

Colin and Mary and Marists today

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The 19th and the 21st century face different issues, very much so in Mariology. The 19th century was a ‘Marian century’ loaded with Marian devotion, Marian apparitions, and the dogma of 1854 as its climax. The range of opinions in the Catholic Church was much narrower than today as the Syllabus of 1864 made clear. A lot has gradually changed since. The Marian century came to an end in 1954 – the year of the canonization of Marist Peter Chanel. And, the Second Vatican Council opened the range of opinions in the Church.

In the 19th century we find a number of societies of Mary, among them the Marist branches.¹ This is already significant – Colin is not unique with his project.

After Colin’s main ideas on Mary along his life,² I try a summary of the characteristics for Colin and I draw some conclusions for Marists today.

1 Biographical approach: Colin and Mary

From boyhood to provisional Marist superior: 1790 to 1836

Colin’s childhood was a traumatic experience in the religious persecution after the French Revolution of 1789. He grew up in a traditional Catholic village while the cities were centers of revolutionary thinking. The family practiced the devotion to the Mother of Seven Sorrows. Before his mother died, she alerted the boy to Mary, from now on his heavenly mother.³

Colin spent his youth as a boarder in minor seminaries (1804-1813) during the time of the restoration.⁴ As an adolescent, Colin entered the major seminary in Lyon situated just below the Marian shrine of Fourvière (1814-1816). He later recalled the Marian prayers during the day. For himself, he thought of a Marian association of a contemplative nature. Like other founders, he joined another group for some time, the Society of Mary of Courveille.

Already as a seminarian he did intensive spiritual reading. A major work for his Marian imagination was Mary of Ágreda, *The Mystical City of God*. This book strengthened for Colin two important aspects: the biblical Mary and the link Mary and the Church.⁵ Other reading also included Marian imagination like St. Brigid of Sweden and Alphonse of Liguori (*Glories of Mary*, 1786).⁶ Colin followed Liguori in pastoral theology but not in Mariology. Instead of a Mary in Glory Colin emphasized a Mary with the people and with the Church.

His first appointment in Cerdon set him to work on a rule for a new Society of Mary. The leitmotif became ‘to live in the house of Mary’. First, this was understood literally, a small community in one building. But the work would evolve.⁷

The new pastoral theology by Alphonse of Liguori was promoted by Alexandre-Raymond Devie, Bishop of Belley. And put into practice by the Marist mission band. Such were Colin’s

¹ Alois Greiler sm, *The Society of Mary and the wider Marist Family: Two Models of the Origins*, in *Marist Notebooks* 20, 28 (2010) 101 – 113.

² Mayet, *Mémoires*; FA, p. 498-499, Analytical index no 530; cf Indices ‘Mary’ in FS and FA; OM 4, p. 844-845, *Index d’orientation*.; Paul Walsh, *Index of the Constitutions of the Society of Mary*, ms, Rome, 1981 [CS 1872].

³ Donal Kerr sm, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist. A Founder in an Era of Revolution and Restoration: The Early Years 1790 – 1836*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2000, page 31. The biography by Justin Taylor sm is not finished yet.

⁴ References: OM 2, docs. 436, 1; 509; 578, 2.

⁵ Rafael Rámila sm, *La influencia de la Venerable María de Ágreda sobre el P. Juan Claudio Colin en su manera de comprender el misterio de la Virgen María en su relación con la Iglesia*, in FN 17 (2015) 39-48.

⁶ APM 2373/13802 (APM 923.311) Ph. Gobillot, ‘Notes pour la spiritualité du P. Colin’, notes on books read by Colin: St Alphonse Liguori: In 1846 Colin said, God sent him Francis de Sales for true piety, St Alphonse for true doctrine. Colin mentions Liguori (his life, simplicity) in 1839, 1845, 1846; St Brigitte: In 1845, Colin said the revelations of St Brigid helped him to understand the mercy of God and the significance this has for confession. In 1848 he applied this to confession. Mary has taken Brigid and Mary of Ágreda into her service, she takes us.

⁷ References: OM 2, docs. 506, 3; 534, 4; 619; 717.

topics (1816-1830):⁸ The mercy of God and our conversion; Mercy for sinners with the examples of Lazarus and the prodigal son; The Assumption of Mary as the final fulfillment after conversion; Marian devotion and cult lead to the mother of Christ as our advocate on judgment day. Mary is the mother of mercy as St Brigid says. Mary governs the Church, and the saints illustrate this in history. Note the parallel to the year 2016. These home missions were part of a holy year, a pastoral approach of mercy then as we celebrate it today!

