

Causa Colin – Yesterday and Today

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When I began my work as general archivist in September 1998 I had the good fortune over a period of a few months to be introduced to the treasure which is the archives of our religious family by an expert guide, Fr. Gaston Lessard. The following year after his departure I started to make myself at home with these documents and to respond to requests that came in for information. When I opened the various files just to see what they contained, I was struck by the presence of sheets, cards and notes, the majority of which were in the handwriting of the previous two archivists, Frs. Coste and Lessard. Wherever I looked I found traces of the presence of these two brothers of ours. This might appear to have been frustrating, but in reality what they had left was an essential guide for me in coming to know to what point they had arrived, and so indicated to me the point from which work needed to go forward. Furthermore these traces were a testimony to the great service these men had rendered the Society of Mary.

So now having to write an article that outlines the history of the cause of beatification of Fr. Colin, its current status and steps to be taken to reopen the cause, I am also using use much of what Fr. Coste wrote in the past in his role as General Postulator.¹

On the death of Fr. Colin which took place at La Neylière on the 15 November 1875 the Society of Mary through its Superior General Fr. Favre thought of building a specially-designed chapel to house the remains of the founder. Until the erection of the chapel, the remains of Fr. Colin remained buried in the garden of La Neylière. As yet there was no desire to introduce the cause of beatification. Besides, the legislation in force at that time gave a period of up to thirty years for the introduction of a cause and there being no minimum waiting time before its introduction. Today however there a new norms of a minimum of five years waiting after the death of the person before a cause can be introduced.

Meanwhile in 1877, two years after the death of Colin, Fr. Favre ordered that the writings of the Founder be collected. Certainly this was an act of respect and devotion allied with a desire that these writings

¹ In this regard it worth rereading the article of Jean Coste which appeared in FN 5, 3 (2000) on the cause of Fr. Colin. The part where Coste explains the substance of the four objections made in 1941 by the historical commission is very clear.

should not be lost; but as to the cause of beatification nothing had happened as yet. The work of copyists in transcribing the texts finished in 1892. Fifteen years had passed since the death of Colin.

Thus we come to the general chapter of 1893. Besides delegates from France, there were delegates from England-Ireland, America and New Zealand. A "postulatum" called for the collection of canonical information on Fr. Colin before all the oracular witnesses would have disappeared. At the end of the discussion the chapter expressed the desire that work begin without delay on the introduction of the cause. Fr. Coste noted that in the minutes of the meeting at which this resolution was passed the secretary first wrote "unanimously" and then "a majority". This shows that not everyone agreed, but enough did in order to start the process.

The postulator general was Fr. Nicolet who had followed the cause of beatification of Chanel in 1887. On the 14th October 1889 the preparatory process was constituted, and between 1889 and 1891 the informative process took place in Lyon. This process did not add any substantial novelty as those who had known Fr. Colin at the beginnings of the foundation were already dead. The most relevant testimony was that of Fr. David. The other testimonies were influenced by the six-volume work of Fr. Jeantin edited in 1895.

In 1890 Fr. Nicolet died and Fr. Forestier took his place until the chapter of 1905 when Fr. Copéré took over. The documents from the Lyon process were copied and sent to Rome. Between 1903 and 1905 the postulatory letters of the bishops of dioceses where Marists worked and who supported the cause were gathered. On the 1 October 1904 the lawyers signed the *Informatio* on the appropriateness of continuing the cause and the Promoter of the Faith placed his objections regarding the writings of the Founder: Rigorism, Jansenism, Gallicanism, lack of respect shown toward Monseigneurs Devie and Favre... The lawyers responded basing their answers on the work of Fr. Jeantin, and in 1907 the writings of Colin were approved. On the 9 December 1908 Pope Pius X signed the decree for the introduction of the apostolic process to Rome. With this decree Colin was now Venerable.

Between 1910 and 1921, with the interruption of the First World War (1914-1918) sessions for the process were held, but nothing new was contributed. No longer were there eyewitnesses but only those who had second hand information.

Another period of fourteen years until 1935 passed without the process advancing. One cause was the traditional slowness of the

Congregation of Rites which was at that time responsible for the processes of beatification, but a factor was also the lack of interest shown by the Society of Mary in urging a faster process. For example, in 1926, Fr. Copéré left Rome but he was only replaced in 1928 by Fr. Grimal as postulator general.

Finally on the 12 November 1935 the Ante-Preparatory Congregation met. In this Congregation evidence of heroic virtue was discussed. The cause passed but in the meantime the objections were more fully high-lighted: the difficulties of Fr. Colin in dealing with Fr. Favre, his slowness in drafting the Constitutions and the famous signature of Courveille which supposedly was placed by Colin. To meet the objections Fr. Grimal wrote a *Synopsis Historica* about the origins of the Society. The aim was to clarify the issues and help to untie the knots. In fact, the work of Fr. Grimal led to other questions and added to the objections already submitted that of the relationship between Colin and the Vicars Apostolic. At this stage the consultants in charge of the case were asking for more light and a more comprehensive documentation. Fr. Grimal then asked for the collaboration of an excellent historian of the time who had knowledge about Fr. Colin, Fr. Gobillot. But Grimal did not assign him the job of structuring the work or of responding to the objections raised but only used him for consultation. Fr. Grimal continued with the idea, as reported by Coste, “of repeating incessantly that if P. Colin spoke against the truth it was because he could not remember the facts more clearly”.

