Society.

From 1837 to 1854 Mayet copied down everything he could find about the origins of the Society, as well as the “table-talk” of the Founder. Over a period of 17 years he employed 17 known and named copyists, as well as 22 others whose handwriting is distinguishable in the Mayet Memoirs. These memoirs are contained in 9 preserved volumes, and cover six thousand pages of writing.

A contemporary of Mayet wrote: “The more I read these notes, the more I am utterly convinced that it is one of the most worthwhile and fortunate services which anyone could render the Society. These notes are the spring to which Marists will come to draw on the true character and spirit of the Society.”

Mayet found a way of turning his liabilities into assets. In this way he found ways to be useful to the Society of Mary, which was his only ambition.

He has a touchingly modest conclusion to one of the entries he wrote in his Memoirs:

“It can be seen clearly from my notes that a host of extremely interesting articles were collected by me on these occasions... I think that our successors will be grateful to me for it some day.”

Constitutions 221-222

Marists must excel in obedience because it is the hinge upon which the whole mission of the Society turns. By listening to the Holy Spirit speaking in their confreres and in the events of daily life, they are able to discern what God is asking of them and be ready to respond.

Since the mission entrusted to them by God through Mary is so urgent, they must work together to accomplish it. Obedience enables them to look beyond their own personal interests and those of communities and provinces. By a loyal, intelligent, and prompt obedience, Marists support their superiors in the task of animating the community and guiding its work.

Perfect obedience is ... constant and manly in all things, especially those which nature finds displeasing and which are opposed to one's own will or judgment.

1872 Constitutions, 125

Faithful in his post



Of all the missionaries who sailed to Oceania between the years 1836 and 1849, the least known is probably Br **Genade Rolland**. He is mentioned once and then forgotten in the major study of the founding of the Church in Oceania. There are no letters written by him in the Marist archives. He has left no words behind. But his actions tell us that he did what he was asked to do in urgent and dangerous times.

Genade joined the Society in 1844, and at age 27 accompanied Bishop Epalle to establish the mission in Melanesia. He witnessed the murder of Epalle on Santa Isabella. He helped establish the mission in Makira on San Cristobal, where another 3 Marists were murdered and one died of fever. He was a member of the group that left San Cristobal for Woodlark with Bishop Collomb. Within a short time Collomb had died of fever and exhaustion, and four months later Fr Villien died, reducing the missionaries to seven. When Fr Colin withdrew the Society from Melanesia in 1852, Genade remained for three years as the only Marist on Woodlark to help the Missionaries of Milan to settle. He was transferred to Australia and remained at Villa Maria for 44 years till he died.

Tucked away in a letter, a small comment from one of his confreres throws light on this solid character: “We are happy with Genade: he cares a lot about the Society and the mission. I think he deserves our confidence. He’s candid and honest, and he’s straightforward with the local people, and that’s what’s needed.”
(LRO VI, 926:12)

Constitutions 223-224

Obedience is sterile if it is cut off from love of God and neighbour.

Charity brings Marists into communion with the risen Lord and with all believers, united in heart and mind, as they prepare for the coming of God's kingdom.

In brotherly love, Marists strengthen the bonds of friendship by the frank exchange of hopes and concerns. They avoid all that provokes disharmony and envy. They ensure that their diversity enriches the community rather than create discord and division.

The Society must neglect nothing in ensuring that its sons who, amid so many dangers, toils, and trials, spend themselves in faraway places to spread the faith, are most effectively helped to fulfill their vocation faithfully.

1872 Constitutions, 275

Communion at risk



Laurent Dezest went to Futuna in 1849 at the age of 27. When, after some time, he had heard nothing from his confreres or even his superior general, he wrote:

“It is with a heart broken by the greatest sorrow that I undertake to write you this letter. This sorrow is shared by my confrères in Futuna, Wallis, etc. We are continually wondering what connection we have with our dear Society of Mary? ... There are no more letters, no more communications, no more instructions from our superiors in France; not a single stub of a note from our beloved confrères, no more sign of life from this Society to which we have entirely dedicated ourselves by religious profession!”