In 1829 Bishop Devie made Colin director of the minor seminary of Belley. This allowed Colin to bring together the Marist aspirants. Elected in 1830 their informal leader he named Mary Queen of Belley College, creating a house of Mary as the Cerdon-Rule had foreseen:⁹

“He pointed to the statue of Mary outside the Superior’s door, with the words *hujus domus regina* [Queen of this house] inscribed on the base. ‘That is to indicate,’ he said, ‘that everything must pass through her hands, that she is there. It will be the same in all our houses - it is written in the Rule. The words, however, will be *hujus societatis regina* [Queen of this Society]. Ah, then,’ he said, with a loud laugh, ‘I shall be General for as long as people want, provide that I am the staff in the hand of the blessed Virgin, and that she holds the staff and holds me with it, and that she runs everything.’”

His first visit to Rome in 1833 showed him the popular Marian devotion of the people, something which he shared wholeheartedly.¹⁰

Colin’s devotion to Mary was very emotional. Mary was a real person, he lived a real relationship. Often Mayet notes that Colin was in tears when speaking about Mary:¹¹

“He spoke to us of the blessed Virgin, and having painted for us a picture of her, he ended with these words, ‘This is our mother!’ Saying this, he looked tenderly at her statue, stopped, and began to weep. That look, the silence, those tears, touched all our hearts like a rapier thrust.”

Did Mary appear to Colin?¹² La Coria, where he felt unexpected strength by Mary is often cited. Whatever it meant for him personally, he did not make it a Marist feature.

Superior general from 1836 to 1854

In 1836 Colin found himself *malgré lui* superior general of a Marian congregation. His personal Marian devotion and the gradual formation of the Marist charism are related but need to be seen as distinct elements.¹³

Colin honored Mary’s actions (FS, docs. 33, 39). He had great devotion to the Heart of Mary (FA, docs. 271, 11; 395, 5). The devotion to the Seven Sorrows was extended to the seven joys of Mary (OM 2, doc. 509; FS, docs. 32, 1; 39, 21), an important sign of personal growth. The Rosary was important (FA, docs. 219, 1; 222, 4; OM 3, doc. 808, 1-2). Mary was invoked for help (FA, docs. 219, 2; 395, 2.5). Marists consecrated themselves to Mary (FS, docs. 174, 16; 176, 1; FA, doc. 378). We have the famous heart with the names of the missionaries at Fourvière. He asked for Novenas in his intentions (FS, doc. 102, 10; FA, doc. 275, 2). Some Marists wore the Scapular (OM 2, doc. 436; FA, doc. 195, 4). Colin had her statues placed in the houses (OM 2, doc. 752, 44; FS, docs. 123; 143, 7; 156, 8). Marists spread the Miraculous Medal through their schools and their missions in Oceania (FS, docs. 78, 2; 102, 47; 116, 10; FA, doc. 379).

What is more specifically Marist? This I think we find in a concise and frequent expression recorded in 1837 by Mayet in his *Mémoires*, now document 1 in *A Founder Speaks*:

“Our congregation is for doing what the others cannot do: merely that. Not only must we not think or say anything against other congregations, we must do everything we can to support them, working

⁸ Bernard Bourtot sm (ed.), *Conférences et discours de Jean-Claude Colin en paroisses, missions, retraites de jeunes dans les années 1816-1830*, Rome, 2013.

⁹ FS, doc. 46 (1842).

¹⁰ References: OM 2, docs. 436, 2; 564, 1-2.

¹¹ Examples: FS, doc. 115 (1846), also FS, doc. 143, 1-2.6-11; others in Jean Coste sm (ed.), *A Founder Speaks. Jean-Claude Colin*, Rome, SM, 1975 [= FS], and in the Mayet *Mémoires*.

¹² Alois Greiler sm, *Offenbarung, Prophezeiung und Sendung. Colin, die Maristen und das Übernatürliche*, in Id., *Inspiriertes Leben. Sechs Hinführungen zu Jean-Claude Colin*, Dessau, SM, 2002.

¹³ FA, analytical index, 520: Forms of Marian devotion.

for them and showing them favour. The aim of the Society is to imitate the blessed Virgin, who was at once so unassuming and so full of zeal for the salvation of the world, working for it in silence.”

I would regard this as a short formula for a Colinian and Marist understanding of Mary.

A more extensive description offers the index in Girard’s documents on Marist laity:¹⁴ The spirit of Mary is the spirit of the house of Nazareth, a hidden life for Jesus. The Marist spirit is about simplicity. To be Marist is to be Mary. This spirit has a body which is the Society of Mary. In the world, the body is the Third Order.

Another description is of course the final and official formulation in the Constitutions of 1873, numbers 49 and 50 which I need not quote here.

