

More of the Same or a New Impetus for Our Marist Mission?

John Thornhill SM

The Superior General's letter, *To Embrace Wholeheartedly Our Marist Identity* (25 March 2010) and his invitation for the whole Society to join in a collaborative effort to bring new life to the Society of Mary was encouraging.

Weighing up the challenges we face, I recalled a moment in the story of our origins which may help us see the way forward in taking up our task.

It is important, before considering practical proposals, to clarify understanding of our present situation. During the past twenty years I have contributed three articles to *Forum Novum* commenting on the current situation and prospects of the Society of Mary.¹ The first, published in 1992, reflected a mood of mild optimism in the aftermath of the 1985 General Chapter, when our Constitutions had been finalised, and the historical recovery of our origins had given the Marist movement a new confidence. The second, published in 2000, reflected a less optimistic outlook, as its title indicates; it discussed historical factors that have hampered the Marist movement, especially factors shaped by the ethos of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. The third, published in 2009, related the ongoing life of the Society of Mary to the challenging developments associated with the Second Vatican Council.

Reviewing these articles, I became aware of something very significant for us as we come to terms with our present situation. A review of our history points to the fact that, in our present situation, we are, to a large extent, victims of circumstances beyond our control.

The enthusiasm of young Jean-Claude Colin, sent to assist his brother in the parish of Cerdon, was clearly associated with an extraordinary blessing through which he began to envisage an apostolic way of life inspired by Mary's identification with the mission of her Son. In the terminology of today's theology we would call this blessing the "charism" which led him to play a key role in the foundation of our Society. But such an understanding and an appreciation of such a charism in the life of the Church would only emerge in the future, at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The Council's recognition of the

¹ "The 'Refounding' of the S.M. through the Rediscovery of our Mission", FN 2 (1992) 98-104; "Will Our Marist Way Live on in Tomorrow's Church?", FN 5 (2000) 251-260; "The S.M. in the Aftermath of Vatican II", FN 11 (2009) 113-121.

importance of prophetic charisms in the life of the Church² was long overdue in a Church that relied in large part on canonical discipline in its guidance of the faithful.

Since the Society of Mary was one of the first of the large number of religious foundations to be given papal approval in the 19th century, the Founder was dealing with officials of the Curia who were cautiously finding their way in what was a new development. Later, when the Society had received approval prior to the approbation of its constitutions, canonical norms, which discouraged descriptions of spiritual ideals in constitutions receiving approval of the Holy See, frustrated our Founder's life-long ambition to enshrine the essentials of the Society's spiritual ideals in the constitutions.

It is interesting, in this context, to recall that the project of a religious family including ordained members, male and female religious and lay people – something very similar to “ecclesial movements” in today's Church with strong backing from the Holy See – was dismissed as unthinkable by the officials of the curia Father Colin had to deal with.

The subsequent long delay in the writing of the constitutions was due in large part to these constraints. The fact that Julien Favre, who succeeded Father Colin as Superior General, pushed ahead with the presentation of constitutions acceptable in Rome must mean that the delay was affecting the morale of the Society. When the Founder disowned the new constitutions and expressed his disapproval of the form the Third Order had taken, a period of uncertainty followed which must account for the fact that the inspiring memories of our origins faded, only to be recovered much later through the providential labours of Jean Coste and his collaborators.

The history I have outlined does not make clear what put beyond all doubt the fact that Jean-Claude Colin is the Founder of the Society of Mary. However, if it was difficult for him to capture in words the inspiration that brought the Society into existence, he knew and lived by that inspiration, witnessing to it through a leadership, which was remarkably fruitful. The beginnings of the Society during his generalate were truly remarkable. When he was elected in 1836 the Society had twenty ordained members; when he resigned eighteen years later it numbered two hundred and fifty eight. During that time he founded

² Cf *Lumen gentium* n.12; *Perfectae caritatis* n.2; *Dei verbum* n. 8. Also Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, Freiburg, Herder, 1964, p.12-83.

twenty-seven houses, including four houses of formation, twelve residences for home missionaries, six colleges, three seminaries (in addition to the one already existing at Belley). On top of this, Colin sent his best men to Oceania: fifteen successive groups, seventy-four priests, twenty-six Champagnat brothers and seventeen Coadjutor brothers. We shall not understand this astounding vitality if we do not appreciate the zeal for the mission of the Society which he communicated to those who joined the new foundation, many of whom were mature men already established in the ranks of the diocesan clergy.

