

About «The Marist Founding Myth»

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As I read what Fathers Arbuckle and Snijders write in the latest issue of *Forum novum*, I feel very uneasy. Here, Colin is faulted for «keeping to himself key inspiring elements of an apostolic founding mythology» and for not developing «appropriate structures of government and management». Arbuckle bases his argument on what Snijders wrote in *A Mission too Far* (ATF, 2012) and Snijders expands on Arbuckle's statements in an article of his own. The questions raised about structures of government and management would warrant a separate essay, but I can at least state that I do not agree with the assessment made of Colin's leadership.

What makes me uneasy? For one thing the statement about Colin keeping to himself key elements of the founding mythology, namely Mary's role in the early church and at the end of time. Linked to that, the way Snijders describes the relationship between Courveille and Colin. The little we know does not allow the kind of clear cut picture that Snijders offers. We need to be a lot more tentative. In connection with Colin's visit to the Nuncio in 1822, for instance, Snijders postulates «a real quarrel», then called an «altercation» in the adjoining footnote. There is simply no evidence for such an incident. The two sayings that Snijders quotes (OM, doc. 425, § 8; 467) can be understood to refer to the rift with Courveille, but only in a far more general way.

According to Snijders, Colin received from Courveille the apostolic founding mythology (Mary support of the nascent church and at the end of time) and then, after Courveille's departure, kept this mythology under wraps and made Marists into people limited to asceticism and a monastic lifestyle. It makes for a simple narrative.

What we are able to piece together is both more elusive and far more complex.

Several questions arise: 1) did Colin have an idea of the Society of Mary before he went to the major seminary in 1813? 2) what do we know about the project around which Courveille rallied his fellow seminarians before 23 July 1816? 3) what do we know about the rule on which Colin worked in Cerdon? 4) what was the role of Courveille from 1816 to 1826? 5) what interaction took place between Courveille and Colin during those same years?

1) Did Colin have an idea of the Society of Mary before he went to the major seminary in 1813?

On 26 December 1956, Jean Coste finished writing an essay entitled: «Father Colin and the Society of Mary before the Major Seminary». By that time, Coste had spent a year and half working on the problems related to Marist beginnings. His work was part of a long history, that of the cause of beatification of Father Colin. This had come to a halt after the unsuccessful efforts of the postulator, Father Grimal, to answer the objections that the defender of the faith had raised repeatedly. The cause had been entrusted to the historical section of the Congregation of Rites, and in 1952 a Jesuit historian, Father Pedro Leturia, produced a report on the main stumbling block of the cause, the Courveille problem. The ball now lay in the court of the Society of Mary. Coste was asked to give up his biblical studies to dedicate himself to Father Colin's cause, and more especially to respond to Leturia's report. Coste then spent the summer of 1955 scouring archives in France on the trail of Courveille. In September 1955, he moved to the general house. The December 1956 study was the first fruit of his labor, but it was also the beginning of a much larger project, namely what became *Origines maristes*. Even sixty years later, Coste's paper remains a solid starting point for a study of the relationship between Courveille and Colin. The full text appears in this issue of *Forum Novum*.

Coste concludes his investigation with the following statement: «It can be held as a historical fact, based on Father Colin's testimony, that he had, before he went to the major seminary, a certain idea of a society dedicated to the blessed Virgin, that he had written some notes on this topic and had discerned some companions who might one day share in this work».

Here is my translation of the concluding page of Coste's essay:

«While it matters for a correct understanding of the basics of our Marist spirituality, the fact that Father Colin had the idea of the Society before going to the major seminary also throws an appreciable light upon the more specific problems raised by his cause of beatification.

This fact, indeed, is the first ring of a long chain at the end of which we should be able to attach the crucial statement regarding the signing of the petition to Pius VII, which until now stands as a lump that will not fit the psychology of Father Colin.

Of course, if Father Colin truly had an idea of the Society before Courveille's project was launched at the major seminary and considered this important enough to confide it to the authority of the Church as early as 1824, the story of his relationship to Courveille turns out to be quite different from what Father Leturia supposed.

It is no longer in 1826, in the climate of shame that Father Colin felt for the fall of his confrère, that we would need to seek the origin of the psychological process which led to the erroneous statements in question. It is from as early as the major seminary that we must date the beginning of an ambiguity that merely unfolded its consequences as time went on. Whereas Courveille saw Colin as a follower, Colin himself embraced his confrère's project only in so far as he saw in it a concrete means of bringing about something he had long dreamed of. Between Courveille's brilliant *short remarks* [Terraillon's expression in OM, doc. 750, § 5] which delighted the first aspirants and the few tenaciously held ideas which for years had dwelt in the young Colin's heart, the contest was already unequal. Such is the ambiguous situation in which people lived for ten years, until Courveille left the scene and Colin was implicitly acknowledged as superior for the time being. The real psychological process has its roots, therefore, as early as 1816, in the awareness, objectively well founded, that Colin had about his ideas dating back further than Courveille's proposals.

Does this process account fully for all the facts that make up, from 1816 to 1870, the difficult history of the relationship between these two priests? It is not our task to prove this here. Again, we are dealing with a long chain that needs to be rebuilt, and many studies on particular points will be needed before we can reach that point. It is enough, at this point, that we tried to set as solidly as possible the starting point of an explanation by showing that, historically, Father Colin had plans for a society before he went to the major seminary. The reader will decide whether we succeeded.»

2) What do we know about the project around which Courveille rallied his fellow seminarians before 23 July 1816?

