

**Marist Ethos in a Global World.**  
**90 Years St. Mary's College Blackburn<sup>1</sup>**  
*Alois Greiler sm*

To celebrate 90 Years St Mary's College allows me to highlight the global dimension of the Marist ethos. From the beginnings, Marists travelled to the 'ends of the earth' and England proved to be the bridge. Which are the elements of continuity in 90 years full of change? Elements of continuity build up identity. I search for a double continuity: continuity into the past – the link with the Marist origins, and continuity into the future – the Marist ethos transparent for today. Specific to this school is the fact that it echoes the global dimension of the Marist enterprise, and this is topical in a world which has become a 'global village'. Marist ethos focuses on people with religion as resource. The name of the school refers to Mary of Nazareth. She exemplifies the manner of doing things and connects Marists past and present. Examples of continuity and discontinuity may help us to reflect on the 'Marist ethos in St Mary's College Blackburn' (SMC) set in the global world of today.<sup>2</sup>

What struck me during my first visits to the school in May this year was the richness of images full of symbolic meaning. The Marist founder, Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) used images to give words to Marist spirituality. So I will use some of these images in the school.

### **1 Former pupils**

Schools prepare their former pupils. We try to prepare young people for their career in life. The booklet for the Silver Jubilee in 1950 shows former prefects.<sup>3</sup> One of them became a Marist priest and left for the Pacific in 1963: Norman Arkwright, born in 1932. He worked in the Solomon Islands for over 40 years and then returned home. Today he lives not far from his former school. Norman also appears in the introduction to his article 'The Spirit Cult at Buma' in the Golden Jubilee booklet of 1975:<sup>4</sup>

*"Fr. Norman Arkwright S.M., an old boy and past member of staff of the College, has kindly given us the following article which he wrote for a missionary magazine and which highlights the differences in education here and in the South Seas."*

Note the pride to refer to a former pupil now a Marist father. And the distinction: 'us here – they in the South Seas'. In his time, Norman had to travel to the 'ends of the world' as seen from Blackburn, to experience a multi-cultural and multi-religious world. In our time, we find it at home. Father Norman was a Marist pupil and lived the Marist ethos after school, here as Marist priest and missionary, a wished-for example of Marist ethos and religious ethos in his time. Today we still hope to equip youth with an ethos helpful in their life after school in a global world albeit in different ways.

As we celebrate 90 years SMC I thought Norman's story reflects continuity and discontinuity in the life of the school, in the life of the Marist Fathers, and in the Marist Ethos of the school, our topic.

The discontinuity in his story is evident: It is boys and girls today, it is a different age range, the school buildings have changed, the role of the Marist Fathers is minimal, it is a lay school, and pride of place as 'former pupils' take people known from sports and art and economy as the magnified photos in the corridors show.

The continuity in Norman's story is the person – a former pupil who practiced Marist values on a global level and in fact was an actor in the global world, living in a place of different cultures

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<sup>1</sup> See the booklet *St Mary's College: Our 90<sup>th</sup> Year*, Blackburn, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For further reflections on the hermeneutics of Marist ethos in schools today: Alois Greiler sm, *Marist Ethos in Our Schools Then and Now*, in *Forum Novum* 14 (2012) 114 – 122; Id., *The One-Page Rule. Colinian Inspiration for Independent Thinking in Marist Education Today*, in *Forum Novum* 16 (2014) 9-14.

<sup>3</sup> *St Mary's College Blackburn. The First 25 Years 1925-1950*, Blackburn, 1950.

<sup>4</sup> *St Mary's College Blackburn. Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1925-1975*, Blackburn, p. 32-34.

and faiths. And whatever happens, it will always be about persons, be it on a local or be it on a global level. That is why education is so important.

## 2 English Marists and Marist origins

To talk about the kingdom of God Jesus often started like this: ‘What can we say that the kingdom is like? What parable can we find for it (Mk 4:30)?’ Then a little story follows to make a point. To link up the Marist ethos today with the Marist origins I choose the story of Marist beginnings, the missionaries in the Pacific, and the place of England in this story.

England and the English Marists played the important role of a bridge for the Marists responding to the growing globalization.<sup>5</sup> In 1836 the Society of Mary received papal approval as well as the mission to the Western Pacific. Globalization, a process starting in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, had fully reached the Pacific in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The complex of economic, political, scientific, and cultural forces had reached the islands in different stages. The missionaries followed – to offer a human alternative in this process. The first Marists fought the vices brought to the local people by the white sailors and traders. The Marists thought they could offer a ‘soft globalization’. Local people finally accepted the new religion as a better system to cope with their world which had changed so much.

