

The Marist Founding Myth

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The preceding article in this number of *Forum Novum* is an extract taken from the latest book of Father Gerald Arbuckle, S.M., called *The "Francis Factor" & the People of God: New Life for the Church*.¹ The title may make you think it is a book mainly about Pope Francis. It is not. The book is in the first place a study of grieving and mourning whereby grieving refers to unrelieved sadness about the death of someone dear to us, the loss of one's job or position in life, etc. Grieving amounts to the refusal to accept one's loss, withdrawing into denial or even resorting to resistance and attempts to restore what has gone. Mourning on the contrary is the often ritualised way of coming to terms with one's loss and, in a dignified and public way, taking leave of the past. Grieving looks backward and closes the way to the future. Mourning frees one from the past and enables one to move into the future. Grieving and mourning happen in individual life, to each of us; it also overcomes institutions. Insight in these processes can help us understand the history of institutions.

Arbuckle, a theologian and an anthropologist studies grieving and mourning in Sacred Scripture and in different cultures. He then looks at concrete historical cases of both grieving and mourning, in individuals and in institutions. In the last chapter he applies it to the Church in the last half century in which the Second Vatican Council intended to open the Catholic Church for the future: Pope John's *aggiornamento*. However, the loss of the past was not accepted by the Roman institutions and they gradually retrieved the past, piece for piece. Large streams of the People of God felt deprived of what they had celebrated in the 1960s as a new and vital future for their faith. Mourning was suppressed and the ensuing bitterness contributed to the disillusion that made so many people turn away from church practice if not the faith itself. The appearance of Pope Francis has awakened hope that he will take up the thread where it was broken off in the late sixties.

In between Arbuckle applies his model to other institutions such as nations, social, educational and cultural institutions and also to religious institutes. One of them is the Society of Mary and its history; hence the excerpt in the preceding article.

The second centenary of the Promise of Fourvière of 23 July 1816 may be an appropriate time to throw more light on two centuries of Marist history from the vantage point of Arbuckle's paradigms of grieving and mourning and of foundational mythology.

Limiting myself to what Arbuckle calls the foundational myth and using results of my studies on Father Colin and the Missions of Oceania² I try in this article to add some background and nuances to Arbuckle's conclusions.

Founding myths

Arbuckle finds in the history of our Society signs of grieving and mourning round the loss of what in anthropology is called its founding mythology. He says Father Founder hesitated to articulate for the Society its founding myth. He kept it to himself, and it was discovered by historians only after Vatican II. The Society was in this way deprived of its specific identity 'that would allow it to define its apostolic uniqueness, including a focused mission and an integrated spirituality'.

The words 'myth' and 'mythology' may put us off because in ordinary language it carries the connotation of 'fictitious stories'. Perhaps 'narratives' is easier on the lay ear, narratives about the origin of nations and movements. The people of Israel nurtured the story of their enslavement in Egypt, the paschal meal, the exodus, the passage through the Red Sea, the wandering in the desert and the conquest of the land. It is one of the most powerful of founding narratives. It still inspires a nation and is used to justify wars many centuries later. It provides our own Christian paschal mystery with a coherent narrative and symbolism.

¹ The book will soon be published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York.

² Jan Snijders sm, *A Mission Too Far* [MTF], Hindmarsh, SA: Australasian Theological Forum, 2012.

Where would French history and identity be without the storming of the Bastille and without the national hymn, '*Allons enfants de la patrie*'? Where would the United States of America be without the Boston Tea-party and the Statue of Liberty welcoming the millions of migrants coming to the Land of the Free? And of the Founding Fathers writing the Constitutions? How would the Maori people in New Zealand feel about their land without the story of the fleet of canoes looking from the Ocean at the long white cloud on the horizon, *Aotearoa*?

Religious movements and churches are unthinkable without their founding narratives. The Reformation does not make sense without the story of Jan Hus burned at the stake and of Luther tacking his ninety-five statements to the Castle Church doors in Wittenberg. Whether these events actually happened exactly as the often simplified stories have them, does not matter. It is the narrative that counts.

The story of the Bishop of Hippo living with his clergy a new kind of monastic life, no longer in the desert but in the heart of a Roman town, inspired centuries of different forms of Augustinian religious life. Benedict of Nursia withdrawing from the noisy and corrupt city of Rome into the mighty silence of Subiaco has spread monasteries all over the world. Francis of Assisi dropping his costly clothes in front of his rich family and putting on a beggar's garment has inspired nine centuries of religious life until our present Pope only had to adopt his name for the whole world not only to understand but also to be moved by what he stands for. These are what Arbuckle calls founding myths or narratives. They are the most powerful sources of energy and creativity in human history.

