

To Open Oneself to the Spirit of the Society.
The Rhetoric of a Text
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Preamble

A text so complex in its development and so rich in content as that of *The Spirit of the Society*¹ has allowed for innumerable approaches to interpretation. Today I would like to focus on the rhetoric of the text itself. In what sort of language is our text written? One expects that a text entitled *De Societatis spiritu* will give us a definition of the spirit of the Society. This presupposition has led several generations of Marists to be disconcerted by the apparent confusion, the hodge-podge, of ideas, virtues, action, and attitudes that one finds there. Fr. Maîtrepierre, theologian, and for many years the Society's master of novices, was himself mystified. Here is his somewhat tongue-in-cheek analysis, already published in Fr. Jean Coste's historical commentary on *The Spirit of the Society*:

The spirit of the Society consists principally in the things enumerated in this article. But how many are there?

1. humility; 2. abnegation; 3. intimate union with God; 4. the most ardent charity towards one's neighbor; 5. flight from the spirit of the world; 6. emptying oneself of all cupidity; 7. lack of all self-seeking; 8. profound abnegation; 9. seeking only the interests of Jesus and Mary; 10. considering ourselves exiles and travelers on the earth; 11. considering ourselves useless servants; 12. the sweepings of the earth; 13. disinterest-edness; 14 avoiding display; 15. ostentation; 16. fleeing all human consideration; 17. love to be unknown; 18. love to be subject to all; 19. not to be deceitful; 20. or sly; 21. to show great poverty everywhere; 22. great humility; 23. great modesty; 24. great simplicity; 25. leave aside the ambition of the world; 26. vanity; 27. love solitude; 28. and silence; 29. practice the hidden virtues; 30. give oneself to the works of zeal; 31. love to be ignored; 32. love the hidden life.

What an ideal for the Marist! What a phenomenal religious! And yet all of that is needed if the Society is to remain in existence; this spirit of 32 points is the bulwark against the Society's enemies; it is the pivot without which the Society cannot move or even turn: *Societatis cardinem et firmamentum*. Thus the Marist worthy of the name would indeed be a superlative religious.

However we can lower the standard a little if we consider the points of resemblance in many of these ideas. Do we not find, in fact, certain similarities in the ideas contained in the following expressions:

1. abnegation, and 2. again abnegation, and 3. considering ourselves the sweepings of the earth by abnegation, and 4. making ourselves subject to all by abnegation.

And 5. humility, and 6. again humility, and 7. modesty which includes humility or is included in humility, and 8. simplicity, which very much resembles humility, and 9. emptying of self-esteem through humility, and 10. to regard themselves as useless servants through humility, and 11. avoidance of display through humility, and 12. avoidance of ostentation through humility, and 13. having so much humility that we flee from the esteem of men, and 14. fleeing from vanity in order to preserve humility, and 15. having enough humility not to give way to ambition.

And 16. to practice the hidden virtues, and 17. to love solitude, that is to say the hidden life, and 18. silence, again the desire for the hidden life, and 19. *amantes nesciri*, love of the hidden life, and 20. *esse ignoti*, love of the hidden life, and 21. *esse occulti*, once more love of the hidden life. These 21 ideas thus refer to three main ones, and even then is there not a certain resemblance even among these three: abnegation, humility, hidden life? Do we find clear-cut shades of meaning here? There is no article so deceptive as this. One reads it with

¹ I refer here to Article X (paragraphs 49 and 50) of the Constitutions of the Society of Mary, 1872. The title of the article in Latin is *De Societatis spiritu*; in English, *The Spirit of the Society*.

a certain edifying satisfaction, and yet, how it pales at the first probing of a most superficial study, of a simple analytical exposition.²

But our text does not offer a definition of the spirit of the Society. The only “definition,” so to speak, that our text presents is that the spirit of the Society is the spirit of Mary herself. This text proposes rather, to Marists, a series of actions; it prescribes certain actions in which we Marists ought to engage. Fr. Jean Coste, in his historical commentary, uses in passing the phrases “spiritual exercise”³ and “fundamental exercises”⁴ to describe the actions that this text wishes to engender in Marists. I propose that paragraph number 49 consists in three great spiritual exercises by which the Marist can open himself to receive the spirit of the Society, that is to say, the spirit of Mary herself; and that paragraph number 50 uses a great metaphor to describe the path or course of action or project on which the text wishes to launch Marists.