Already in 1843 Colin made plans for a house in London to serve the missionaries leaving for the Pacific, to serve local needs, and to recruit English speaking vocations. In 1850 and 1865 Marist houses were opened in London. After 1850 colonialism spread in the Pacific, the English language won further in importance for the islands and for new Marist foundations in Ireland as well as in the United States. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, England was a bridge to reach out. The foundation of schools was to win vocations and to turn to local needs. The first school started in Middlesbrough in 1903.

Then came the 1920ies which Phil Graystone sm, former headmaster, describes as follows:<sup>6</sup>

“The decade of the nineteen-twenties is a memorable one in the history of the Anglo/Irish province. ... The thirteen months from September 1<sup>st</sup> 1924 to September 30<sup>th</sup> 1925 were perhaps the most adventurous in the history of the Anglo/Irish province, for within that short period three new Marist Colleges were opened – a great act of Faith in a province which was certainly not over-endowed either in manpower or resources. The first to open was St. Mary’s Sidcup, in September 1924. It was followed in 1925 by Marist College, Hull and St. Mary’s College Blackburn.”

The growth continued to the 1980ies.<sup>7</sup> Then the fall of vocations hit the Society of Mary also in England. In 1993 the last Marist Father as headmaster of Blackburn retired.

There is a heritage specific to any Marist project in England. England was something like the bridge to the global world, with the language, the travel and financial network, and the openness for international as well as for local needs.

### Oceania: The humility to learn

England was a bridge to reach Oceania. One major element from Marist origins in the Pacific is the experience of learning from reality and changing one’s culturally bounded views. A Marian virtue is humility. And to be open to learn from mistakes, to learn from the other requires much of this virtue.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Snijders sm, *A Mission Too Far... Pacific Commitment*, Adelaide, ATF, 2012, emphasizes the advance of the Oceania mission once the Marists used London as a base for travel, finance, communication, and language.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Graystone sm, *Society of Mary (Marist Fathers and Brothers) in England from 1850 to 2001*, Marist Fathers England, here p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> For other foundations in English speaking countries see for 1854-1885 Bernard Bourtot sm (ed.), *Julien Favre. Second supérieur général de la Société de Marie (1854-1885). Documents pour l’étude du généralat Favre*, vol. 3 (1880-1885) *Annexes (doc. 1159-1289)*, Rome, 2012, p. 1994-1996: 1855-1869 Romford near London, parish; 1861 Dundalk; 1863 USA St. Michael’s Louisiana; 1864 USA New Orleans; 1867 Dublin CUS; 1881 Mary’s Hill Paignton; 1882 Massachusetts; 1884 Van Buren (Maine) and Boston; 1885 San Francisco; for offers refused 1854-1885 see *ibid.*, p. 1997-2002: 1854 September, Scotland; 1880 May, Gibraltar; for the development in modern times Graystone, *Society of Mary England*.

The first Marists in the Pacific came in the exclusive religious and cultural mentality of their time. The other Christian denominations in the Pacific were regarded as worse enemy than the religion of the local people. The religion of the local people was regarded as barbarian compared to the high civilized status of Christianity. Local culture was either seen in an over-idealistic fashion or with dislike for customs not understood by white people. Language and treatment of local cultural heritage became expressions of this attitude.

And here, the Marists had their share in mistakes, but they were humble enough to learn. For example, the experience of depending on each other brought some ecumenical openness to the Marists in the Pacific while the idea of ecumenical respect was still banned for the Marists back home in France. In their letters on their way to the Pacific the men would write about the 'savages'. After living with the people they wrote about the 'natives'. While some missionaries did destroy symbols of the local religion, the Marists overall preserved much of the cultural heritage in their long letters, scientific studies, and preservation of objects sent back home to France.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous were not forced to learn French prayers and hymns. Fathers Bataillon and Chanel for example translated Catholic prayers and hymns into the local language. Chanel had much difficulty to learn Futunian. This is also true – to learn the language of the other is difficult. The missionaries were not the only or leading actors. The local people played an active role in integrating the new ideas and new material goods into their respective internal power struggles and confrontation with the newcomers to their islands.