Arbuckle regrets that Father Colin did not articulate his foundational narrative for his followers and kept it to himself so that it was only discovered more than a century later. He thereby refers to the 1960s when Jean Coste and Gaston Lessard found the Memoirs of Father Gabriel-Claude Mayet (1809-1894) and published the great articles in the *Acta Societatis Mariae*. The centenary of Father Colin's death provided an opportunity to publish *A Founder Speaks*, in fact an anthology of texts from the Memoirs.

Until then Colin was known in his Society especially in his preferred role of spiritual director fostering, as Arbuckle writes, 'in his men an intense, faith-filled ascetical commitment to Jesus-Christ' but, he adds: 'he kept to himself key inspiring elements of [the] apostolic founding mythology'. Fortunately the original data had been preserved but like a palimpsest, overwritten by Colin himself.

The Marist Founding Myth

Arbuckle summarises the narrative that inspired the founding of the Marist movement as the vision of 'Mary, Mother of Mercy coming to the aid of a world that in the Enlightenment had drifted from its traditional Christian roots and (...) called Marists to labour with her to bridge the gap between modernity and the church.' (151)

From the middle of the eighteenth century the educated strata of French society had widely adopted the ideals of the Enlightenment.³ Although not atheists they spread anticlerical feelings and ridiculed the Church. Church practice dwindled, first among the elite, later among the common folk. The Revolution and the Terror disrupted regular pastoral work and left parishes without clergy, without religious communities. When after 1815 life in France returned to normal, only small groups still practised regularly their religion. Religious ignorance had become the rule in many places. The loyal remnant was the fertile ground of new religious foundations. This is where the Marist movement began.

The young generation of the 1810s saw their time in dramatic terms. Was this not the time of which Jesus had said: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?' (Lk 18:8).⁴ These words gave an apocalyptic setting to the way that the post-Revolutionary generation saw their 'present age'. To make matters worse the highly respected Society of Jesus had been disbanded in 1773 by Pope Clement XIV. That someone then came up with an alternative, a Society of Mary to take up the challenge of restoring the faith precisely in this situation could

³ Jonathan I. Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment*, Oxford, O.U.P., 2001, 709-720.

⁴ Jean Coste (ed.), *A Founder Speaks* [FS], Rome: Marist Fathers, 1975, Doc 117, 2.

have been expected. Mary, the Mother of Mercy, rushes to the aid of the Church with a new religious body, her own Society, whose members, Mariists⁵ will on her behalf enter into battle against the 'impiety and incredulity' of their age. 'I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time', that was the message someone had received from on high.

The 'new-born Church' gave the Marist vision a biblical background: 'All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers' (Acts 1:14). This background in turn provided the Society with a style of life in the Church and in the world: supporting the successors of the Apostles in an unobtrusive way, not in the limelight like Mary had not been either; never in conflict with the Bishops as religious had at times been in the past. A style for the way the Church of the future would situate itself in the world, not attracting attention, not domineering and influential as the Church had been under the *Ancien Régime*, but the presence of Mary re-enacted.

Mary and the women present at a critical moment called up emotional memories in early nineteenth century people, the stories of their parents and grandparents, lay-people, men and women who at the height of the *Terreur* had provided support and safety to the priests in hiding who went round to say Mass and administer the Sacraments in private houses. The Society of Mary would be very different from the Society of Jesus. Not made up of priests alone but of priests and laity, men and women, as the Church of the future would have to be.

The Mother of Mercy provided at the same time a pastoral model. Under the influence of Jansenism the Church in France had acquired an image of severity. The bar stood high; there was little room for the sinner and one's eternal salvation was constantly in danger. The Mother of Mercy stood for compassion and for patience. The Marist pastoral approach had to show understanding for the difficulty of keeping the faith in the modern world and appreciate the basic good will of people even if they were not always able to live up to the standards that a severe moral theology preached.

How we got to know

There can be no doubt that this splendid founding vision stood at the origin of the Society of Mary. However, we know of it only from the Memoirs of Father Gabriel-Claude Mayet (1809-1894). Mayet was a Lyonnais from a large, middle class, traditional, royalist and fervently Catholic family. He studied for the priesthood in Lyon, interrupted his studies to work as a teacher, returned to be ordained in 1816. He first thought of joining the Jesuits but was directed to the Society of Mary by the saintly *Curé d'Ars*, who was a member of the Third Order of Mary. A serious throat disease left him nearly unable to use his voice already before ordination.

