

Constitutions Chapter Five: Entering Nazareth

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Chapter 5 of the Constitutions asks a question and gives an answer. The question is: what do we have to do if the Society is to survive and grow? The answer is: to enter Nazareth.

Chapter 5 is a conscious reprise of chapter 12 of Father Colin's 1872 Constitutions where our founder presented the results of at least 30 years reflection on what would be necessary if the Society is to be kept in existence and made to grow (*quibus auxiliis Societatas augeri et conservari possit*). This may seem a very strange suggestion since the word Nazareth does not occur even once throughout the whole chapter.

Chapter 5 tries to express the sort of attitudes and dispositions on our part that are necessary in order to have a future that is worthwhile. In the city of Rome you occasionally come across churches attached to ancient religious orders that have survived for hundreds of years but which, to be honest, are no longer vital forces in the life of the church and the world. They have not literally ceased to exist but they do not make a great deal of difference. Father Colin in his Constitutions and chapter 5 in our present Constitutions are not speaking about survival of this sort. It is not a matter of literally staying in existence. It is about having a future as a truly missionary body that actually makes a difference.

Jean Coste recounts how Father Colin came to see the symbol of Nazareth as expressing very precisely the attitudes and dispositions necessary for survival:

It was only when the congregation had already been founded and constituted that he came to discover how perfectly the mystery of Nazareth expressed that interior richness which alone would guarantee the growth and preservation of the Society. Although the ruthless scissors of the Roman censors of 1873 have eliminated the reference to Nazareth in the preamble to the last chapter of the Constitutions, we are not forbidden to remind ourselves that it was of this mystery Father Colin was thinking when, in the quiet of Belley in 1842, he sought to determine *quibus auxiliis Societas augeri et conservari possit*.¹

To enter Nazareth, for Father Colin, is to cultivate what is traditionally known as peace of heart, the practice of the presence of

¹ J. Coste SM, *Nazareth in the thought of Father Colin*, in *Acta SM* 6, p. 325.

God, and a discernment of spirits, at the service of a missionary apostolate in an organised society:

“I place myself in the home of Nazareth and from there I see all that I have to do. For me,” he continued, “I place myself alone before God. When I feel happy and at peace and relaxed with regard to the course of action I intend to take, then I go ahead. But if I am not at peace and I see reasons for and against without being able to put my mind at ease, then I wait.”

To place oneself in the home of Nazareth and to place oneself alone before God indeed seem to mean one and the same thing for Father Founder. To see what one should do, to decide whether to go ahead or not, all human considerations must be cast aside and the soul left in peace to take the direction God wills. Nazareth is the symbol of that peace, of that attention to God alone (25 July, 1870).²

It is probably fair to say that in recent decades we Marists, or at least many of us, have paid little attention to the symbol of Nazareth. This may be a happy fault if it means that what we retrieve is the authentic Colinian notion of Nazareth which is interior richness of the service of an active mission. During the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII at the end of the 19th century devotion to the Holy Family in Nazareth took off in the Catholic Church. This at once encouraged and distorted a little the characteristic Marist approach to this mystery. Father Colin’s understanding of the symbol of Nazareth is a different one, for example, from that of Charles de Foucauld for whom Nazareth symbolizes a distinctive form of presence in the world that is admirable but not the same as ours. The missionary aspect of Nazareth is evident in the sentence quoted above: “I place myself in the home of Nazareth and from there I see all that I have to do”. When Father Jeantin transmitted this sentence he left out the word “from”. People who spend their lives analysing texts and documents can of course exaggerate the significance of such minor changes for the real world so to speak. But probably Jeantin’s small error reflects a corresponding lack of integration between the interior life and missionary commitment. For Marists, to enter Nazareth is to cultivate peace and union with God but in the context of a Marian missionary enterprise.

For Father Colin this peace is not freedom from care or a sort of emotional anaesthesia. It is true that peace of heart can be seen as a sort

² See OM doc. 839, 38, quoted in Coste, *Nazareth*, p. 397.

of quietening down that gives freedom from the swirling turmoil of thoughts and feelings that can fill our consciousness. The desert father Pachomius, for example, spoke about using *lectio divina* to put a stop to the bubbling of thoughts that disturb us, surging up in our heart like boiling water. No doubt with memories of the farmhouse hearth of his youth, Father Colin uses the same image but to express not what we want to *get away from* but what we want to *get to*:

“You have seen how boiling water leaps and bubbles: that is zeal, but it must be pure... When completely changed to steam the water seems to make no noise, to be completely still, but it burns, it is strong. That is how we must be.” (FS, doc. 53).

Here Colin expresses the particular sort of missionary zeal he wants for Marists. He focuses on the moment when a cauldron of water over the family fire reaches boiling point, just before the water starts to leap and bubble. There is intense activity beneath the surface – it burns, it is strong – but in such a way that it seems to make no noise, to be completely still. For him, entering Nazareth is like that. To enter Nazareth, to be hidden and unknown, is a particular sort of intensity centred on the activity of the Virgin Mary in salvation history. It is not mediocrity, or settling for the unchallenging and the unremarkable – it burns, it is strong. Some of this intensity shines out of Father Colin’s own eyes in some of his photos in old age, and the same is true of the standard picture of that remarkable Marist, Françoise Perroton.

Chapter 5 of our Constitutions expresses in contemporary terms what Father Founder came to see as vital if we want to survive: humility, obedience, poverty, brotherly love, and prayer for the Society, concluding with the full text of the most read and loved of all Marist texts, ‘The Spirit of the Society’. In their entirety, these elements amount to retrieving anew the interior richness that marked the experience of the first Marists and which Father Colin symbolized in terms of entering Nazareth: nothing must be overlooked in cultivating “the four unshakeable cornerstones: humility, obedience, charity, and poverty” so that what was once apparent in the house of Nazareth may be evident in the Society today (1872 Constitutions n. 422).