

## Marist history and Spirituality / Histoire et spiritualité mariste

### Father Colin and Spiritual Leadership

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#### Introduction

In this input I try to specify my understanding of spiritual leadership. A fragment of a conversation of Father Colin could be of help. The text is part of a conference given by Fr. Colin on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1847, during the summer retreat in Puylata. The words of our Founder are handed on to us by Fr. Mayet and the fragment we read is taken from the collection edited by Fr. Jean Coste: *A Founder Speaks* (Nr. 142, 21):

‘Another thing, Messieurs, if the Society is to prosper and its houses be houses of saints, the superior must understand the position he occupies. He must remember that he is the representative of Jesus Christ, and that he is entrusted with his little flock in a very special way. Let everything else give way before the duties of his office. The superior is not responsible just for keeping order but for seeing that each of the members of his community grow in virtue, and for helping them to reach their goal of perfection. The superior is one who guides, who comforts, who urges on. I stress that more than ever. We are growing in numbers; it is important to grow in Jesus Christ. Our confrères from Bordeaux and Agen are at present on retreat also, at Verdélais. I have just written to them, with the sole intention of urging the superiors to take good care of the interior life of their subjects. Each superior must see his subjects at least once a month to sound out where they stand spiritually. If one of them is engaged in some struggle, is enduring some kind of onslaught, the superior must see him more often. If he sees that someone else is growing lax, he should see him more often still, to encourage him, to set him on his feet again, so that he will stand his ground. There should be a spiritual conference each week in every house, which is faithfully kept to and which the superior should give, or have someone else give.’

We have here a text which has a lot to offer. I shall first present four important elements that, according to Father Colin, constitute the role of the superior. I then want to see how spiritual leadership relates to the other elements of the role of the superior.

#### 1. Four dimensions of the role of a superior

**1.1 The sacramental dimension.** Colin starts underlining what I would like to call ‘the sacramental dimension’ of the role of the superior: ‘*The superior must understand the position he occupies. He must remember that he is the representative of Jesus Christ.*’ When I say that here a sacramental view upon the role of the superior comes through, I use the word ‘sacramental’ in a broad and analogous sense. From this sacramental perspective the visible, the audible, the tangible, the historical are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence.<sup>1</sup> Using this language to characterize the role of the superior, is today less common among religious. Nevertheless, a long tradition tells us that there are times, when the superior echoes a voice that comes from elsewhere. Many founders, from Benedict to Fr. Colin, speaking about superiors, remind us in their rules of the word of Jesus: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me’ (Luke 10:16).<sup>2</sup> The image of the superior as the ‘spokesman of the Lord’ has old and respectable credentials, but it seems to many people, many religious included, hard to reconcile with leadership in the modern sense of the word.

**1.2 Spiritual direction.** Let us now pass on to the last part of the text and see what Fr. Colin wrote to the confrères at Verdélais, where they were on retreat. Here we find, perhaps to our

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<sup>1</sup> Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London 1994, 10

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Letter of the Superior General, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2006. Luke 10:16 is cited in numbers 432 and 433 of Colin’s constitutions of 1873.

surprise that Fr. Colin wanted to see the superior take on the role of a spiritual director. In former centuries, the majority of founders, Colin included, had no objection to impose, by rule, spiritual direction by the superior. Let us listen to him again in this same passage of *A Founder Speaks*: “I have just written to them [the confrères gathering in Verdélais] with the sole intention of urging the superiors to take good care of the interior life of their subjects. Each superior must see his subjects at least once a month to sound out where they stand spiritually.” Today such a directive would make us raise our eyebrows, but it was the application of a practice used by the majority of religious congregations since the time of St. Ignatius.<sup>3</sup> Colin consecrates an entire article to it in the ‘Common Rules’ in the 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter of his constitutions.<sup>4</sup> He says: ‘It is extremely important that they be perfectly known to the superior as regards both the inner and the outer man.’<sup>5</sup> This is why Colin encourages the Marists to open their hearts to their *major* superiors from time to time and to report to their *immediate* superiors at least once a month.<sup>6</sup> In the eyes of Colin, opening the heart provided the ideal opportunity for the superior to exercise his spiritual leadership, and at the same time gave the subject a guarantee of advancing on the road of sanctity.<sup>7</sup> The *link between* the role of the superior as spiritual guide *and* his hierarchical role as superior is even so close in Colin’s mind that, when speaking of spiritual direction, he seems not to think first of all of the spiritual director, in our sense of the word, but of the superior.