During many years he lived in the same community as Father Colin and had a great veneration for him. He made it his vocation to write down whatever Colin said or did and left us a wealth of handwritten notes. After a time Father Colin noticed what Mayet was doing and without actually encouraging him openly allowed him to go on. At times he would even say, half-jokingly, here is something you should note!

After Colin's resignation (1854) Mayet continued to improve his Memoirs whenever he got new material. Colin's successor, Father Julien Favre (1854-1885) showed little interest in the mysterious notebooks that would have been rumoured about but became known to only a few Marists. For many years superiors may have been averse to recovering the notes for fear of reviving the conflicts that upset the Society in the 1860s around the question of the Marist origins. Nor would they have wanted to throw doubts on the ascetical ideal of life that had become dominant. Spiritual authors like Jean Jeantin (1824-1895) used the Memoirs for his *Doctrine Spirituelle* picking out what was useful for promoting the Founder's ascetical teaching that they found more important. As the years passed by, interest in the Memoirs waned to the point that nobody knew any more if they still existed. When Father Jules Grimal (1867-1953) as an assistant general to Father Rieu tried to revive the cause of the Founder and mentioned the Memoirs, the consultor of the Congregation for the Canonisation of Saints asked for them. Grimal could not find them.

⁵ Apparently the oldest form of the name, soon shortened to 'Marists'.

In the 1950s Jean Coste and Gaston Lessard did find them and in a highly professional and scholarly effort of several years they traced the history of the notes, and even deciphered nearly all the bits that Mayet had overwritten or covered up. They studied the contents and composed impressive volumes of onomastic and analytical indexes. Even more important they made a rigorous study of the crucial question how trustworthy Mayet's recordings really were. Their assessment was that in reading Mayet 'we hear Father Colin today'. The notes, they concluded, give us a remarkably accurate account of Father Colin speaking.⁶

While a lot of the material recorded in the Memoirs represents the spiritual direction Colin gave to communities and individuals and tells how he tried to make his administrative direction a means to grow in holiness, they also reveal the background of his own thinking and disclose what we can now recognise as the founding vision of the Society of Mary. Thanks to Jean Coste and Gaston Lessard, Anthony Ward and William J. Stuart we have two anthologies, *Entretiens Spirituels (A Founder Speaks)* and *Quelques Souvenirs (A Founder Acts)* that make the more important sections accessible in two languages.⁷

The paradox

As the results of the researchers found their way into the Society, first in articles in the *Acta Societatis Mariae*, then in the above mentioned books, Marist readers were increasingly puzzled by themes they did not know from the Constitutions or from their novitiate formation.

How was it that nobody had ever spoken of *Church, New-Born, End of Time, Present Age*, and other themes that are so important in the Subject Index of *A Founder Speaks*? How could sayings such as *Hidden and Unknown* that had certainly played an important role in Marist spirituality as a way to holiness, at once turn into a pastoral and missionary approach, even a model of being Church? When the Marist archivist and historian Father Theo Kok (1929-1994) after studying numerous letters from Oceania asked why he did not meet any of the above mentioned themes in letters to and from missionaries, nobody had an answer. If they were so important for the understanding of Father Colin, why did the missionaries not know about them?⁸ Why does Colin not write about them in his letters to the missionaries?

Marist ideals were, as Arbuckle points out, reduced, even reinterpreted into the monastic/ascetical model of religious life, 'contrary to the apostolic emphasis that the founder desired' (152). The story of what happened to the Memoirs, kept secret, hidden away, a few times nearly destroyed, is significant by itself. Formators and superiors preferred Colin as the spiritual director. Indeed it was Father Colin himself who set the pattern and did not articulate in a formal manner the founding narrative of his congregation to define its apostolic uniqueness and its mission.

The clue: Jean-Claude Courveille

The clue in what may begin to look like a mystery story is that Jean-Claude Colin was not alone and not the first to launch the Society of Mary. With him was the dark figure in the early history of the Marist movement: Jean-Claude Courveille. The Society received pontifical approbation on 11 March 1836 but by then the Marist movement had existed for almost twenty-five years.