Of special importance is the biblical description you often find with Colin. Based on the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 1 and 2, he wants Marists to be like the first believers gathered around Mary in the upper room in prayer, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit, the advocate to discern the will of God for the mission to the ends of the world.

Besides texts, we have the iconographic expression of Mary as the one who gives her name, her spirit, and her mission to this little Society of hers in the symbols, seal, and stamps officially in use during Colin’s time. Mervyn Duffy provided us with a study of this topic.¹⁵

Old age: 1854 to 1875

Only in the 1860ies did Colin allow to take photographs of him.¹⁶ Significantly he was placed in the studio with a statue of Mary and with a book of rules.

Living in Lyon Sainte-Foy and in La Neylière, Colin continued his Marian devotion and had Marian images placed in the house.¹⁷ He continued to work on two major projects, the rules for the congregation and the explanation of its origins, both going through phases of controversy. Both result in Mary as the key figure for a synthesis. The Constitutions approved by the Holy See in 1873 give a description, not definition of the Marist spirit: it is her name, a life under her banner, in her spirit, and in her body which makes a Marist religious. And, it is she who is the true foundress and superior says the solemn declaration of the general chapter of 1872 resolving previous controversial issues.

His last years in life saw the famous Marian apparitions of Lourdes and La Salette. Colin read about those¹⁸ but was skeptical about La Salette because the bishop of Lyon was.¹⁹

The last reference to highlight Colin and Mary is the name of the house where the founder was buried, Notre Dame de La Neylière.

2 Systematic Presentation on Colin and Mary

The biographical approach showed elements and developments. Let me try a more systematic view on Colin and Mary and Marists today.

2.1 General Christian and Catholic faith and practice

Marists share with other Catholics the usual Marian devotions. Popular are Marian hymns and litanies and images and statues. Other congregations also bear her name (Marianists, Oblats) or live the Marian spirit of simplicity and faith (Vincentians).

For the early Marists, these devotions had a surplus in meaning because they expressed their charism, the privilege to be her sons, to do her work, and to die in her Society.

2.2 Colinian Convictions

¹⁴ Charles Girard sm (ed.), *Lay Marists*, Rome, SM, 1993, Index ‘Spirit’.

¹⁵ Mervyn Duffy sm, *Investigating the Marist Crest: 1 Precursors*, in FN 13 (2011) 147-153.

¹⁶ Patrick O’Reilly sm, *Le visage du Père Colin. Petit essai d’Iconographie*, Paris, 1939 (*La Revue Montalembert* 25 décembre 1936).

¹⁷ References: FA, docs. 395, 2.4.5; 396, 6-11; OM 3, doc. 808.

¹⁸ Alois Greiler sm, *Lourdes and the Early Marists*, in FN 10, 2 (2008) 442-446.

¹⁹ Greiler, *Offenbarung*.

More specific about Colin is his emotional relationship and belief in her active presence. This brought him healing from his traumas and the capacity to be an active leader.

He transformed traditional elements: from seven sorrows to seven joys; the house of Mary as model for the Church; Mary is like an apostle. Her example is not limited to the individual Catholic but concerns the whole Church. The focus is on Mary in the Church and with the people, more than on her glory or a particular devotion or apparition.

The same surplus of meaning is true for Marian images in a house.²⁰ Colin transformed this custom by giving it a symbolic reference to the Marist charism. He places the statue inside the house and declares her the Queen of this house, the house to have her spirit.

The Holy Family and the home of Nazareth are often presented in an idyllic way. Colin transformed it to a Marist ideal, from devotion to existence. His original inspiration was a contemplative Marian association. He discerned this age asks for active religious. In his old age he returned to Mary as a figure of contemplative life.

In liturgy Colin reinforced the three moments of the day to recall our Marian vocation. He linked the Holy Spirit and Mary in prayer, especially in intercessory prayer to discern the will of God. On a theological level we could say he more than others in his and even our time linked Mary and the Church, Mary and the Holy Spirit, and Mary and Eschatology.

2.3 Colin and Mary and Marists today

Accepting the difference in time, the distinction for what is personal devotion and what is Marist charism, and for what we share with others and what is more specifically Marist, we come to the relevance of Colin and Mary for Marists today.

In his time he looked for a new approach, respecting the liberty of modern people, the search for authenticity, for a Church free of her sins of the past. Colin found this model in Mary. Marists and ideally the whole Church imitate Mary, personally hidden yet full of zeal. Jean-Claude Colin was the one to inspire this spirit and to give it a body. He had the gift to understand what people and the Church needed: a new way of doing things.