Dezest’s love for the Society and for his brothers in the Society was best expressed when he felt that the bonds of brotherhood had been broken.

“Exiled in these faraway islands to which we have come out of zeal for the glory of God and under obedience to our Superior General, we are prey to the horrible and baffling thought that perhaps ... our dear Society thinks it needs to abandon us. What a cruel thought! To die in this country in the midst of so many dangers, and maybe not to die as Marists!”
(LRO IX, 1365:1)

Dezest eventually regained his confidence in the fraternal life of the Society. He remained for another 13 years on Futuna. He then went to Rotuma where he died at the age of 50.

226

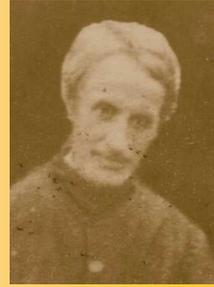
Constitutions

Such poverty rids the heart of covetousness and reliance on worldly means. Aware that it is easier to adapt to one's surroundings than to remain faithful to the Gospel, they shall take care that their dwellings, possessions, and manner of life bring them closer to the poor. A Society of rich men could hardly claim to be a sign of the presence of Jesus and Mary in the world.

Should they at times feel the effects of poverty, let them at least suffer them calmly, putting all their trust in the help of God and blessed Mary.

1872 Constitutions, 148

We live among them



Even before his ordination as a diocesan priest **Joseph Chevron** had wanted to be a missionary, but his bishop asked him to give ten years of service to the diocese. When his time of service to the diocese was completed, he joined the Marists, setting out almost immediately for the missions in 1839. He made his novitiate on the boat travelling to Oceania.

At first he worked in New Zealand, then on Futuna and Wallis. In 1842 he and Br Attale landed in Tonga. His missionary work in Tonga lasted for 42 years, where he is known as “the apostle of Tonga”. One of his confreres said of him, “Father Chevron is worthy of the title ‘a rare missionary’.

Although he never mastered the Tongan language, his closeness to the people and his simple life-style broke down barriers, and the people were won over.

In 1843 Chevron wrote to his family about his ministry with Br Attale:

“The care we have taken to adapt to the local practices has won over the people here. We live like them, contenting ourselves with what they bring us. When we visit them we sleep as they do on a mat on the ground, or in a wooden boat. We join them at their feasts and in drinking kava. We make sure we always have a little something to offer chiefs who come to visit us. ... but what they value more than anything else is our care of the sick.”
(LRO II, 261:21)

227

Constitutions

Let them pray for all members of the Society, living and dead, and for the members of other Marist congregations, particularly on September 12, Solemnity of the Holy Name of Mary and name day of the Society.

Their prayer should be that the Lord may govern the Society, increase it, defend it from all error, and keep it faithful to its true spirit.

... it is the divine mercy itself which will increase it, guide it, preserve it, and fill it with the Holy Spirit.

1872 Constitutions, 422

A memorable moment



Jean Coste's work as general archivist took him to many places in the Society of Mary. One of the visits he made was to Tonga, where at the time **Pateliso Finau** was bishop. Some time after this visit, in a conference in which he spoke of the spiritual practices common to the Society, he related this incident which concerns the prayers for the Society.

"Working in the archives in the diocese of Tonga I was living in the college and I used to go to the bishop's house each day, where I also stayed for the midday meal. The bishop, Patrick Finau, was alone at that time and we used to eat together. A bishop, as we all know, has great latitude with regard to the rules of his congregation, and even more so with regard to minor practices; besides, let it be said, the heat was overwhelming... Yes, there was an abundance of reasons for not going to the chapel, but as soon as the meal was finished the bishop told me that we would go to the chapel, and he said the prayers in a tone of voice I have never forgotten. Think what you like, but it was one of the moments of my life when I most sincerely thanked God for being a Marist."