It began in the small town of Usson-en-Forez not far from Le Puy with Jean-Claude Courveille (1787-1866). Courveille's parents had taken grave risks during the *Terreur* by hiding in their home a miraculous statue of Our Lady of Chambriac that the Jacobins sought to destroy. A childhood illness left the boy nearly blind and unable to go to school. At the age of twenty-one he

⁶ Jean Coste & Gaston Lessard (eds.), *Origines Maristes* [OM], Rome: Marist Fathers, four volumes, 1960-1967, volume 2, pages 3-113 give a full and well-founded account of their research.

⁷ Jean Coste (ed.), *Entretiens Spirituels*, Rome: Marist Fathers, 1975, = *A Founder Speaks* [FS], English translation by Anthony Ward sm, Rome, Marist Fathers, 1975. *Quelques Souvenirs sur J.C. Colin*, Rome, Marist Fathers, 1981 = *A Founder Acts* [FA], English translation by William Joseph Stuart sm and Anthony Ward sm, Rome, Marist Fathers, 1983.

⁸ Gaston Lessard (ed.), *Saint Pierre Chanel*, Saint-Augustin, Marist Fathers, 2004, p. 109. Cf. MTF, 381, n. 1.

is suddenly healed of his illness when praying before the statue of Our Lady of Le Puy and decides to become a priest. He is sure that the Blessed Virgin wants him to found a religious congregation under her name. He studies at the seminaries of Le Puy and as from 1814 in Lyon. In Saint-Irénée he inspires a group of seminarians to found the Society of Mary with him. He leads the group of 'Marists' to commit themselves to the project before Our Lady of Fourvière in September 1816.⁹

While serving in various parishes he presents himself during ten years as the superior of the Marists. He keeps in contact with the Fathers, the Brothers, the Sisters and the laity and to some extent they defer to him.¹⁰ In 1822 he visits Jean-Claude Colin and his brother Pierre in Cerdon, he accepts the Rule written by Jean-Claude Colin as the Marist rule and they write together to Rome to present their Marist project. In 1824 he is appointed by the Archdiocese to be a companion to Marcellin Champagnat who had at that time already gathered a considerable number of candidates to begin the Marist Teaching Brothers.

Some key elements of what has been presented above as the Marist founding vision or mythology were from Courveille. Jesus' words: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?'¹¹ were for Courveille the core of his personal mission and he will have put it in this way to the little group of seminarians whom he had gathered in the Seminary of Saint-Irénée. It was the background of the message he believed he had received from the Blessed Virgin: 'I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time.' In 1844 Colin said that these words presided over the earliest days of the Society, and that they were said to a priest 'some thirty years before, which puts the event at the time Courveille had been healed of his blindness and begun his studies.'¹² In 1844 Colin called these words 'a foundation and encouragement in the very earliest days of the Society.'¹³

Jean Coste does not hesitate to call this theme of crucial importance to the Founder's thought and a breath-taking view that dominated his understanding of the Society right to the end of his life. He has no doubt either that it goes back to Jean-Claude Courveille.¹⁴ From its earliest days the Society of Mary has a particular, precise mission, not to a ministry or a place but to a time. He speaks of 'current needs, its vocation, its mission, its time', the present time of 'unbelief and indifference',¹⁵ a mission the Society fulfils on behalf of Mary, the Mother of Mercy. This crucial element of the Society's self-understanding Colin never claimed for himself. It came from Mary through Courveille, whom he later called 'a certain priest'.

Another theme that seems interlocked with the first origin and must go back to Courveille is the parallel with the Society of Jesus but with a significant difference. In contrast to the image the Jesuits had, of being 'men with talents and many other things, the Society of Mary must be open to all kinds of people, it must be a 'tree of several branches'.¹⁶

The branches appear to come natural in the context of Mary's intervention into history at this particular time and must have been part of the Courveille deposit as witnessed also by Marcellin Champagnat's mentioning it in correspondence as early as 1828,¹⁷ and as mentioned in the Summary of the Rule written by Colin in Rome in 1833: 'As conceived from the beginning (*qualis ab initio concepta*), the Society comprises several orders, priests, lay-brothers, religious sisters and confraternities of lay-people living in the world'.¹⁸

Jean-Claude Colin had not been among the first seminarians invited by Courveille to his Marist project. A little withdrawn, happy to stand in the background, he would have done everything to

⁹ OM 4, 253-5. Donal Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2000, p. 126-9.

¹⁰ Cf. OM 4, 547.