I. Number 49

First Exercise

Let them always keep in mind that they belong by gracious choice to the family of blessed Mary, Mother of God, from whose name they are called Marists, and whom they have chosen from the beginning as their model and their first and perpetual superior.

The first exercise recommended to us is to remember something that concerns our identity and the body to which we belong. The expression in the original Latin, *in mente perpetuo teneant*, is quite strong. It speaks of a tenacity of memory, of not forgetting, in Greek *anamnesis*. The *anamnesis* of the Mass is the Eucharistic Prayer in which we call to mind all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, in order to render it present. This manner of praying derives from the Old Testament in which the psalmist urges us to remember the marvels of the Lord:

Recall the wondrous deeds he has done,
his signs and his words of judgment,
You descendants of Abraham his servant,
offspring of Jacob the chosen one!⁵

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, your wonders of old I will remember.
I will recite all your works;
your exploits I will tell.
Your way, O God, is holy;
what god is as great as our God?
You alone are the God who did wonders;
among the peoples you revealed your might.
With your arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.⁶

The creeds in the Old Testament are formularies in which Israel remembers the marvels of the Lord who has liberated their nation from Egypt and constituted them as the people of God. I

² The text of Fr. Maîtrepierre is found in Jean Coste sm, *The Spirit of the Society*, Rome, Via Alessandro Poerio 63, 1963, p. 487f. A typographical error in the English translation has been corrected in accordance with the original French text.

³ Ibid., p. 657.

⁴ Ibid., p. 673.

⁵ Psalm 105:5f.

⁶ Psalm 77:12-16.

notice here in the Province of Quebec that on the license plates on your automobiles, you proclaim to the world: *Je me souviens*: “I remember,” undoubtedly with reference to historical events by which you have been constituted as a people with a culture of your own.

So, exactly what ought we remember as Marists? We remember our identity: that we are of the family of Mary, and that we take our name from Mary. The general chapter of 1872 added the word “Marist,” the name by which we were known. The original intention of the text was that we bear the name Mary itself. That is to say, as Simon was endowed with a new name—Peter—by Jesus at the moment when he gave him the new mission of being the rock on which the Church would be built, so also for us Marists: we are endowed with the name Mary when we make our commitment as Marists, that is, at the very moment when we are endowed with the mission of being the presence of Mary in the Church of our day.

But whence do we derive this identity as Marists? It comes as a privileged choice. The Latin *delectu gratioso* implies “favor,” one can say “grace.” We are chosen. God (or Mary: the subject doing the choosing is not specified) has chosen us to belong to the family of Mary and to bear her name. The initiative comes from God. But this choice needs to be ratified. In response, “from the beginning” (beginning of the Society and beginning of our individual lives as Marists), we have chosen Mary as model and superior.

And what is this initiative of God and this ratification on our part if not the sort of alliance or covenant that one finds in the bible. I do not wish to suggest that God or Mary has made a new covenant with Marists. But I wish to say that by this privileged choice and our ratification, we Marists experience and live in a particular manner the one covenant established in the blood of Christ. And it is this covenant, this name, this family to which we belong, that we ought to call to mind constantly and with tenacity.

Second Exercise

Remembering in itself, however tenacious, is not sufficient. How is it that the name of Mary becomes more than an appellation, how is it that the reality expressed by the name “Mary” becomes the truth of our existence? Let us move on to the second exercise.

If therefore they are and wish to be true sons of this dear Mother, let them continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor.

Here our text seems to define the spirit of the Society, and in two ways. More superficially, it presents us with a list of virtues. But two of these virtues are simply the two commandments of the Law: love of or union with God, and charity toward the neighbor. Self-denial characterizes the life of all who take the spiritual life seriously. Humility is, perhaps, particularly characteristic of Mary: it is the only virtue that Mary names in reference to herself; but it is also the foundation of every spiritual life. All these virtues ought to be practiced by the Marist, especially humility; but not one of them defines the Marist spirit.

On a more profound level, this sentence of our text defines, by implication, the spirit of the Society: it is the very spirit of Mary herself that the Marist ought to draw into himself as if by breathing.