The global world became a reality in the Pacific. The question was not, do we want it? The question was, how do we relate to it? And here the Marists tried to offer a peaceful and respectful way in as much as they could. They got inspiration from the Marist religious ethos and from Marian humility to turn to the people and to learn to appreciate plurality.

### 3 The Marist Ethos in schools: elements of continuity

The link with Marist origins and the worldwide Society of Mary is one important element of continuity providing identity. It gives the name, the family, the common story, common symbols and persons and places we can refer to. This makes up part of our identity, and it means something to us. It is about our roots.

Continuity and discontinuity is today found in the use of Marist names. The booklet for the golden jubilee lists the school roll for 1975/76. There we read:<sup>9</sup>

"Form 1 Chanel, Colin, Eymard // Form 2 Chanel, Colin, Eymard // Form 3 Chanel, Colin, Eymard // Form 4 Simison, Duckworth, Westhead, Eastham, Rose // Form 5 Whelan, O'Neill, Holt, Wynn // Form 6 Lower Science, Lower Arts, Upper Science, Upper Arts".

I was touched by the use of Marist names like Chanel, Colin, and Eymard as late as 1976. How are the groups called today? Could those Marist names come up in other ways?

Another element of a Marist ethos would be the humility to learn from another as did the first Marists in the globalized Pacific. To me this is immediately transparent in a city and school like here in Blackburn which reflects our global world.

In the Marist beginnings, the ratio teacher – students was 1 to seven. Thus, personal knowledge was possible. The booklet for the golden jubilee gives a modern expression of this when it says the headmasters highlighted the importance of the individual person and how they will fare later in life, in terms of knowledge and of values.

<sup>8</sup> Mervyn Duffy sm, *The Work of Mary versus the Work of the Devil. The Ecclesiology of the Early Marist Missionaries*, in A. Greiler sm (ed.), *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania. Marist Missionary Perspectives*, Adelaide, atf, 2009, 143-155; Antoine Forissier sm, *Ancien élève et ancien professeur en 1872. Illustration des conflits de l'époque sur les idées modernes*, Ms, Rome, 1993; Id., *La "science" ecclésiastique au temps du père Colin et du père Favre*, in FN 3, 2 (1996) 170-181; Charles Girard sm (ed.), *Lettres reçues d'Océanie par l'administration générale des pères maristes pendant le généralat de Jean-Claude Colin, Textes revus, corrigés et ajoutés, 1836 – 1854*, 10 volumes, Paris, Éditions Karthala – Société de Marie (Pères Maristes), 2009-2010; Claire Laux, *Les missionnaires et la mémoire des civilisations polynésiennes*, in RHEF 89 (2003) 69-80. See the preservation of objects in practically all Marist regions and houses.

<sup>9</sup> *St Mary's College Blackburn, Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1925-1975*, p. 6-10: School Roll 1975/76.

Discontinuity is found in space. The original building was left for the present site. The number of Marist schools in England changed. New forms of continuity are established with the European Marist Education Network. The face of the globe is changing – from a world centred round the Atlantic Ocean to a world centred round the Pacific Ocean. And the Marists are there with a mission.

Let me return to the images in your school. On the ground floor I find the ‘Memorial Wall’. There you honour the deceased and the victims of a global war. Could this place of memory and forbearers extend to the Marist founders, for example with an image of Peter Chanel, representing the Marists from the beginning acting in a global dimension?

The ‘Memorial Wall’ shows an image of the Holy Family. Your school bears the name ‘St Mary’s College’. Looking at the Marist foundations in England, you may think these people lacked imagination: Middlesbrough – St Mary’s, Paignton – St Mary’s, Hull – St Mary’s, Blackburn – St Mary’s... In fact, this does not refer to a lack of imagination but to a richness of imagination. Colin drafted his ideal of Marist life inspired by the image of the Holy Family of Nazareth, the very image on your wall. This house was to be a house of a Marian and religious spirit. Your image is rightly placed and contains meaning still to be explored. Colin pushed the imagination from the Holy Family to a Marian church, pilgrim and servant, a vision many Marists see reflected in ideas of Pope Francis.

As context I made reference to the global world we are living in. People draw on the advantages of such a world – travel, variety of food, access to news and entertainment. But people often do not feel at home in such a vast world. The growing globalization is met by a growing search for a core group, for people to whom I belong, for some form of family. Is the school-family answering this need? The first Marist schools were boarding schools: ‘school’ was everything – place of academic learning, of living, of friends, of my daily routine. A modern school separates the private from the professional. Still, the idea of a school-family, of a family spirit belongs to a Marist school and wins new relevance in the search for belonging in a global world.