¹¹ Lk 18:8. FS, Doc 117, 2-3.

¹² FS, Doc 4, 1-4.

¹³ FS, Doc 152, 1.

¹⁴ Jean Coste sm, 'The Role of Mary at the Birth of the Church and at the End of Time' in *Acta Societatis Mariae* 5 (1958 - 1959) 26, 263-81.

¹⁵ FS, Doc 5; Doc 78, 2.

¹⁶ FS, Doc 2.

¹⁷ OM 1, Doc 185, 2.

¹⁸ OM 1, Doc 294, 5.

avoid attracting attention. It was his friend Déclas who proposed him to join the group but once a member of the group the little Colin - as he was called in contrast to his older brother - felt very much at home with the ideals that Courveille promoted. Jean-Claude had a great admiration for Courveille and entered wholeheartedly into the perspectives of his Marist project. On 23 September 1816, the day after his ordination, he joined the eleven or so other candidates in the ceremony of Fourvière.

Not long after his appointment as a curate to his brother Pierre in the parish of Cerdon he got Pierre to join the Marist project. The parish ministry made another man of him. He grew in self-confidence and developed into an impressive speaker. He continued to read widely in the spiritual literature of the previous century and 'experienced an extra-ordinary serenity of soul.'¹⁹

One of the works he read avidly was *The Mystical City* of Maria of Ágreda, a seventeenth century Spanish nun. Her legends (Colin believed them to be private revelations) describe Our Lady in the midst of the Apostles, listening respectfully to their deliberations, preferring to remain silent and unnoticed in their presence. This nicely complemented the theme 'I was the support of the Early Church' and developed the great respect that Colin wanted Marists to have for the Bishops, a Colinian contribution to the founding vision.

The unobtrusive presence of Mary among the Apostles and in the early Church as described by Maria of Ágreda helped develop also the preference for the low-key approach that Colin was by nature attached to: 'The Blessed Virgin (...) Queen of the Apostles, look what great good she did for souls. Yet in this world she was hidden and as it were unknown'.²⁰ The latter phrase was one he had picked up from Jean-Joseph Surin, a seventeenth century Jesuit spiritual writer, and perhaps other ones.²¹ In any case we can identify here a typically Colinian element alongside the ones he took over from Courveille.

In the same period, apparently on his own initiative, Jean-Claude began to write a Rule of Marist life. Courveille seems to have visited Cerdon a few times²² and he must therefore have known of the Rule that Jean-Claude was writing. In January 1822 Courveille visited Cerdon again. Jean-Claude presented him with a complete text of the Rule. Pierre would have seen it already and the three agreed that the time had come to present the Marist project to the Pope. Their letter, dated 25 January 1822, presents the Society of Mary in terms reminiscent of the opening of the Rule of Saint Ignatius and at the end it says 'We have the constitutions from no book or no other constitutions. We hope to submit them to Your Holiness and we wish to make fully known to you from where we have them.' The letter is signed by Courveille and the two Colins.²³

We can safely conclude that up to that point relations between Courveille and the two Colins had been good and that the two acknowledged Courveille's leadership in the Marist venture. We know Courveille to have been an ambitious person, anxious to show and exercise authority. The Rule, later known as the 'Cerdon Rule', must have been faithful enough to his ideas to adopt it. As it has not survived we do not know if and how much of Colin's own ideals were already woven into the fabric of the text. In fact it is difficult to say how far Colin's own ideas had matured at this point. Some of them ripened only through the pastoral experience of the Bugey missions. Whatever was there, it must have pleased Courveille. It is a fair assumption that Courveille admired Jean-Claude and trusted him. Jean-Claude so far was happy to see Marist life as a realisation of Courveille's vision.

Frictions and break

The first serious difficulties between the Colins and Courveille arose when in March 1822 an answer came from Rome. The Colins did not wait for Courveille to return to Cerdon but opened

¹⁹ Kerr, *Colin*, p. 143-59.

²⁰ FS, Doc 85, 2.

²¹ Justin Taylor sm, 'A neglected Source of Colinian Spirituality' in FN 5, 4 (2001) 416-21.

²² Contacts were regular enough for a school inspector to put the two Colins in Cerdon down as agents of Courveille, then still the parish priest of Épercieux (1819-1824), OM 1, Doc 75, 13.