In one sentence, it can be said that Courveille's 1812 inspiration at Le Puy was part of that project, and that this inspiration had to do with Mary present in the Church at the beginning and at the end. But the question can be answered with some nuance only by taking into account what is said about it in *Origines maristes*, what Coste wrote in his essay on *The Role of Mary at the Birth of the Church and at the End of Time* (in *Acta S. M.*, vol. 5, p. 263-281, 419-451; vol. 6, p. 53-87, 179-197), to all of which must now be added Pierre Colin's letter of 9 October 1819 (published in *Forum Novum*, vol. 4, p. 91-94).

From all that, it can safely be said that a) Colin gave great prominence to that formula throughout his years as superior general; b) he never claimed that these words had been addressed to himself; c) he did not name Courveille as their recipient. In so far as these words can be considered to be the «founding apostolic mythology» of the Society, it is inaccurate to say that Colin kept this to himself. See, for instance, *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 152.

Snijders mentions Theo Kok's remark about the lack of references to this theme in the letters of the missionaries, but there may be other reasons for this, including, for instance, the fact that some of them went to Oceania without having done a proper novitiate. The formula appeared in the 1833 *Summarium* (n. 109) that Colin submitted to Rome. Maître-pierre was the novice master for priests from 1844 to 1864. The notes he wrote for his novices contain this passage: «His (Colin's) modest simplicity never prevented him from believing that the Society of Mary is called to do great things in the Church of God. Mary, he says, protected the Church in its cradle, she will do so in a special way at the end of time» (OM, doc. 752, § 43).

3) What do we know about the rule on which Colin worked in Cerdon?

Again, the topic cannot be dealt with in one sentence, but Coste summarized what we know in a few pages that can be read in his book, *Studies on the Early Ideas of Jean-Claude Colin - I*, p. 16-24 and 224-232.

4) What was the role of Courveille from 1816 to 1826?

I would characterize it in this way: a) he claimed the title of superior general; b) he tended to appropriate to himself the work of others; c) Champagnat trusted him until 1826; d) Colin kept his distance from as early as 1819; e) from 1819 on, the leadership of the Marist project was in the hands of the Colin brothers, and more especially of Jean-Claude.

a) see his signatures from 1822 to 1828 as listed in OM 4, p. 520 (n. 15-27); see Brother Jean-Baptiste's account of his attempt to get himself elected superior of the brothers (OM, doc. 757, § 27-31);

b) as a curate in Rive-de-Gier, Courveille tried to recruit candidates for his Sisters of Mary from a group of sisters founded by the parish priest (see OM 4, p. 178). Later, at Verrières, he wanted an association of the Holy Family that existed there «to be the third order of Mariists» (OM, doc. 105, § 1);

c) up to 1826, Courveille was co-owner of the brothers' houses of l'Hermitage and Lavalla (see OM, doc. 166, 167);

d) back in 2001, I wrote: «In the eyes of the companions and of Vicar General Bochard, Courveille set himself off as leader of the group, and in his letter of October 9, 1819, Pierre Colin still fully recognized that quality in him. Jean-Claude Colin recounted, however, much later on, that his hesitations regarding Courveille went back to the very first years. Jeantin noted in this regard: "Up to 1817 or 1818, Fr. Colin was in correspondence with Fr. Courveille; the latter wrote to him to ask him for money and to advise Colin to acknowledge his position. Colin wrote back that he no longer wanted to continue the relationship" (OM, doc. 839, § 12). In fact, the relationship continued at least until November 1824, when Colin still wrote to Courveille, but undoubtedly Colin no longer had confidence in the latter after 1819. Colin believed in the Society of Mary, but he felt that, left in Courveille's hands, the project would founder» (reprinted in Gaston Lessard sm, *Devenir mariste*, Saint-Augustin, 2015, p. 52).

My hypothesis is that the shift in leadership took place between February and October 1819. The basis for this is that a letter written to Pope Pius VII in February 1819 was sent to Rome by Jean-Antoine Gillibert the younger, who was then in Lyon and who had acquaintances in Rome (see OM 4, p. 289). By the following October, the steps toward getting the Society of Mary recognized had their starting point in Cerdon, through Pierre Colin's letter to Bishop Bigex of Pinerolo. Jean-Claude Colin's vow to go to Rome probably took place at that time (see my article in *Forum Novum*, vol. 2, p. 279-280) and marked the turning point.

At the same time, we must not forget that, in November 1821, the Marist aspirants were still hoping to get the Society of Mary started at Le Puy (see OM, doc. 68).

5) What interaction took place between Courveille and Colin during those same years?

Up to 1819, I think Colin was content to be in the shadow of Courveille. The special graces that led Colin to work on the rule were taking place, but Courveille would not have been aware of them. Pretty early on, Colin would have had reservations about Courveille's tendency to put himself forward, but he himself did not want to be in the limelight. In January 1822, Courveille signed the letter to Pius VII. I think that he did not write it, but he certainly read it and saw what was said there about constitutions: «We have these constitutions, not taken from any book or from any other constitutions; and we hope to submit them to Your Holiness and also to let you know clearly whence we have them» (OM, doc. 69, § 4). There is no indication that Courveille wrote constitutions, but we do not know what he made of what he read there. We can only suppose that he did not make a fuss.

What else can be said about the interaction between those two? There were visits, but how many took place and when is not clear. What is clear is that Courveille was not in Cerdon on 25

January 1822, because on that day he performed a funeral in Épercieux, two days away from Cerdon (see OM, doc. 70; and OM 1, p. 262). There was also at least one letter, that of 29 November 1824 (OM, doc. 122), which is polite but little more. The situation can still fairly be described as one where Courveille is allowed to stand in front, but where Colin has taken charge of establishing the contacts that matter, namely with the authorities in Belley and Lyon as well as in Rome. It is difficult to say how long that situation could have lasted, but the crisis of 1826 resolved that problem.

I do not wish to go on. I have no desire to enter into controversy with confrères whom I esteem. But I do wish to register my disappointment at such a cavalier dismissal of Colin.