I doubt very much that Fr. Colin knew those oriental methods of prayer in which one synchronizes one’s meditation with one’s breath. Our text uses the word “to breathe” as a metaphor.⁷ But Fr. Colin certainly knew that in several languages, for example Latin and French, the word *spiritus* comes from the same root as the word *respirare*, “to breathe.” So, the Marist

⁷ The French translation does not use the metaphor of breathing. It says “Let them constantly strive to penetrate themselves and animate themselves with her spirit.” This is because an earlier Colinian text, in French, used this expression, and it seemed the origin of the Latin text which nevertheless does use the metaphor of breath and is translated into English as: “to draw on her spirit and breathe it”.

ought to inhale the spirit of Mary, ought to draw it into himself. But, what does “draw in” or “breathe” mean in our context. Of what, precisely, is “breathing” a metaphor here? I believe that Fr. Colin had in view the way in which one is influenced by someone of great importance, for example a parent, a mentor, a friend. It is impossible to define that influence completely with any accuracy: it is an ineffable reality, but nevertheless very true, very important, perhaps the truest and most important thing in life. And that influence takes place through a process whereby one dwells in the presence of the mentor or, at least, one carries the person of the mentor in one’s soul, so to speak. It is a process of osmosis in which the character, the virtues, the personality of the mentor forms us, fashions us, shapes our character. So, in this spiritual exercise that we are considering here, Fr. Colin invites us to hold Mary in our hearts, in our souls, to absorb her spirit, to become Mary, so to speak, to become the one whose name we bear. For, it is this identification with Mary that is the heart of being Marist. Fr. Colin is inviting us to take Mary herself as our Rule of Life.

Third Exercise

The spirit of the Society, the spirit of Mary, is not merely an interior reality, not merely a “spiritual” reality. The spirit of Mary is given to us to exercise an influence on the Church and on the world. So, how can we “translate” this interior spirit into actions that can transform the world? Let us move on to our third exercise.

And so, they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things, otherwise they will be unworthy and degenerate sons.

“To think,” “to judge,” “to feel,” and all of these activities leading to “to act”: this is the language of discernment. I suggest to you that the Holy Spirit inspires in us Marists creative and transformative actions via the person of Mary with whom we have identified ourselves, that is to say, by means of the image of Mary which is found in the Scriptures, in the Tradition and the teaching of the Church, and in the Marist and Colinian spiritual tradition. In striving to think, to judge, to feel as Mary, we make ourselves available to be guided by the Spirit into actions which can advance the work of Mary.

But what does it mean to “think as Mary”? I don’t believe that Mary teaches us some new method of post-Aristotelian logic. No. What is important is not the method, but the direction, the object, of our thoughts. According to Fr. Colin, speaking of Mary, “When Jesus Christ was born, he was the object of all her thoughts, all her affections. After his death, her sole thought was the extension and the development of the mystery of the Incarnation. There you have precisely the mark by which you can recognize a Marist.”⁸ So, to think as Mary means to direct our intellect, our rational power, our entire attention, to the advancement of the Kingdom of God, to the work of Mary, to the mission of the Society.

And to “judge as Mary”: what does that mean? “To judge” means to evaluate. According to what values, according to what standards, does Mary evaluate situations or behaviors? One could say according to the values that one finds in the Gospel. Certainly we ought to evaluate all things in the light of the Gospel. However it is not infrequent that one or another teaching of the Gospel falls into oblivion. Probably every foundation of a religious congregation signifies the retrieval of Gospel values that had been forgotten or overlooked. Indeed these rediscovered values are precisely the ones which the contemporary culture needs the most. So what are the Gospel values that were retrieved through the foundation of the Society of Mary? What are the most important reference points to which we Marists ought to pay particular attention when evaluating situations or actions? Without any hope of being exhaustive, here are some examples. In the *Summarium* (the “Summary of the Rules of the Society of Mary”), Fr. Colin proposes as the general aim of the Society, “That all the faithful might be, with God’s help, one heart and one mind in the bosom of

⁸ *A Founder Speaks* (hereafter FS) doc. 60:1 = *A Book of Texts for the Study of Marist Spirituality*, ed. Edwin L. Keel (hereafter BT + number of document) doc. 43.