**1.3 Administration.** There are two elements in the role description of the superior to which our Founder, in this text, does not seem to pay much attention. It is the organisational aspect, the task of administering the human and other resources of the entity which he is serving, and the juridical aspect, the task to legally represent the community within the Church and within the civil Society and to use, wherever this serves the well-fare of the community, the powers that are intrinsic to his office. The dimension of the official administrator, or the administrative officer, is not completely lacking in the text we have in front of us. Fr. Colin alludes to it when he says that ‘*the superior is not responsible just for keeping order*’. Order here has a rather broad range of meanings, from discipline and organizational tidiness to legal solidity. Colin knows of course that in this broad sense of the word, ‘keeping order’ is a very important aspect of the role of a superior, but, in the context of a retreat dealing with things spiritual, he doesn’t stress this element.

**1.4 Spiritual leadership.** What he does stress is a fourth dimension of the role of the superior, the one of spiritual leadership. ‘*The superior is responsible for seeing that each of the members of his community grows in virtue, and for helping them to reach their goal of perfection. The superior is one who guides, who comforts, who urges on. I stress that more than ever.*’ Although Colin in our text is remarkably preoccupied with the spiritual life of the individual confreres, on the internal as well as on the external level, the ultimate goal is the Society to prosper and its houses to become ‘houses of saints’. The Society which is growing in members should ‘*grow in Jesus Christ*’. I call this dimension of the role of the superior the ‘*agogic*’ one. ‘*Agoogos*’ means ‘guide’, and ‘*agogic*’ refers to ‘a person or thing that leads or incites to action.’<sup>8</sup> Colin says in our text that before everything else the superior has to be the one who guides, who calls, who gathers people and challenges communities and their members to promote the goals of the Society, namely, first of all – and this is the goal most stressed in the text – the personal growth of each of

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<sup>3</sup> The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. XI, p. 1070, defines opening up to the superior as follows: “The ascetical practice by which a subject discloses regularly to his superior, according to the rules of the Constitutions, all that touches his personal life: character, aspirations, calls, accomplished efforts, but also the negative side of his life, physical or mental hidden illness, temptations, habitual moral weaknesses, provocative circumstances etc. It means that one makes oneself known as far as possible to the person who is in charge of organising the life of the group...”

<sup>4</sup> *Constitutions* 1873, no. 207-211.

<sup>5</sup> *Constitutions* 1873, no. 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Constitutions* 1872, n.107.

<sup>7</sup> *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 44, 1: The opening of the conscience is “the safest way of not losing one’s way and of preserving peace.”

<sup>8</sup> www.collinsdictionary.com

its members, but always in view of the spiritual growth of the whole community. As I attempt to figure out the idea of spiritual leadership, I do not think at first of the sacramental or administrative dimension of the role of the superior, nor do I primarily think of his role as spiritual director. Spiritual leadership refers to the superior in his 'agogic' role, his role of guiding, calling, uniting and challenging his community.