If circumstances beyond the control of the Society help us to understand the stark contrast between the vitality of the first generation of the Society and its life in our day, we must face up to the fact that our morale and sense of mission are at a low ebb. As a theologian, I am struck by the fact that, while the last half century has seen the recovery of the patristic recognition that Mary is the model of all that the Church is called to be, that she is the first and greatest of the Lord disciples – themes so close to the inspiration that brought the Society into existence - these developments have had little effect on the sense of mission in our Society.

A prophetic charism is both a gift and a task. Our Founder inspired in the first generation of Marists an awareness of the “gracious choice” that called them to share in Mary’s active involvement in the boundless mission of her son, so that they made her spirit their own.

Can we recover something of that enthusiasm? The Marist way is so authentic, at once simple and all-embracing, going to the very heart of the Saviour’s Gospel of the Kingdom. It can speak to every human situation; but it speaks especially to the frustrations and disillusionments of our times.

The whole Society, I am sure has been moved and encouraged by the “Plea for a Marian Church” of our late confrere, François Marc (1949-1996). It brought home to me how down to earth and close our Marist way is to the concerns of ordinary men and women.

Is it possible, we must ask ourselves, for our Society to be united in a common vision inspired by a new appreciation of the greatness and power of the blessing which brought our Society into existence, united in a desire to bring the whole Church, even the whole world to find new life by sharing in it?

The Colinian story we have just followed serves as a good introduction to my practical suggestion concerning the General’s proposed program designed to bring new vitality to our Society. One of

the most inspiring details in the story of our origins is the fact that Jean-Claude Colin shared his dream of a Society of Mary with laymen of the parish of Cerdon, some of whom so identified with his plan that they added “S.M.” to their signatures.³ The Founder would certainly have found inspiration and encouragement in his efforts to clarify the ideals of the Society from the reactions of these simple men to what he shared with them.

It is doubtful that a review of our tradition will bring the new vitality we need if we do not reach out beyond the restricted world of our past experience. The Founder points to a way of doing this, which is an expression of what the Marist project envisaged from the beginning – involving lay people in our efforts to engender the new life the Church needs.

If this is done, however, we must consciously leave behind the clericalism that has been taken for granted for centuries, in the culture of Catholicism. Those we invite to join us in our search for renewal must take part, not a minor privileged to listen to their elders, but as fellow disciples of the Lord seeking a fuller Christian life – the approach, surely, which Jean-Claude Colin would have adopted.

In the article published in 2008, I suggested that as our numbers and apostolic involvement diminish we should carry out surveys that bring to light, before they are no longer recoverable, the reactions of people ministered to or working with Marists, to our style of ministry – the good and the bad. Such surveys would not only be valuable for those investigating the history of our Society but would help us to identify people with attitudes that fit them for the collaboration envisaged.

What is being suggested could be important for our long-term survival. Let us read the signs of the times. The movements in the Church in which the ordained and families share their faith are fostering vocations. I know that these movements are open to criticism, but we should not be blind to the fact that the sharing of faith I refer to is fundamental to their success.

Let us recall that it was in a **parish** setting that the Founder inspired laymen to identify with his plans for the Society. In one of my earlier articles I suggested that the Founder’s policy of avoiding parish ministry has not been satisfactorily interpreted.⁴ The Founder was not

³ Cf. *Lay Marists. Anthology of Historical Sources*, Ed. Charles Girard, Rome 1993, docs. 60 and 84.

⁴ *Forum Novum* 5 (2000), p. 254.

against parish ministry as such, it could be suggested, but he feared that Marists would be overwhelmed by the dominant clerical culture of the day. For him Marists should take up the real needs of the Church; and surely – certainly in countries such as my own – there is no greater need today than the forming of communities of faith.

What is called for is a “manifesto” making clear the attitudes we are committed to in taking on parish, or any other ministry, a statement which shapes the expectations of those we are ministering to.

The framing of such manifestos could well be a valuable exercise in the program we hope to undertake. It would be a good test of the Marist identity we are able and willing to affirm.