Mary is often presented as the mother. Marist historian Jean Coste (1926-1994) does not want this misunderstood. A mother is not only nice and supportive. A mother is an educator and sets limits. Colin invites Marists to be like mother Mary – to be responsible as a mother is in her family and house.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Colin, Mary wanted certain things totally excluded from her ‘house’. Colin phrased this as the three no’s – no to greed, to power, and to ambition. To say ‘no’ remains important: no to racism, no to violence, no to abuse.

Another Marist key we find in the *Acts of the Apostles*, 1:14. Colin referred six times to this verse and often to the early Church as normative ideal. From the Gospel of Mark (3, 20-21.31-35) we know that earlier there was a tension between the natural and the spiritual family of Jesus, his siblings and his disciples. Acts 1:14 describes the early Church: the disciples, Mary, and members of Jesus’ natural family. Mary brings both groups, formerly in tension, together. Mary stands for unity – in her house, in her school.

In front of the school we see the Marist crest, the foundation stone bearing the name of a Marist Father, the Marist name of the school, and the motto ‘striving for excellence’. Last not least a school is about learning. Colin had it placed in the Marist formation programs and the Marist rule of life – be very good in academia, and, be very good Christians.

This leads me to another aspect of the Marist ethos of a Marist school yesterday and tomorrow, the religious ethos, a core of any Marist ethos.

#### **4 The religious Ethos: change and continuity**

The religious ethos at the time of the silver jubilee was straight forward: Marist fathers teaching Catholic boys with a strong hope to win vocations for their order or the Church and for the foreign missions. And Norman Arkwright is our example of this early period. Or, as a German

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Coste sm, *Une vision mariale de l'Église: Jean-Claude Colin - A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean-Claude Colin* (Maristica, 8), Edited by Gaston Lessard sm, Rome, 1998, p. 268-270: To call Mary our mother does not mean we remain ‘children’, but that we become responsible.

confrere says: 'I was more Marist as a Marist border than as a Marist father'. The day was structured around prayers, study, and some free time. This lasted until the 1960s.

Then we read with Kevin O'Neill, headmaster, looking back in 1975:<sup>11</sup>

"Parents and students listening to the Headmaster's reports at speech nights in those days could not fail to be struck by academic success (the first Oxbridge awards), sports achievements (in 1959 16 school athletic records were broken) and cultural activity (ambitious dramatic productions followed one upon another). But also and always they would hear, like some monastery bell tolling in the distance, a quiet and incessant recall to the Gospel: "The acid test is the personal catholic life of each individual boy; and we may ask parents to co-operate closely with us in the academic and moral education of their sons, bearing in mind that the most outstanding academic achievement means nothing unless it is coupled with habits of true Christian living."

As if in response to this plea, in 1958 three old boys were ordained Marist priests in the school chapel – Myles Moriarty, Reginald Riley and Norman Arkwright – and in 1960 Philip Graystone was appointed Provincial Superior of the English Marist Fathers."

The understanding of religious ethos changed.

Kevin O'Neill continues:

"Perhaps the following words indicate where the stress ought to be laid in an assessment of 1967 to 1975: "In the midst of all this activity it is easy to forget that the school is about people, about the individual boy and his efforts to find his place in life, his growth as a person." (Speech Night report, 1970). ... I think Hamlet was right:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."<sup>12</sup>

Emphasis now laid on human development and a sense of the divine illustrated by a quote from classical English literature. I think that echoes well the spirit of the time.

Now, 90 years after the foundation, we see a development from a strictly Catholic and Christian ethos to emphasis on personal development and, finally today to a plurality of faiths. The School chaplaincy honours the different faiths of people belonging to this school family. Respect for the belief of the other is a sign of our time in a global world. And we need not travel to Oceania to experience this plurality of faiths and cultures, we find it at home. And again, the question is not, do we want it, but rather: how do we relate to it? The experience of the first Marists in the Pacific may help us, their humility to learn, to develop understanding, and to respect the other. Peter Chanel on Futuna, we know it from his diary, lived with the people, ate their food, partook in their different festivals. He was not the isolated missionary preaching against them. He lived with them and won their openness for his religion by his authenticity, goodness, and peaceful approach.