## 2. Four dimensions: un-mixed and un-separated

**2.1 Leadership and representation of Christ.** In saying that subjects when they hear their superiors are hearing Christ, Benedict and Colin are using sacramental language. One of the characteristics of this language is that to a certain extent it does not emphasize quantities and qualities. The sacramental character of bread does not increase with its weight or size. Similarly the sacramental role of the superior, strictly speaking, does not directly depend on his virtues and human qualities, even those that are a *sine qua non* for every leader. Father Colin does not hesitate about saying in his constitutions: *'Let them pay no attention to the person, the virtues or other qualities of the one they obey, but only to our Lord Jesus Christ, for whose sake they obey'*.<sup>9</sup> Of course, our Founder does not want to say that a religious superior can do without virtues or other qualities. He would be very tough on any superior who would not care for developing his virtues and skills, under the pretext that his sacramental role of being a representative of Christ would substitute for all this. When he stresses the sacramental dimension of the role of the superior, our Founder has less the one who commands than the one who obeys in mind. Religious should not obey because of the qualities and virtues of the superior, but because of Christ. They are entitled to expect from their superior wise and well informed leadership, but in the end their obedience should not be grounded on the virtues and qualities of the superior, but on the fact that he is the representative of Christ. This is a long standing conviction in the spiritual tradition of the Church. To understand it rightly, we should see it, as I said, within an enlarged concept of sacramentality. Pope Benedict XVI spoke a few years ago of 'the sacrament of the brother', referring to St. John Chrysostom, to explain how we meet Christ in the poorest of our brothers. Believers meet Christ also in their brothers and sisters who show them the way to the kingdom of God. Are religious then not entitled to hope that they may meet Christ in their brothers and sisters that are officially called to mirror the image of the Good Shepherd? True, superiors who pride themselves on their status of being representatives of Christ, easily fall for very earthly manipulations, but this is not a reason to do away with this sacramental perspective of leadership, handed on to us by great spiritual leaders such as St. Benedict and Fr. Colin.

**2.2 Leadership and administration.** By insisting on spiritual leadership, I do not wish to suggest that, in addition to his administrative tasks, a superior should also consecrate time to things spiritual. I am not saying either that the one who opens and closes each meeting with the most beautiful prayer, is also the best spiritual leader. Spiritual leadership consists largely in the pursuit of spiritual ends with administrative instruments.<sup>10</sup> In the text we study, we see Colin at work during a retreat, and therefore very explicitly concerned with the spiritual welfare of the confreres, but also a retreat has to be organized and somebody has to take the initiative. The organization aspect is an administrative tool to obtain a spiritual goal. There were of course many other administrative tools which Colin used in order to foster the spiritual goals of the Society. He had to prepare agendas for meetings, negotiate with Church leaders, plan and evaluate missions and ministries, raise funds for Oceania, supervise the financial administration carried out by his bursars, work on 'the Rule', supervise the observance of the existing rules, organize initial and on-going formation, etc. In a religious community the buying of a property, the closing of a school, or the setting of criteria for admission to the Society is never a purely or mainly administrative matter. I remember once attending a provincial council meeting. The morning had started with the Eucharist and a beautiful homily on the importance of sharing after the example of Christ. Then

<sup>9</sup> Constitutions 1873, nrs. 432 and 433.

<sup>10</sup> *With a more lively confidence*, Rome, 2005, 38.

the meeting started. One point of the agenda was a request made by an institution for handicapped children to buy a part of the land of one of our houses to extend the playing grounds. One of the councillors said that selling that part would considerably reduce the value of the whole property, in case we would have to sell it afterwards. Without any discussion of or reference to the beautiful homily the request was unanimously turned down. I am not sure whether the outcome would have been different, if the major superior had given proof of spiritual leadership, but the process certainly would have been different. The matter was handled as if financial profitability were the goal of the provincial community, whereas it is a means, no less no more.