(Coste, J., 1990, p. 44-46)

228

Constitutions

Finally, let them learn from the first Marists to find in the presence of Mary at Nazareth and Pentecost, in the early Church and at the end of time, the secret of their own presence in the Church and the world of today: a presence attentive to God and vibrant with zeal, so that while doing great things for the Lord, they may seem to be unknown and even hidden in the world. This was Mary's way; this is Mary's work. It is expressed for all Marists in the words of Jean-Claude Colin:

Let them always bear in mind that they belong by a gracious choice to the family of the blessed Mary, Mother of God, from whose name they are called Marists, and whom they have chosen from the beginning as their model and their first and perpetual superior. If therefore they are and desire to be true sons of this dear Mother, let them try constantly to breathe her spirit: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbour. So they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things, otherwise they will be unworthy and degenerate sons.

Vital spirit



Having just gained his doctorate in theology at the Faculté Catholique in Lyons, **Jean Coste** arrived in Rome in 1953 to begin higher studies in Scripture. He seemed set to begin a brilliant career as a biblical scholar. But in the following year, the superior general asked him to abandon his biblical studies and devote himself to research into the sources of Marist history and spirituality.

To begin this work, Coste – along with Gaston Lessard and Seán Fagan - produced two fundamental tools for Marist research: the six-volume work, *Antiquiores Textus*, and the four-volume work, *Origines Maristes*.

Coste spent all the rest of his life studying the history of the Society of Mary and the spiritual legacy of Jean-Claude Colin.

In 1963, he wrote a commentary on Colin's article on "The spirit of the Society", (nrs 49 & 50 of the 1872 Constitutions). At the end of his commentary he wrote:

"The Marist spirit will never be grasped except through the personal and communal effort of the members of the Society of Mary to take seriously their belonging to Mary and the responsibility it puts upon them."

Coste describes that responsibility: to live a simple life stripped of any artificiality, and to keep in touch with the living tradition of the Society. "This spirit," he wrote, "cannot be separated from the body it contains, from the living tradition of the Society of Mary."
(Coste, J., 1963 pp. 677, 674)

Therefore, following in the footsteps of their Mother, let them above all be far removed from any worldly spirit, and from all greed for earthly goods, and completely emptied of all self-interest. Let them strive to deny themselves completely in all things: seeking not their own interests, but only those of Christ and Mary; considering themselves as exiles and pilgrims on earth, indeed as worthless servants and as the refuse of the world; using the things of this world as if not using them; strenuously avoiding in their buildings and living quarters, in their style of life, and in their dealings with others, all that suggests display, ostentation, or a desire for attention; loving to be unknown and subject to all, without deceit or cunning; in a word, acting always with such great poverty, humility, and modesty, simplicity of heart, and lack of all vanity and worldly ambition, and moreover so combining a love of solitude and silence and the practice of hidden virtues with works of zeal, that while they must take up the various ministries by which the salvation of souls may be furthered, they may appear unknown, and even hidden, in the world.

Let them all cling to this spirit in the knowledge that it is the pivot and foundation of their whole Society.