the Church.”⁹ Marists ought then to be sensitive to situations marked by disunity, and ought to choose actions that promote reconciliation and unity. Fr. Colin also tells us that Mary’s bosom is open “to all who would enter there.”¹⁰ Consequently we Marists are allergic to every situation of exclusion, of rejection, or of marginalization of people, and we favor actions that seek to include everyone. And our touchstone, “hidden and unknown in the world,” directs our eyes toward the least attractive ministries in the world and also, perhaps, toward the people who have been forgotten and who have needs that are not being met. Another point of reference is joy, the joy of Mary, manifested in her Magnificat. Fr. Mayet tells us that Fr. Colin “desired recollection, but he was equally anxious to have freedom of spirit, a good cheerful, brotherly way of living, a certain abandonment, a free-and-easy manner.”¹¹ And Fr. Colin wanted Fr. Eymard to “bring joy to the hearts of others.”¹² And during a general retreat Fr. Colin said that the Marists are “fortunate to be the instruments of salvation and to be called to spread peace and joy in people’s souls.”¹³ Certainly, the asceticism that we live and the Gospel that we proclaim are challenging and demanding; but if they do not lead to joy, they are not Good News and they are not Marist. And the absence of joy calls our attention to situations that have need of the Good News and that have need of Mary’s presence.

We come now to the expression “to feel as Mary.” On November 19, 1848, Fr. Mayet heard these remarkable words: “We must do good in a hidden way, take on all sorts of works, but always remaining *unknown and hidden*. That does not mean that I want us to preach badly, certainly not. Nor do I want us to be lacking in zeal, in eagerness, in energy for doing good, to restrict ourselves to a narrow circle. Did not our Lord burn with fiery zeal? Did not Mary feel that searing flame which sets afire all that it touches? What souls were more aflame than theirs? What a blaze of zeal!”¹⁴ Fr. Colin wished that we Marists be on fire with the same zeal, the same passionate flame that burned in Mary’s heart. She “hastened the coming of God by her burning desire.”¹⁵ We Marists ought to burn with the same zeal, the same passion, for the coming of the Kingdom of God in these last days! Here, then, is an important example of what it means to feel like Mary.

But, can one say something of Mary’s particular way of feeling? As you know, Fr. Colin insisted on mercy as a quality proper to Marists. We ought to become “instruments of the divine mercies.”¹⁶ And this is because, for Fr. Colin, Mary is the Mother of Mercy. For Colin, mercy primarily signifies inclusiveness: “She is mother of mercy. Her body [that is, the Society of Mary] will have several branches. She will be open to all kinds of people.”¹⁷ But the French word for mercy, *misericorde*, signifies a heart that feels the misery of another person. Thus mercy implies *compassion* which, in its Latin root signifies *to suffer with* someone, that is to say, to feel what the other person feels. The Marist learns from Mary how to feel what the other is feeling, to enter into the suffering of the other.

Finally, “to act as Mary.” In the Constitutions of 1872, one reads a text the substance of which goes back to the earliest rule of the Society, the rule Colin wrote in Cerdon: “though the superior be left full freedom to choose whatever seems best to him in the Lord, nevertheless whenever a majority of the councilors take the opposing view, he is invited and even entreated to adopt that view out of humility, for Mary was always ready to follow the will of others rather than her own.”¹⁸ Another constitutional text reads, “Let them be friendly and humble with everybody, especially parish priests, and give no occasion for anybody to blame or mistrust them, for the greater service of God. Let them hold other religious in high esteem, believing themselves in all

⁹ *Summarium*, paragraph 109 = BT doc. 104.

¹⁰ FS doc. 4:1 = BT doc. 2.

¹¹ *A Founder Acts* (hereafter FA) doc. 192 = BT doc. 540.

¹² FS doc. 45:3 = BT doc. 544.

¹³ FS doc. 102:17 = BT doc. 549.

¹⁴ FS doc. 167 = BT doc. 363.

¹⁵ FS doc. 60:1 = BT doc. 43.

¹⁶ Cf. BT docs. 478-486.

¹⁷ FS doc. 2 = BT doc. 457.