**2.3 Leadership and spiritual direction.** It is not difficult to imagine the problems that could arise from combining the different roles of superior and spiritual director. As a matter of fact combining them did lead to abuse in practice, given that superiors do not all possess the charismas of prudence and discretion to the same degree. This has been a problem throughout history but combining these roles touches a modern nerve in a very particular way, and raises questions of principle. These objections deal with the rights of the person, the inviolability of a person's conscience, and the connection between exercising authority in the internal and the external forum. How could one avoid using confidential communication at an administrative level? That is why Rome, in 1890, repealed in all the constitutions of non-clerical religious congregations, stipulations calling for an account of conscience to be given to the superior.<sup>11</sup> The regulations of this decree were taken up again, and extended to all religious, in the Code of 1917. Consequently after 1917, our Society changed its constitutions: opening up to the superior was reduced to external conduct and it should always be free and spontaneous. So, it was forbidden from then on for superiors to question confreres on matters concerning the internal forum. So today Canon Law - apart from certain exceptions - prohibits the rule of religious orders to contain any obligation for religious to open their interior life to their superiors. But if this is the case, why still mention this preoccupation of Colin? There are two reasons for it. First I deal with the issue, because the directives and the example of our Founder cannot leave us indifferent. Secondly, I deal with it because the discussion about whether or not opening one's heart to the superior can help us clarify and specify the concept of the superior's spiritual leadership today: what it should and what it should *not* imply. Our congregation, in its constitutions, did not wish to continue the tradition of opening ones heart to the superior, even in the mitigated form conceded by canon law.<sup>12</sup> Mainly, without doubt, for fear of confusing internal and external forum, that is, for fear that confidential secrets might be used at the administrative level. Actually, experience has shown that the superior should always be careful not to allow himself to get entangled in a confidential relationship which paralyses his administrative freedom of action. Many superiors, who recently had to deal with questions of sexual abuse, have learnt this at their cost. It is not without reason that one of the most accredited commentaries on the 1983 Code thinks that the Code would have done better not to allow at all the possibility of opening one's conscience, even though it be free and spontaneous.<sup>13</sup> The spiritual direction, which our constitutions speak about on two occasions,<sup>14</sup> is therefore quite different from spiritual leadership. The spiritual director is chosen freely. His relationship with the person directed lasts until either the religious or the director terminates it. The religious gives him access to the internal forum. On the other hand, the superior is appointed by the congregation. He is appointed for a definite period and he concentrates on the external forum. But that the superior has to concentrate on the external forum does of course in no way imply he had not the right, and sometimes even the duty, to address personal questions. Only the area of his questioning has to be well specified. He will see how the person's external behaviour fits in with the spiritual, community- and mission values of the congregation. In all this, more than ever to-day the superior needs a spirit of discretion and charity and must always have respect for

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<sup>11</sup> Decree *Quemadmodum* (17 December 1890).

<sup>12</sup> See Gaston Lessard, *Constitutions de la Société de Marie. Matériaux pour aider à l'étude des constitutions de 1988, II*, Rome 1990, 33f.

<sup>13</sup> *Münsterischer Kommentar zum Codex Iuris Canonici*, C. 630, par. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Constitutions*, no. 100 and 123.

consciences. But he keeps the right to watch and question. Lifestyles, spending, vacations, travel, prayer, friendships, periods of renewal, are not simply private affairs which only slightly concern, or don't concern at all, the community and the mission.

### **Conclusion**

Spiritual leadership is something different from sacramental representation of Christ. It is also quite different from the role of the superior in the administrative and legal field, and, at least today, it is mostly incompatible with spiritual direction in as far as spiritual direction is about the internal forum. But, if it is true that the four dimensions of the role of the superior cannot be mixed up, they cannot be separated either. The superior finds himself in a complex field of responsibilities, but what makes his task spiritual is that all its dimensions are ultimately aimed at the spiritual welfare of the community which is called to grow in Christ, day by day. Contrary to what people often believe, a greater emphasis on individual responsibility has made the task of a superior more demanding, not less. To be a superior in a culture centred on the individual is more demanding than to exercise authority in a culture where the group would prevail over the individual. Each superior has to learn how to walk a tightrope in order to find the balance between the tender care for the needs of the individual and the pursuit of the ends of the institute. That is why formation of superiors, and especially of local superiors, was made a priority by CS 2005.<sup>15</sup> Our 2009 General Chapter has taken up this concern: *'By 2011, in dialogue with the general administration, provinces/districts will introduce training for local superiors as spiritual leaders of local communities.'*<sup>16</sup> So, this present meeting seems to provide a timely opportunity of seeing together where we are. The Society can only flourish if the development of international structures is counterbalanced by a growing concern for local communities, the smallest cells of the organism of our Society.

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<sup>15</sup> Council of the Society 2005, Mexico, 3.3.

<sup>16</sup> General Chapter 2009, SD 25.