After four and a half years of work Fr. Grimal presented his report to which the Preparatory Congregation in February 1941 gave a severe judgment referring everything to the historical section of the Congregation which appointed a relator to study everything. The relator was Fr. Pedro Leturia SJ, dean of the Faculty of History at the Gregorian University (Rome), who presented his study on February 15, 1952 only on the Courveille case. It was at this point that the relator general of the historical section of the Congregation asked the Society of Mary to do further research and to produce a critical edition of the documents.

The superior general of the time, Fr. Cyr, called the American Fr. Nicholas Weber, an excellent historian but now in his eighties, who soon realized he could not complete the work. This brings us to point of the invitation given to Fr. Jean Coste to work for the continuation of the cause. Fr. Coste had already prepared the critical edition of the *Antiquiores Textus* of the constitutions in 1955. In 1956 he was

appointed assistant to the postulator general Fr. Giannini. Fr. Lessard was soon added to their number with the same title of assistant to the postulator, and on 15 December, 1957 work began which in 1967 resulted in a complete edition of the four volumes of *Origines Maristes* which will not only offer the answer to the Courveille problem but will also cover other issues which will terminate much of the work necessary for the presentation of the cause of Colin. Meanwhile the Second Vatican Council finished and religious congregations were invited to work on the renewal and revision of their legislation. So at this time the energies and attention of the Society of Mary were directed towards the preparation for and the carrying out of the general chapter of 1969. All these activities diverted attention away from the cause of Colin, and gradually the interest in it decreased and cooled. On the other hand this next period will not see a decrease in the interest in Marist studies which the rich bibliography of output in this field in the following years indicates. In 1982, Fr. Coste after twenty-seven years left the general house and from that moment there was no postulator general officially named.

Every now and then both in general chapters and in councils of the Society - for example at Suva in 1991 - there were requests for the reopening of the cause, but the differences of opinion militated against proceeding further. So we come to the General Chapter of 2009 which empowered the Superior General to explore the possibility of a reopening of the cause.

Since 1983, with the apostolic constitution *Divinus perfectionis Magister* and further with the instruction *Sanctorum Mater* of 2007 a new series of laws are in effect for the causes of saints. The aim of this reform was a greater involvement of diocesan bishops, a raising the level of critical study of causes and a streamlining of the procedure.

In fact the cause of Colin had stopped in 1941, the year in which the four main objections were presented: the question of signature of Courveille, the slowness of Colin in writing the Constitutions, his relations with Fr. Favre, and his relations with the Vicars Apostolic. This was also the moment when a demand for a more detailed historical documentation was made.

I think the question that everyone asks is: will the cause pass this time? One answer might be that the presumption is in favor of the sanctity of the Servant of God, and that with the historical method currently employed the problems will be resolved. This response,

however, does not give certainty but only invites a resumption of the interrupted path.

In 2010, Father General and his Council appointed Fr. Carlo Maria Schianchi as the new postulator general. In order for this appointment to be accepted by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints Carlo Maria had to attend a course and take final exams. He attended the course in 2011 and successfully completed it by passing four exams: one theological, one historical and two juridical. With the resulting diploma and the letter of appointment of the superior general the Congregation ratified his appointment on 6 May 2011. At this point the postulator was able to take up the cause of beatification of Fr. Colin and verify the steps to be taken.

Where to begin? Since more than thirty years have passed since the interruption of the cause and it is considered an old cause, and this means that it must be based exclusively on historical documents without the help of eyewitnesses or those who have listened to them. The cause cannot be resumed immediately in Rome, where it was blocked, but must begin again in the diocese where the Servant of God died. In our case this is the diocese of Lyon. A diocesan process has to be set up which requires a vice-postulator on the spot who represents the Society of Mary in order to verify the reputation of holiness (*fama*) of Fr. Colin i.e. to see if from the moment of death until the present time there has been a continuity of *fama* of the Servant of God among some of the people of God. A central part of this investigation is the word of a dozen witnesses on the reputation of holiness of Colin. Only after a positive conclusion of this phase, the evidence collected will be sent to Rome, where the Roman phase of the process can continue.

From the documental point of view in order to clarify the various past and future possible objections, critical editions of published and unpublished writings of the founder are needed; *Origines Maristes*, the four volumes of *Colin Sup* edited by Frs. Lessard and Bourtot, the volume(s) of the writings that come after the generalship until the death of Colin which is being taken care of by Fr. Lessard, and the collection of documents prepared by Fr. Bourtot from the generalship of Favre. For the same reason, a biography of Colin written on the basis of a scientific method is needed which presents the man, the believer, the religious, the founder. This is being worked on by Fr. Justin Taylor.

It is therefore not possible to determine exactly when all of this will be fully in motion - hopefully as soon as possible - or to know the date of its conclusion. What is certain is the desire to re-open the cause of

beatification. Besides the juridical process it is important that there be a parallel path such as that which has begun with the Colin year, the intent of which is not to close ourselves in on Colin but like him and through him to open ourselves up to wider horizons with hope and confidence in the support of Mary for her little religious family.

A last remark concerns the miracle needed for the conclusion of juridical process as a seal from God about the authenticity of the process completed. The invitation is to pray for the beatification of Colin and also for healing through the intercession of Colin of those people whom we pray for or who commend themselves to our prayers.

To conclude I would like to compare the history of the cause of beatification of Colin, not yet completed, to the path of a river, the Timavo. It has its origin in Slovenia, crosses the Italian region of Friuli and flows into the Adriatic Sea near the city of Trieste. In its early stages it flows impetuously and rapidly then slowly and placidly only to disappear underground and to re-emerge on the surface after forty kilometers along the last stretch to the mouth. The cause of Colin began with a certain interest but after that it slowed to be hidden for a long stretch during last seventy years, but it had not gone. Today it resurfaces with the hope of reaching the mouth.

Transl. Larry Duffy sm