²³ OM 1, Doc 69, 4.

the letter that they expected in answer to the one they had signed together. The letter addresses *Dilecto Filio cognominato Courveille* and encourages him and his two associates in their good intentions but suggests they go and see the papal Nuncio in Paris.²⁴

While the two Colins and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn²⁵ who was all the time very much involved in things Marist had received the letter as a sacred document and did not mention it to anyone else, Courveille proudly showed it to all and sundry and carried it around to the point that his dirty fingerprints were all over it. As soon as the Colins could they hid it outside the house so Courveille could no longer get at it.²⁶

Courveille felt the papal letter authorised them to go ahead and see the Nuncio without asking permission from the Bishop in spite of the strict rules for priests in the Archdiocese about absence from one's parish. The Colins would not have it and there was a real quarrel between the Colins and Courveille:

“There was one person who wanted to go ahead without the agreement of the authority. My brother and I were of one mind. We would rather see the Society disappear than do anything against the authority. If our project comes from God, he will make it possible. The voice of authority is the only way to know God's will.”

“What has put me gradually at the head of the Society is that some of my con-frères were determined to act against the will of the Bishops. I have received this very special grace that I have never gone against the Bishops. I am convinced nothing will ever succeed unless it is done in accord with the Bishops”.²⁷

The conflict shows that at that stage Colin had certain definite views that did not come from Courveille and that were probably not in the Cerdon Rule.

In November Colin went to Paris and presented the Constitutions.²⁸ They were in French and during the winter Colin wrote a Latin version that he took to the Nuncio in the spring of 1823. In late 1822 the vast Archdiocese of Lyon was divided and the Marists in the new Diocese of Belley found themselves separated from those in Lyon. Soon after returning from his second visit to Paris, Colin presented himself and the Marist project to their new Bishop, Alexandre-Raymond Devie who agreed to the first community of Marist Sisters establishing itself in Cerdon under the direction of the Fathers Colin. He also accepted the proposal of starting parish missions in the Bugey region and moved Déclas to Cerdon for the purpose. The first mission took place in the winter of 1824/1825.

The new Archbishop in Lyon, Jean-Paul-Gaston de Pins appointed Courveille in 1824 to the Hermitage where he joined Marcellin Champagnat in the formation and the direction of the Marist Brothers but in 1826 he committed sexual abuse with one or more young brother candidates. Terraillon found out and he notified the Archdiocese. During the month of May Courveille left for the Trappist monastery of Aiguebelle. Things first remained secret and with his reputation of being a saint there were rumours that Courveille had withdrawn to Aiguebelle to seek a more severe form of religious life.

On 4 June Courveille wrote from Aiguebelle a long letter to the community of the Hermitage, offering his resignation as superior but clearly hoping they would beg him to return.²⁹ Champagnat was inclined to do so and nearly convinced Colin who came on a visit just after the letter arrived, to join him but Terraillon did everything possible to stop them without actually giving his real reasons. For those who knew (Terraillon and at least some of the Brothers) it was a despicable piece of hypocrisy suggesting among other things that it was the low level of religious spirit in the Hermitage that made him go to Aiguebelle! In the end Champagnat and Colin

²⁴ OM 1, Doc 74. Kerr, *Colin*, p. 181-2.

²⁵ The future foundress of the Marist Sisters lived in Cerdon at the time.

²⁶ OM 2, Doc 689, 7.

²⁷ OM 2, Doc 425, 8; Doc 467. These mentions are from 1838 and 1839 and may be coloured by later events. Kerr does not mention the altercation.

²⁸ OM 2, Doc 752, 14-19.

²⁹ OM 1, Doc 152.

accepted Terraillon's point of view that sooner or later Courveille would have to be replaced anyhow and what time better than now that he offered his resignation himself? Terraillon wrote a letter accepting the resignation and Champagnat and Colin signed it.³⁰ The Vicar General was delighted with the solution found.

As Terraillon had warned, it did not take Courveille long to return from Aiguebelle. He turned up in Belley but by that time the Colins knew all about things and, as Pierre Colin told it in 1849, 'we told him never to come back again; we could not accept him any more as one of us. He pleaded and cried...but we were adamant.' The Bishop of Belley agreed and forbade them to receive him in their house.³¹

The fledgling little group of candidate Marists had lost the founder who had guided them for more than ten years and with whom the Bishops and their fellow priests identified them. When the story became known, it must have been extremely embarrassing for Jean-Claude Colin, at the time living with his brother Pierre and Étienne Déclas in a corridor of the seminary in Belley where they were already the butt of pestering by the seminary staff.³² That Jean-Claude had written a Marist Rule may not have been known, but that he had twice visited the Nuncio on behalf of the Marist project cannot have escaped the gossip of the common rooms. He would have been seen as the number two of the Marists, second to Courveille.

