

**Charles Girard (1935-2017). A Colleague Remembers**  
*Gaston Lessard SM*

From 1979 to 1984, I was assistant novice master at Marist College, Washington, D. C. Charles joined me there in 1982. He was completing work on his doctoral dissertation about Chrétien de Troyes, a twelfth-century author of novels. The dissertation (in French) was the end product of long years of French studies which had begun, before he even joined the Marists, at the universities of Lafayette, New Orleans (Tulane) and Rennes, in France. The title of the thesis was: Christian Practice and Belief in the Grail Narrative of Chrétien de Troyes. The thesis was 644 pages long.

Already Charles was using a personal computer. In the early eighties, this was a novelty. Portable computers were barely portable. The programs were also in their infancy. Charles shared with me the computer on which he was writing his thesis, and this was my first contact with this new world. We benefitted from the expertise of Leon Olszamowski, who was also writing a doctoral dissertation and who introduced me to XyWrite. Perhaps it was also thanks to Leon that Charles discovered Nota Bene. In any case, Nota Bene became my word processing program, which later made it much easier for me to work with Charles.

Charles also opened up for me the world of Louisiana. He himself was half of Swiss origins, but he was born in Breaux Bridge, and he willingly introduced us to the delights of cajun cuisine, among them gumbo, unknown to us in Québec. I recall these memories because they remind me how little I really knew him. This is why I leave to others the task of writing a proper biographical notice, and I come to his contribution to Marist studies.

Father John Jago, Superior General, called Charles to Rome in 1987, in order to work on the history of the Third Order of Mary, In May 1992, a volume nearly twelve hundred pages long entitled: *Maristes laïcs. Recueil de sources historiques*, came off the press of the printing house San Pio X. Beginning in 1955, San Pio X had printed the works undertaken under the impulse of Jean Coste, which constituted the collection *Fontes historici Societatis Mariae*. The English translation *Lay Marists* came out the following year. However, several preparatory versions had preceded the definitive text, and, as early as May 1988, in his presentation on Marist laity at the Council of the Society held in Madrid, Frank McKay referred to the work of Charles.

In March 1989, at the colloquium on the study of Marist history and spirituality, Charles himself gave a presentation entitled: "Colinian Ideas on Marist Laity and their Relevance today" (text in *Forum Novum*, vol. 1, p. 144-158). An article by Laurence Duffy dated 31 March 1993 was entitled: *A Vision Upheld. The Role of Jean-Claude Colin in the Idea of Marist Laity and its Development* (text in *Forum Novum*, vol. 2, p. 293-326); it relied heavily on the documents edited in *Marist Laity*. The following year, Laurence Duffy and Charles co-authored *Like a Bridge. The People of God and the Work of Mary*.

After the years devoted to Marist laity, Charles took on an even more daunting task, editing the letters addressed to the Lyon general house by the Marist missionaries in Oceania throughout Colin's years as superior general (1836-1854). By way of anecdote, I note that this work took place mostly at night. Sister Constance Dodd wrote to Edwin Keel: "Charley was a night owl. When in Rome, I remember him telling me that he would be on his way to bed in the early hours of the morning when he would meet Seán Fagan on the stairs getting up. They greeted each other with 'Good morning' and 'Good night'. And both men accomplished so much!". Here again, several partial versions marked the progress of the work, until a four-volume edition came out in 1999.

While working on editing the letters of the missionaries, Charles took time out to attend the fourth colloquium on Marist history and spirituality, which was held in Rome at the beginning of April 1997. The theme of the colloquium was Colin's pedagogy of humility. Charles gave a masterly presentation of the sources of Colin's teaching on humility (text in *Forum Novum*, vol. 4, p. 257-293). His treatment was methodical and exhaustive.

Charles left Rome in 1999, leaving unfinished the work of editing the letters from Oceania. He took it up again four years later, after attending the workshop on Marist studies held in Rome from 7 to 10 October (Acts in *Forum Novum*, vol. 7). Provisional editions of his work were

available on computer and could be put to use in 2006, when regional colloquia were held in some provinces (France, New Zealand, and Canada; texts in *Forum Novum*, vol. 8-9). These regional colloquia were held to prepare the symposium on the Oceania Marist missions, which was held in Auckland in July 2007 and in Suva on 5-10 August of the same year (texts in Greiler, Ed., *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania*, 2009).

In November 2008, the French publisher Karthala included in their collection *Mémoires d'Églises* a 750-page volume which contained an anthology of 132 letters entitled: *Letters from the Marist Missionaries in Oceania (1836-1854)*. A four-page foreword by Charles laid out the criteria for the choice of letters.

The following year, Karthala and the Society of Mary co-published nine volumes entitled: *Letters Received from Oceania*, which were followed in 2010 by a tenth volume of complements and indices. The whole work is also number XIII in the series *Fontes historici Societatis Mariae*. The index of proper names alone is 177 pages long. Under the entry Akaroa (NZ), subentries comprise: the arrivals of Comte, Pezant and Brother Florentin (François), bay, French colony, description, inhabitants, Nazareth (house of), harbor, provenance of letters edited, catholic mission station (chapel, state of the mission), property titles challenged, Pompallier's visit. Each of these subentries has its list of references, around thirty for the subentry: catholic mission station. As one can see, this is systematic and exhaustive work.

In April 2009, Charles travelled to New Zealand to attend the official launching of *Letters Received from Oceania*. The event was organized by John Craddock and took place on 16 April in Wellington, before many personalities, including the French Ambassador, Cardinal Williams and his successor at Wellington, Archbishop John Dew; several Marists, among whom Hubert Bonnet-Eymard, Brian Cummings, and Mikaele Paunga; Professors Hugh Laracy and Peter Tremewan. On the following day, Victoria University hosted a symposium on the topic. John Craddock then accompanied Charles to Napier, and to Auckland for another symposium. In an e-mail to Edwin Keel, John tells of his "sheer joy at seeing [Charles] enter a room or touch books that belonged to these confreres in places like Otaki and to hear him say their names and to see his eyes moisten with emotion at his recognition of their handwriting or selection of literature. These were Marist men whose inner lives he had read in their letters home to Father Colin and who in his public expression were saintly and 'six I would have canonized as saints.' And he named them."

Charles spent his final years in New Orleans. I want to salute and thank three former Marists who looked after him until the end: Bill Edwards, Steve Gegenheimer, and Pat Mallinson. May this good and faithful servant enter the joy of his Master.

Québec, 24 November 2017