

IV - Marist Spirituality

A Marist's Reflection on Mary

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The reflection followed on a story. The story was told by Fr Bernhard Kordes SM during a retreat to Marists in Sydney in 2005.

The story: A Marist on renewal was visiting Le Puy. At Le Puy, there is a great statue of Mary, outside the cathedral. Very large indeed. And one may enter it. Within there are steps. And the Marist mounted the steps, within the statue.

Afterwards, he spoke of *going up into Mary*. (Perhaps one does get a great view from being right up there, in the statue! A Marist is to see as Mary sees!)

This led me to thinking about, reflecting on those familiar words, that fundamental formula from our 1872 Constitutions No 1 of the Latin Constitutions viz: "Ex eius vita quasi vivere." Not, of course, for us to live her very life, but *as it were* for *us* to live out of her life.

That little Latin preposition "ex" what's its meaning? I took myself to two Latin dictionaries. Both give a meaning as: "out of" or "from". Lewis dictionary, however, gives a first meaning as "from within" – with regard to the origin or source of something.

Hence, the Marist spirit and the virtues of Mary to be emulated by Marists "arise from within Mary herself thorough our going up" (being drawn up) into Mary; and, consequently, living as it were *out of* her life – out of her life-spirit. Not, as it were living her life.

One may not argue from the particular to the general. We are well aware of this. Yet, I do want to move from the particular (or the individual) to the general; not, however, to prove a point but simply to raise a question which may deserve a more universal attention. The question pertains to our reference as Marists to Mary; the starting point for framing the question is myself. You can see that this approach has validity only as a means to put the question.

Let me begin, then, by saying that in one sense I was more devoted to Mary years ago than I am now – both before I entered the Society of Mary and in the earlier years of religious life as a Marist. (I was in the Legion of Mary and in this helped to promote Fr Peyton's Rosary Crusade etc). By this I mean that in my consciousness I was more obviously aware of Mary (I was going to write "more deeply aware", as a person to whom I used frequently to relate. But I suspect that is not true.)

Reflecting upon this change, deterioration or "development" – was any changed attitude in fact a development? – it did seem to me that the heart of the Marist spirit, "ex eius vita quasi vivere" seemed to move a Marist in this direction viz. that Mary may seem less a focal point of one's attention than before, precisely because the growing focal point of a Marists' life should increasingly become what was the focal point of Mary's life.

Father John Coste expresses this thought by saying that for Marists Mary is not primarily an *object*: the aim expressed in our constitutions is not primarily to love Mary, to praise her, to honour her – she is not an object; but she is rather a *subject* with whom we have to be psychologically identified in a spiritual sense – we are to be one with her in her manner of being and acting, we have to be one with her in our mission and apostolate.

This psychological identification (spiritual) with Mary is not devotion *to* Mary in the ordinary way. (It doesn't of course, exclude such devotion and on the individual and community level some such is necessary. Fr Colin had a personal devotion to Mary which was very traditional; his founder-insight only was original). Its character is quite different and, it seems to me, ever so much deeper.

It is this identification with Mary that explains what Fr Coste calls the Marist paradox: in terms of "customary" Marian criteria (Titles of Mary, feasts, books published etc) Marists are one of the

least Marian of Congregations. But Fr Vinard SJ, Sister Joan of Arc OP have been impressed by the totally Marian Character of the Society of Mary.¹

In some congregations, so Sister Joan of Arc has found, there is not much integration between their spirituality and the original intention of the founder: the character of the institute's spirituality doesn't flow closely from the founders' intention; rather, does it seem a later addition. With the Marists, she found that these two elements are almost totally integrated – because Fr Colin's master-thought was Mary living and active in her mission within the Church, and our spirituality and character as Marists is to make Mary present still within our Church of today through our life and apostolate.

It is not too difficult, I think to agree that this spirit, this attitude is both deep and subtle and delicate. But in that subtlety and delicacy lies a danger; it is from that viewpoint that I am asking myself a new question. May I lead up to my self-questioning by quoting John Coste?