Body and soul



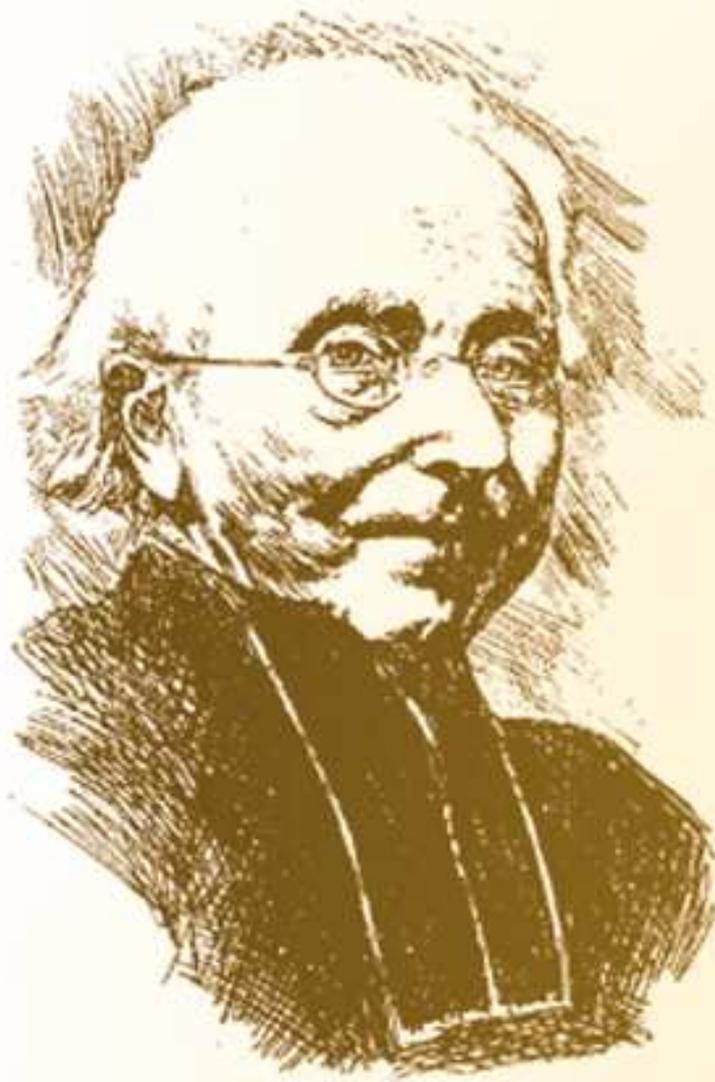
In 1990, in one of his last public talks, **Jean Coste** said of Father Colin: “He was one thing only, but he was that to the fullest extent possible: a founder.” (Coste, J., 1990, p 4)

As a founder, Colin gave to the Church a religious congregation. Its Rule and its Constitutions gave it a body. Its spirit gave it a soul.

Twenty-seven years after writing his commentary on the Spirit of the Society, Coste warned the Society that “the most insidious temptation for us today would be to become indifferent to the body in order to concentrate on the spirit.” (p. 38) He alerted the Society to the danger of separating the spirit from the body. “The separation of body and spirit has a name,” he wrote. “It is called death.” (Coste, p. 38)

“I am really convinced ... that we cannot speak of fidelity to Colin if we do not seek above all to keep alive the body he founded. A body animated, of course, by a spirit ... but a body which accepts that it is a body and consequently is concerned not to decompose, concerned about what preserves its structures and nourishes it.”
(Coste, p.40)

“Yes, to learn once more ... to love afresh our Marist corporate body, to give it features and form, there is the task that awaits us, if we do not wish to disappear.”
(Coste, p. 46)



For your part, dear Marists, read this rule, absorbing ever more the spirit I have tried to express in it. It is my hope that you will recognize there, the true dispositions which Mary, our noble and most holy Mother, wishes to be the inspiration of all the members of her little Society.

Jean Claude Colin. *Spiritual Testament*
Lyons, May 6th 1870

Acknowledgments

My thanks are due to many people:

To Jean-Claude Colin who for 56 years spent his energies giving the Society of Mary a body with recognizable features expressed in a rule of life, and with a spirit to give it soul.

To our Marist ancestors whose lives have in some way reflected the spirit of the Constitutions of the Society.

To the many Marists, including members of the 1985 General Chapter, who were involved in the re-writing of our Constitutions, and have presented them as a faithful reflection of the mind of our Founder.

To the General Chapter of 2009 and to the present general administration for calling Marists at this time to pick up the Constitutions and to find renewed life and direction in them.

To the provincials, archivists and individual Marists who provided me with appropriate details on the lives of our Marist ancestors.

To Tony Corcoran and to Sophie Janssens who have prepared this book with care and with professional competence.

To Francisco Chauvet and Miguel Ramirez who undertook the work of translating the text with so much generosity.

To each person who picks up this book with the desire to bring to life the body that Jean-Claude Colin passionately loved.

C.L.