To have the spirit of Mary is to imitate her way of doing things and to continue her mission in this age of unbelief. The Marist ideal is the total integration of this spirit into one's life, to live the Marist paradox which is to be Mary more than to practice devotions.

What marked the early Marists is the love for her Society, and the edifying example of true Marists. Again it suffices to open index pages to find references in the letters of the first missionaries to Colin, edited by Charles Girard.²¹ 'Belonging to her Society' comes up more than 50 times and 4 times 'love for the Society'.

The Italian Mariologist Stefano De Fiore discerns four types to categorize Marian spiritualities: God, Christ, Church, and the human person.²² With Colin, it is the grace of God at work through Mary, mother of mercy, to respond to the needs of the people and of the Church. And I would add something you do not often find in theology. Colin brought together Mary and the Holy Spirit. Mary is the Spirit-filled person. A Colinian church balances the Petrine institution with the charismatic and Marian principle. The whole Church is to be a house of Mary like each Marist house. From such a house, things like pride are excluded. In this house, people can bring out the gifts with which the Spirit blessed them.

Colin put insights to work. This may correspond to the US American temperament. The abbot-emeritus of Einsiedeln, Martin Werlen OSB, says: Pope Benedict XVI has said things similar to Pope Francis. The difference being Francis actually does it and demands it from his collaborators! To applause Pope Francis is easy until we change our own lifestyle.

²⁰ *Marienlexikon*, vol. 3, L. Koch, 'Hausmadonna', p. 85-86, on Marian statues outside private houses. In southern Germany and Austria you still find Christian inscriptions on the outside private houses. The texts ask God to bless and protect the house, sometimes at the intercession of Mary. Such a custom I did not find with Colin; *Marienlexikon*, vol. 3, T. Gebhard, 'Hausinschriften', p. 84-85.

²¹ Charles Girard sm (ed.), *Lettres reçues d'Océanie*, vol. 10, Paris, Karthala, 2010, Index.

²² Stefano De Fiore, 'Mariologia/Marialogia', in Id.-Salvatore Meo (eds.), *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia*, Cinisello Balsamo, Edizioni Paoline, 1986² (1985), 891-920, combining his systematization of p. 906-907.911.

The Marists came to the States as a French, Marian, teaching, and missionary congregation.²³ They often started with the French immigrants and took over a number of national French parishes in cities like Boston, San Francisco, and Our Lady of Lourdes in St. Louis (1886). Those traits may be worth a thought for today: put into practice what is in line with our spirituality or at least be partner in such projects; establish spiritual centers in the cities; and work with the Catholic immigrant population.

We could say in our history the emphasis shifted from being Mary's chosen children in these end times to living the Marian virtues, especially humility, to Mary and the Church, and to Mary as symbol for a spiritual feature or pastoral vision.²⁴ Today I would emphasize Mary and the Holy Spirit as key feature and key element of our liturgies.

In his *Study-Aids*, Lessard who drafted the new text, comments on CS 1988, 144-145:²⁵

"These numbers do not, indeed, aim at describing the place of Mary in the life of Marists. That is done in chapter one: the name Society of Mary indicates the place of Mary in the life of Marists and the whole chapter unfolds the implications of that name for all that Marists do. Nor do these numbers simply prescribe a few more practices of piety for Marists. Their precise purpose is to indicate how, at the level of daily life, Marists can deepen their sense of belonging to the Society of Mary".

Let me conclude with a small but very Colinian observation from Anthony Barker (1923-2005), former provincial of England. He notes that many Marists speak about Mary in the past tense. Colin would never do this. How could a Mary of the past inspire us today?²⁶

²³ One of those who took the Fourvière-Pledge, Philippe Janvier, not a Marist, had gone to the States. Jean-Baptiste Furet fms, *Life of Blessed Marcellin Joseph Benedict Champagnat (1789 - 1840). Marist Priest. Founder of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Mary*, Rome, FMS, 1989, p. 115, note 23. In the early 1820ies, Champagnat was in difficulties because of his work with the brothers from the local clergy; "To rescue it from the persecutions which threatened its ruin, he thought of asking to be sent to the American missions."

²⁴ Surveys on Marist literature: Alois Greiler sm, *Between History and Spiritual Renewal: A Survey of Recent Marist Studies*, in FN 5, 3 (2000) 315-341; Id., *From Jeantin to Coste. A Survey on Marist Studies in the 20th Century*, in FN 7, 1 (2005) 38-71.

²⁵ Gaston Lessard sm, *Study-Aids for the 1988 Constitutions of the Society of Mary*, Rome, SM, c.1990.

²⁶ Anthony Barker sm, *The Real Presence of Mary - La vraie présence de Marie*, in *Acta SM* 8 (1968) 226-247.