Plurality of religions and cultures close in space is a fruit of multiple modernity moving people constantly around the globe. An early understanding of modernity claimed this would lead to a loss of faith. More recent interpretations<sup>13</sup> state that faith continues, different faiths or unbelief exist side by side like restaurants with different food in the same street. The point is not that it doesn't matter which faith. The point is their existence and availability to people. In other words, multiple modernity does not necessarily mean that faith diminishes. It means what it says: different faiths exist and need to respect each other. And with the early Marists a Marist religious ethos joins in both aspects of this insight: fidelity to my own faith – respect for the other faith.

## Conclusion

Elements of continuity into the past, the origins of this school's ethos – elements of continuity into the future of a Marist school directed by lay staff. This double continuity I was aiming at. The

<sup>11</sup> Kevin O'Neill sm, *The Last 25 Years. 1950 to 1975*, in *Golden Jubilee*, p. 44-47.

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Hamlet* (1603), Act 5, Scene 2. The talk was given in the building dedicated to Fr O'Neill at SMC.

<sup>13</sup> Overview in Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, *Die postsäkulare Konstellation. Ein neues Verhältnis von Religion und Vernunft*, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 4 (2015) 265-275 (on Charles Taylor, José Casanova, Talal Asad, and others).

context of both is spreading globalization. For religion, I understand globalization as multiple modernity, different faiths and cultures side by side.

A first element of continuity to form identity can be found in names. What's in a name? The names 'Mary', Marist, Colin, and many images of the school like the foundation stone, the Holy Family, the Marist crest, are points of reference for a common story. Possibly an image of Peter Chanel would be an addition – how do we look at a missionary in the context of globalization then and today?

Other elements go under the headings: the Marist ethos – a religious ethos. And amidst all the change I believe there is continuity: from the jubilee booklets to talking to staff today it is about student-centeredness, about a family spirit, about growth of the individual, about learning for academia and for life, about humility and respect, and about courage to persevere in difficulties. These things are not all specific to a Marist school. A Marist school hopefully invests the extra into the individual student in the attitude of a mother.

The religious ethos changed over the nine decades and yet continued to be a key factor: From Marist Fathers on the staff to a lay staff, from boys only as possible vocations to co-education, from a strictly Catholic school to the richness of different faiths. From the Marist side, I recall Mary as the figure of unity, the person to bring people together.

I began with a reference to Norman Arkwright to establish continuity between the jubilees. I'd like to end with a story around Norman and his school, your school.

On the premises of the old school, before it moved to the present place, a statue of Mary stood. At the new site no place for it was found. This is already an interesting sign of change. At the end, the statue was given to Norman Arkwright for the Solomon Islands. The statue duly arrived in Honiara, however, slightly damaged. Norman wrote to his confrere, Miles Moriarty, on 7 July 2005, talking about the arrival and repair:<sup>14</sup>

“The painter is Matthew Ngongorogi, an enthusiast who has just returned to the church after a couple of years after the tension with a cargo cult movement in the bush. Best wishes to all the residents in the new house. Love – Norman.”

What does this little story tell me?

I am not surprised that the statue was given away. Marist ethos is not Marian devotion. At the same time, I find it a beautiful element of continuity for the school and for Marist links with the Pacific. Blackburn sent a Marian statue there - Norman brought back local art to here. It is the exchange in a global world that happens daily in thousands of ways.

Marist ethos is not Marian devotion. At the same time, Marist means reference to Mary. And that is sometimes a problem for Catholics and others. The answer in Colnian thinking is that Mary is a figure of unity, is inclusive, not exclusive.

Elements for a Marist ethos – but: What holds those together? Coste always emphasised, for Colin it was the reference to and inspiration by Mary, the woman of faith, the mother, and the model of unity which makes the Marist vision cohesive.

Mary as a lay woman opens up continuity in a lay school today.<sup>15</sup> This is to say: discontinuity is a natural process. Yet through what you do and how you do it you can revive the basic Marist ethos given to this school, St Mary's, at its foundation and so continue it towards its centenary.

The Marist story was global from the beginning. Our schools prepare our former pupils to play a supportive and mediating role like Mary in a world more international than before. And, like for the statue arriving in the Solomon Islands, it will always be the renewed enthusiasm in us for the ethos of our school that will renew enthusiasm in others.

<sup>14</sup> Quote from a letter shown to me by courtesy of Father Moriarty sm, Blackburn, on 9 May 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Coste, *Marian Vision*, p. 252-254.