Not only Jean-Claude! Déclas too was known to have belonged to the small group started by Courveille in Saint Irénée and an early friend of his. In the Archdiocese of Lyon things can only have been worse. It was Étienne Terraillon, also of the Saint-Irénée group, who found out about the misconduct and reported it. And who can have been more embarrassed than Marcellin Champagnat, superior of the Brothers who already was not very popular in the Archdiocese and among the clergy?

Colin in an impasse

Marist history has often downplayed the influence of Courveille on the young Jean-Claude but in the seminary and the first years afterwards Colin looked up to Courveille as his spiritual guide and made the leader's views his own. Now this same man was exposed as guilty of sexual abuse!

In 1822 the relationship had already cracked. Colin's spirituality had matured. Courveille was perhaps no longer the man he had been. But in 1826, before he knew of the sexual misconduct Colin was still prepared to ask Courveille to return from Aiguebelle and take up the leadership again. But once Colin knew, the break was complete and permanent. He never spoke of him again, never even mentioned his name. As Piere Colin later put it to Mayet:

"[Father Colin] never, never spoke of Courveille. (...) He did not want anyone to know about him. (...) But it was a deep humiliation for the Society and people despised the Society for it. (...) In those days it took courage to want to be a Marist."³³

Forty years after the events, in the late 1860s when there was a general desire to have Constitutions written by Father Colin, most Marists had never heard of Courveille but his name came up and confusion arose about his role. In May 1870 Father Georges David, Colin's assistant in writing the Constitutions of 1872, explained that Father Colin felt the honour of the Society would be seriously compromised if people knew. Many serious men insisted to be told what was behind it all. But, in Father Colin's eyes, it would humiliate Marists if they were told that they were sons of such an unworthy father.³⁴

It may seem odd at first sight but fact is that while Colin broke completely with the memory of his former tutor, he held on to the original vision of the Society even though parts of it were Courveille's. It remained at the heart of Colin's personal spiritual and apostolic commitment. He broke with the memory of a man unworthy of his calling and freed himself for a future committed

³⁰ OM 3, Doc 798, 7.

³¹ OM 2, Doc 689, 8.

³² Kerr, *Colin*, p. 210-1.

³³ OM 2, Doc 689, 11-13.

³⁴ Om 3, Doc 830, 20. The documents of that period are published in *Origines Maristes*, volume 3.

to the core of his earlier experience. No grieving but meaningful mourning. The reason lies most probably in Colin's conviction of the supernatural origin of the first ideas.

Colin certainly wanted to pass the original vision to the members of the Society but in the given circumstances he felt he could not do so openly. Not only the older Marists but outsiders too of the same generation, who had known him in Saint-Irénée, would have recognised some of the ideas as typically Courveille's.

While keeping the foundational vision of the Society out of official texts and out of correspondence that could fall into outsiders' hands, Colin used informal situations to tell Marists around him about the narrative that defined what Arbuckle calls the Society's apostolic uniqueness, its focused mission and integrated spirituality.³⁵ In these curious circumstances the Society was lucky to have someone like Gabriel-Claude Mayet to jot down the casual or incidental communications of the Founder. He did this initially for his own benefit but he soon understood the value that his notes would have for the future of the Society.³⁶

In the beginning Mayet hid his notes from Colin and when Colin found out he first wanted them destroyed. However, it did not take him long to see the value of Mayet's work and he encouraged it. At times he would interrupt a talk and say to Mayet, half joking, if you insist on writing things down, make sure you do not miss this point, or make sure you get it right. It became so much a part of the proceedings that after a time Mayet could ask him after a talk, what did you really mean?³⁷ In the end Colin relied in fact on Mayet to have his views preserved for the future of the Society.