¹⁸ Constitutions 1872, #307 = BT doc. 345; and cf. BT doc. 331.

truth to be inferior to them; they are to show them a sincere and heartfelt charity both in their manner of speaking and in their behavior; indeed, let them beg graces from God for them, and truly rejoice with them when they prosper in the Church.”¹⁹ Fr. Colin also said, “Our union [with the bishops] ought to be such that the bishops can look upon our Society *as their own*...In the diocese, the Society must not draw everything to itself, not work at its own undertaking, but at the common undertaking, that of the Church, of the bishop...”²⁰ With regard to preaching, Fr. Colin tells us, “Let us be small, let us be humble. If in the pulpit we try to gain a victory and take him by storm, our man reacts against it and slips through our hands. *We must take him from beneath* [his very words]. By taking him from beneath I mean making ourselves so small, so very small ...”²¹ “In the pulpit let us not seem domineering, or else we shall alienate people. Man is more jealous than ever of his freedom and his independence.”²² “It is only by being unassuming that we can achieve success nowadays. We must win souls by submitting ourselves to them.”²³ And on the third order, Colin “spoke at length of the modesty with which we should work for this Third Order, how we must always favor other Third Orders, and further, that when someone was wavering between our Third Order and others, we should always, always urge him to enter another Third Order. Marists were for promoting the interests of all the Orders, for working for the good of all Orders.”²⁴ All of this speaks to me of cooperation, collaboration, service, and not at all of competition and domination. So there you have it, Mary’s way of acting, which we are called to emulate.

II. Number 50

If we move on now to number 50, I would like to suggest that this paragraph presents itself in the form of a journey, specifically the apostolic journey. The apostolic journey as metaphor for Marist life. Note all the expressions of movement, of travel, of journey in these phrases:

Following in the footsteps of their Mother...: we begin, walking in the steps of Mary.

Let them above all be entirely removed from the spirit of the world, from any greed for earthly goods, and be totally emptied of all self-concern; let them strive to deny themselves completely in all things...: we distance ourselves from a contrary spirit.

Seeking not their own interests, but only those of Christ and Mary: we turn our backs on a life devoted to ourselves, and seek a life in the service of others in the name of Christ and of Mary.

Considering themselves as exiles and pilgrims on earth, indeed as worthless servants and the refuse of the world, using the things of this world as if not using them...: We do not stop to build a kingdom for ourselves, we are always *en route*; we don’t place ourselves on a pedestal, but we submit to the souls to whom we are sent.

Sedulously avoiding, in their buildings and living quarters, in their life style and in all their dealings with others, anything that might suggest display, ostentation, or a desire for attention; loving to be unknown and subject to all; without deceit or cunning...: We avoid (the original Latin actually says *fleeing*) all preoccupation with ourselves and our own importance, every manner of living that could draw the attention of others to ourselves rather than to Christ.

¹⁹ Constitutions 1872, #14 = BT doc. 343.

²⁰ FS doc. 150:4 = BT doc. 341:4.

²¹ FS doc. 92:16 = BT doc. 335

²² FS doc. 99:1 = BT doc. 336.

²³ FS doc. 102:33 = BT doc. 338

²⁴ FS doc. 189:2.

*In a word, **acting** [original Latin: **proceeding**] always with such great poverty, humility, and modesty, simplicity of heart and unconcern for vanity and worldly ambition, and moreover so combining a love of solitude and silence with the practice of hidden virtues with works of zeal...: We move through the world without the baggage that could slow us down; and we seek, in silence, energy and direction for the journey.*

*That, even though they must **undertake** the various ministries helpful to the salvation of souls, they seem to be unknown and indeed even hidden **in this world**: So, having followed Mary, our Mother, on the apostolic journey, we arrive in the world, at the service of the People of God. Thus we achieve a marian presence, hidden and unknown but nonetheless efficacious, at the heart of the world.*

Conclusion

I believe that, after many attempts to define the spirit of the Society, Fr. Colin gave up that approach. I believe that he decided to place his confidence in the Holy Spirit, in the grace of God. Rather than define or describe the spirit, Colin presents us with a series of exercises by means of which we can open ourselves to receive the spirit of the Society; then he sends us out to become engaged in the world, walking behind Mary, guided by the markers that he has suggested to us, confident that the Holy Spirit will inspire in us the same fire, the same zeal, the same magnanimity, the same courage and the same creativity that he had inspired in the first Marists.