

The “Francis Factor” & the People of God

Gerald A. Arbuckle *sm*

Note by the editor: Extract from **The “Francis Factor” and the People of God: New Life for the Church** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015) (250 pages), *chapter 5, “Aging Institutions. Can Youthfulness Return?”*, pages 144.150-54. *With kind permission by the author.*

[...] **Religious Congregations: Lifecycles**

There are five interdependent elements in a vibrant culture: a founding mythology in which the vision, mission, and values are articulated; appropriate authority structures that serve the founding mythology; transformative leadership; formation of members in the founding mythology; and an openness to responsible dissent and mourning.¹ When one or more elements are lacking, the culture is in danger of falling victim to cultural trauma and impasse. The following examples illustrate what happens when congregations fail or succeed in establishing a vibrant culture.

[...Examples: **Franciscans; Jesuits**]

Marists

The Society of Mary (Marist Fathers) was founded as an apostolic religious congregation by a priest, Jean-Claude Colin, in Lyons, France, and formally approved in 1836.² The mission of Western Oceania, South Pacific, was entrusted to the Society by Pope Gregory XVI in the same year. Zealous recruits joined the Society, and many departed for the difficult and often dangerous mission fields of Oceania. However, serious internal problems inherent in the founding stage of the congregation haunted it for many years.

Colin was unable to lead the young Society of Mary in its lifecycle journey from stage one to stage two for a variety of interconnected reasons. Colin was a charismatic, saintly person and a highly effective spiritual director of his men in their zeal for personal ascetical holiness; they were devoted to him. Here lies the paradox. While he successfully fostered in his men an intense, faith-filled ascetical commitment to Jesus Christ, he hesitated to articulate clearly for the young congregation a *specific* founding mythology that would allow it to define its apostolic uniqueness, including a focused mission, and an integrated spirituality.³ Unfortunately, he kept to himself key inspiring elements of an apostolic founding mythology that were only discovered by historians after Vatican II. These included that Mary, Mother of Mercy, is coming to the aid of a world that in the Enlightenment had drifted from its traditional Christian roots; and that Mary calls Marists to labor with her to bridge the gap between modernity and the church.⁴ This meant that the Society has found it difficult to develop an identity with a sharply defined apostolic mission that could sustain it through the inevitable difficulties of institutional and geographical growth. In addition to his hesitancy to clarify a distinctive founding mythology and the mission of the young Society, Colin was unable to develop appropriate structures of government and management.⁵ Nor did he delegate their development to another Marist. As Marist historian Father Jan Snijders notes: “Colin’s bent to remain non-involved in anything but spiritual direction, became a negative asset

¹ A model of a congregational lifecycle is explained in Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 11-28.

² The problems of founding raised in this case study may be common to some other congregations formed in the nineteenth century.

³ See Jan Snijders, *A Mission Too Far . . . Pacific Commitment* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2012), 381-82.

⁴ See Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary* (Rome: Maristica, 1988), 20-71.

⁵ As the Society expanded, the provinces tended to develop their own distinctive operative mythologies based on their different national cultures, theologies, and particular ministries.

when he was called upon to direct the Pacific missions.”⁶ Contrary to sound advice, he assigned bishops in remote Oceania to be both the episcopal *and* the religious superiors of Marists. Consequently the episcopal authority dominated until after Vatican II, and dedicated Marists were effectively pressured in practice to become diocesan clergy.⁷ This problem was not resolved until the late 1960s.

The founder was also very reluctant to write a definitive set of constitutions. From 1836 to 1872 the Society lacked any officially approved constitutions that would have specified its mission, spirituality, and governmental structures. Without these constitutions it was difficult to develop appropriate formation processes. Moreover, at Rome’s insistence, the approved constitutions of 1872 incorporated the monastic/ascetical model of religious life. This was contrary to the apostolic emphasis that the founder desired.

The monastic/ascetical emphasis is evident, for example, in the 1873 General Chapter, which decreed that the *primary* task of provincial chapters is to promote religious discipline according to the monastic rules as set out in the constitutions and to inquire into the financial administration of houses. No mention was made of the need to foster apostolic creativity in ministry. The 1893 provincial chapter of one province directed that Marists, including pastors, were “prohibited from going out after the evening meal for unnecessary visits.” The assumption was that a Marist house is a quasi-monastery. Such factors meant that the congregation was left drifting and in increasing grief because it lacked a clearly articulated corporate, apostolic mission.

Grief turned to cultural trauma when the congregation faced the challenge of adjusting to the directives of Vatican II. When Marists assembled at the General Chapter for renewal (1969–70), the inherent weaknesses in their existing congregational culture and governmental structures became increasingly obvious. The Society decentralized administratively. The delegates, lacking a clearly expressed congregational founding mythology and mission to shape new administrative structures, decided it would be advisable to decentralize simply for pragmatic reasons. Because “a certain attitude or mentality of mistrust of all central authority”⁸ existed in the provinces, the central administration was left paralyzed. For example, it was discouraged from making canonical visitations of provinces because no one quite knew the purpose of such visitations. Some time later the general administration tentatively tried to react to major problems surfacing in the provinces, but, uncertain about its authority, it found it difficult to anticipate crises and to lead the provinces to face the pastoral and spiritual implications of the General Chapter of 1969–1970.

The unresolved weaknesses in the stage one lifecycle of the Society’s founding continue to bedevil it; the impasse with its accompanying grief endures.⁹ Successive General Chapters have been unable to develop an acceptable global mission because the Society has lacked a unique apostolic founding mythology. Consequently, the last General Chapter of 2009 did not attempt to formulate a specific mission statement. At the chapter’s conclusion, it was decided to re-adopt, without further clarification, the vague mission statement of the chapter of 2001, despite the fact that between 2001 and 2009 conditions within and outside the Society had changed significantly.

The challenge now is not so much refounding the Society but rather, guided by the Spirit and Mary, Mother of Mercy, of solidly founding it for the first time on the inspiring Colnian mythology as discovered in historical research of recent decades and with appropriate governmental structures. The sage Marian insights of the founder are as relevant today as they were in his time and are in line with the compassionate pastoral exhortations of Pope Francis.

Colin advised his men to avoid condemning the way people act, but rather “to offer them a helping hand, [to] go along with what is needed and not to be too demanding. . . . I take a broad [pastoral] path; I wait till their faith grows. . . . Yes, we must begin a new church.” Colin often

⁶ Snijders, *A Mission Too Far . . . Pacific Commitment*, 385.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁸ Roger Durmortier, Superior General, *Report to the XXIVth General Chapter: The Facts and Problems* (Rome: Padri Maristi, 1977), para. 234.

⁹ See Snijders, *A Mission Too Far . . . Pacific Commitment*, which for Marist readers is a ritual of mourning; as they read it, Marists are able to identify the source of contemporary governance and ministerial weaknesses and what now needs to be done to make appropriate corrections.

reminded Marists that they are to act in a “hidden and unknown” way.¹⁰ By this he meant that Marists by their behavior are to promote a church that shuns clericalism, triumphalism, and involvement in authoritarian political and social structures—in contrast to the pre-revolutionary church in France. Marists cannot do this alone: “The apostles needed [Mary] to guide them, and to be in a sense the foundress of the church.” Now “she will make her presence felt even more than in the beginning.”¹¹ [...]

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Colin, *A Founder Speaks: Jean-Claude Colin* (Rome: Marist Fathers, 1975), 40, 350.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 336.