“Such an attitude is extremely delicate, yet it has been, and still is, the deep interior approach of many Marists. It is easy to see how difficult it is to distinguish this from what could be an illusion or just verbalism. In a way, Marists bear their treasure in vessels of perishable earthenware, and are always in danger of losing it; as, more than many others, they run the risk of letting what is Marian dwindle away and become merely implicit... The future will tell us whether we have yielded to that inclination, all the more insidious as our tradition, in some way, seems to drive us in that direction.”

That is now my question: have I begun to yield to that inclination?

I was greatly encouraged by John Coste's insights into the Marist Spirit; I think I was right to judge that a changed and less obvious pattern of reference to Mary was a corollary of some growth in the Marist life and of a deeper oneness with her. But what about the thought that has been thrusting into my mind more recently, that I am not growing in or consolidating Mary's spirit within me, because now there is not in my life enough reference *to* her.

Not reference to her simply as an object i.e. as a person to be venerated and honoured; but to her as the source of my Marist Spirit, as the one with whom I am to be identified. Me, my vocation is to live her life today. But don't I need a deep enough and regular enough reference to her in order to achieve this? Is my contact regular and deep enough? Have I slipped away here? Fr Colin said that the Spirit of Mary is so delicate that the only way to obtain it is through sustained prayer.

From numerous workshops and personal contributions, John Coste has found that there is great divergence among Marists concerning the reference to Mary in our life and its importance. This to some extent reflects and is a corollary of the truth that the heart of our vocation lies in that psychological identification with Mary. There have never been any specially Marist devotions to Mary; and devotion to Mary, in the usual sense of the term, has always been a largely personal affair for each Marist. Fr Colin, too, never *elaborated* in his writings the unique character of our relation with Mary: that theological perspective was not his point of view. Rather as a founder, did he insist on the bonds between Mary and our congregation.

It does seem to me, however, that a deep reference to Mary as the person with whose life-attitude I am to be at one, is desirable and probably even necessary for me to grow in the vocation God has called me to. Perhaps today the pattern and pressures of life make such a deep reference more necessary “lest what is Marian dwindle away”.

Hence, I have been asking myself that question: Have I begun to yield to that inclination? Does the question also need to be asked on a wider scale? Do we need to ask this question of ourselves as a community? Let me conclude with John Coste again:²

¹ References to Fr Vinard SJ and Sr Joan of Arc OP: Jean Coste SM, *Marie aujourd'hui chez les Pères Maristes*, in *À la redécouverte de Marie aujourd'hui dans les congrégations religieuses d'inspiration mariale*. 29^e session de la Société Française d'Études Mariales 1972, Paris, Manuscript print, Société Française d'Études Mariales, s.d., 79 – 96 ; = ID., *Marie, aujourd'hui chez les pères maristes - The Place of Mary Among Marists Today* (SM Document, 1), Rome, 1973.

“If the time came when Fr Colin’s Marian intuition was reduced to a mere symbol, or an abstract reference to a certain kind of behavior, without the person who was its inspiration being mentioned by name, recognized and loved - at least on some privileged occasions of personal and community life – there would then remain very little of the Society of Mary...”

“To my mind, for those who are anxious to be faithful to their Marist vocation, Mary remains a person who is not readily to be confused with an idea, even if more often than not she is paid less attention than the task into which the religious disappears as she did.”

“Our greatest chance of surviving and our hope for the future lie, in my opinion, in fostering this presence of Mary in the midst of the Society which owes her its name.”

² Coste quotations from his addresses 1972-1973 in New Zealand and Australia: Jean Coste SM, *Retreat Conferences*, Ms [Transcript of tapes, conferences in New Zealand], 1972; Jean Coste SM, *The Marist Project and Insight 1816. Addresses 1972 - 1973*, Hunters Hill, ms, 1973.