The ascetical reduction

Through the way Colin communicated his vision of the Society, it was not widely known and played not much of a role. Marist discourse shrunk into an ascetical doctrine. What Colin had been forced to do in the 1830s and 1840s, namely limit himself to his spiritual doctrine, became for a hundred years the standard way in which Marist spirituality was presented and lived. 'Hidden and unknown' was no longer - as in the original Marist vision - the low-key unobtrusive, humble way the Church and its ministers should move and work in the modern world, with as model [Mary in the midst of the Apostles. Instead,

"It was interpreted as essentially something private and personal, guiding each Marist in the way he should live his religious life. Nazareth was the model: Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the hidden years of Nazareth were the ideal. The hidden life was an ascetic life - an *ascesis* - marked by the virtues of humility, simplicity, poverty and obedience which were seen as the virtues most characteristic of Mary."³⁸

At the same time this ascetical reduction must also be seen in the context of nineteenth century French Catholicism. The relative openness to the 'world' that marked the first decades had not brought the Restoration one had hoped for and Catholic thinking turned inward. Pius IX, first inclined to open up to modernity, turned reactionary after the Revolution of 1848. The *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864 marked the openly hostile attitude the Church took on towards all liberal tendencies. Writers and publicists like Montalambert and Bishop Dupanloup who saw a future in engaging the modern world were pushed to the side. In the industrialisation the Church lost contact with the working classes and identified increasingly with the middle classes. The numerical growth of clergy and religious pushed the laity back from active participation in Church

³⁵ MTF, p. 380-84 needs to be complemented and corrected in this sense.

³⁶ OM 2, p. 19-24.

³⁷ OM 2, p. 42-6.

³⁸ Patrick Bearsley sm, 'From Asceticism to Kenosis: the Evolution in Marist Understanding of the "Unknown and Hidden"', in FN 5, 1 (2000), 69. Cf. Alois Greiler sm, 'From Jeantin to Coste: A Survey on Marist Studies in the 20th Century' in FN 7, 1 (2005) 38-54. Books published by Marists, like the six volume biography of Father Colin by Jeantin appeared anonymously: *Le Très Révérend Père Colin*, Lyon, Vitte, 1895-1898.

life into personal and interior piety in the form of devotions to the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart and Mary. The ascetical reduction in the Society of May fitted very well into these trends.³⁹

Conclusions

The Society of Mary began as an apostolic vision, a focused mission and an integrated spirituality. At the core of this vision is the reference to a specific 'time' that its adherents called the Enlightenment but believers saw as a morally evil movement. Colin blamed 'philosophy', the enemy of the Faith, 'paving the way for the end of time'.⁴⁰ Today we may see it less dramatically as a cultural revolution, a danger but also, as described by Pope Francis, an opening and a challenge for the Church.⁴¹

Mary had a particular role in the Marist vision, not in the first place as an object of veneration, but of identification. Mary had taken the initiative. The Mother of Mercy intervened in the unique crisis in the Church of the time. She chooses people to work on her behalf. They do what she wants to do, they commit themselves to do her work (*l'oeuvre de Marie*). Mary intervenes as she was believed to have done in the Early Church: Mary in the midst of the Apostles (Acts 1:14). Her place among the Apostles provides the main themes of an integrated Marist Apostolic spirituality. Being and building a Church that is open to all people, men and women, priests, religious and laity. Being and building in the modern world a Church to the model of Mary (hidden and unknown), unassuming, not seeking to dominate, low-key. To show, like the Mother of Mercy, understanding with patience and compassion for people's difficulties especially with the faith; Always respectful to Bishops, seen as the successors of the Apostles; Avoid conflicts in Church; strive for personal holiness: live the presence of God in a world where he is no longer seen to be present.

This vision has elements from both Jean-Claude Courveille and Jean Claude Colin. After Courveille's misconduct Colin breaks completely with the man but retains the whole of the original vision, including Courveille's contribution. The circumstances of Courveille's failing prevent Colin from full and open promotion of the Marist vision and his governance becomes a spiritual direction. He communicates his foundational vision in incidental ways, on casual occasions. His spiritual direction survived him, his vision disappeared from sight and was only recovered through the work of Coste and Lessard in the 1950s and 1960s.

If the Society of Mary today lacks a generally accepted vision of its mission, its vocation and its identity as Arbuckle states - and I agree - then the main reason is that the generations after him did not appreciate the importance of a foundational narrative or vision and that even after the 1950s the Society has not fully interiorised the rediscovered Colin. We should not grieve for the truncated image of Colin, but free ourselves for a more complete understanding of our Founder. The Society has invested in renewal but for authentic re-founding more will be needed.

³⁹ Janice Farnham, 'A Stirring and Christian Solidarity: Women in the Church of Lyon, 1800-1850', in FN 1, 1 (1989) 38-61.

⁴⁰ FS, Doc 161, 5.

⁴¹ Cf *Evangelii Gaudium*, 72-74.