

## **The Context of the Work of Mary**

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The term ‘the Work of Mary’ is not, perhaps, very familiar to us; but it was familiar to the Marist founders and their first followers. They seem to have used it more or less alternately with the name ‘the Society of Mary’. There was, however, a possible nuance distinguishing their use of either name: when they thought of Mary’s project, in which they were privileged to be humble instruments, they might tend to talk about ‘the Work of Mary’; when they thought of the new body in the Church, which Mary wanted to carry out her project, they would talk of ‘the Society of Mary’. Of course, in those days, they thought of the Society of Mary as the multi-branched organisation as originally planned, in which sisters, brothers and lay people would have their place alongside priests.

So, what was the context in which the Work of Mary took the concrete form of the Society of Mary? Donal Kerr set the early life of Jean-Claude Colin, according to the sub-title he gave his biographical study, in ‘an era of revolution and restoration’. This names a precise period of European history and points to a defined political and social context. I would tend to broaden the context of the life and achievement of Colin – equally of Champagnat and Chavoin – and therefore of the Work of Mary. I think this all needs to be seen in the context of the response of French Catholicism – and, even more widely, of European Christianity – to the challenge presented by the modern age.

In France the modern age burst in with the Revolution, which eventually brought persecution of the Church, as well as loss of property and political status. But, even without the drama and trauma of the Revolution, French Catholicism would still have been severely challenged by the new civilisation that we identify as modernity. For the new ways of thinking that are conveniently called the Enlightenment, likewise religious indifference, the rise of the middle classes to economic and political power, capitalism, industrialisation, urbanisation, the European discovery of the Pacific Islands and Australia, then of sub-Saharan Africa, all these new phenomena demanded a response on the part of European Christianity. That response was sometimes negative and reactionary. But not always. The new age provided also new possibilities and aroused new vitality.

The pattern was first set in England, which, of course, did not experience violent revolution. There, however, well before the birth of Jean-Claude Colin, many of the characteristic marks of the new age were already present: the so-called ‘Industrial Revolution’ was well under way in Great Britain before 1760 and beginning to bring with it vast economic, social and eventually political changes. It was also in Britain, before the end of that century, that the new cultural movement that we call Romanticism was reacting against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. And already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, English (Protestant) Christianity was responding to the challenge of the modern age in several ways that we shall see a little later also in Catholic France: revivalist preaching, including in rural areas, education, evangelising missions to the newly discovered lands (where Protestants and Catholics eventually competed). Again, in both Protestant England and Catholic France, these vigorous activities were the outward signs and effects of a new surge of religious vitality, shown also in renewed fervour and devotional practice. For England, think John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists, also the Evangelical movements there and in the United States. Transposed to post-Revolutionary France and to a Catholic culture, this is the context of the Society of Mary and the lives and careers of our founders.

The immediate context of ‘the Work of Mary’ was the revival of Catholic life in the regions centring on the city of Lyons, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – there were other, comparable, centres in France, notably Paris, Marseilles and Bordeaux. Our founders belong in that setting and were among the remarkable and holy men and women of Lyons, whose names and works are still alive in worldwide Catholicism.

The outpouring of spiritual energy, which we see in their lives, manifested itself in a revitalisation of Catholic spirituality, in popular devotions, typically centred on Eucharistic adoration and on the Virgin Mary, in ‘revival’ missions at home and foreign missions abroad, in works of education, in loyalty to Rome and personal veneration for the pope. The vitality and

strength of the new movement took by surprise those who assumed that Catholic Christianity had been fatally wounded by the Revolution that began in 1789 and could survive, if at all, only in a weakened and much reduced form.

In fact, 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism in France was, in many ways, an unintended and unforeseen product of the Revolution. That event, or rather series of events, had released an outpouring of psychic and emotional energy, as well as radically changing European society and its politics. It was accompanied, or closely followed, by new ways of thinking and expression, new means of production and communication, profound economic, social and political change.

Despite its constant nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, the Church was now free to adapt, if it wished, to the new world that emerged from the fires of the Revolution. An important feature of the new century in the Church was the foundation of new religious congregations, typically initiated and led by a new class of men and women, drawn from the upwardly mobile middle classes, rather than from the aristocracy, trying new approaches to the traditional apostolic works, endowed with new sensitivities to the aspirations and prejudices of contemporaries. The Society of Mary was one of these.

Not the least interesting thing about the early Marists was that they devised a new and, it seems to me, unique response to the challenge of what we now call secularism. This they encapsulated in the phrase, 'Hidden and unknown in this world'. To what they regarded as the pride of the new age – in other words, its characteristic sense of human autonomy – they responded with humility, not only individual, but also corporate and institutional: the human instrument of God and Mary, and even Mary's own Society, was not to be an obstacle to God's grace and Mary's Work. In this *kenosis*, this emptying-out of self, Jean-Claude Colin – if I may be permitted to single him out – was inspired by his reading of the presence of Mary in the Church-as-it-was-coming-to-be (*l'église naissante*) and his conviction that Mary wanted to play a similar role in the Church of the last times, through a new Society that would bear her name and carry out her work.

The role of Mary and her Society in the last times. That eschatological note is present in Jean-Claude Courveille's account of what he 'heard' Mary say at Le Puy:

"So I want, and it is the will of my adorable Son, that in these last times of impiety and unbelief, there be also a society that is consecrated to me, which bears my name and is called the Society of Mary and that those who compose it be called also Marists, to fight against hell ..."

I don't know to what extent it is an idea that found an echo in Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn or Marcellin Champagnat – perhaps people here who know more about them than I do will be able to inform us. It is, on the other hand, an idea that was especially prominent with Jean-Claude Colin. Although it does not come easily to us today, eschatology might be worth considering as part of the context of the Work of Mary, at least for one of our Marist founders.

'The blessed Virgin said, "I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall also be at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me"' (*A Founder Speaks = FS*, 4:1). It was in such sayings that Jean-Claude Colin 'remembered' the words of Our Lady to Jean-Claude Courveille. He even added: 'These words presided over the earliest days of the Society' (cf. *FS*, 4:2). The two parts of this statement, relating to the role of the Blessed Virgin in the new-born Church and to her role at the end of time, always went together, and in fact, the emphasis tended to be placed on the second part, to prepare us to welcome an intervention of Mary in the future and to co-operate with it. Colin believed that, 'At the end of time her protection will shine forth in an even greater way' (*FS*, 116:7).

The great Marist scholar Jean Coste commented more than once on these and similar statements of Colin (see his article, 'Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time: Analysis of Data in Jean-Claude Colin', in *Forum Novum = FN* 3,3 (1996): 245-263). He summed up his ideas about the end of time in five points.

1. The role of Mary (pp. 254-255): the conviction that Mary 'will save the Church in the last times' (*FS*, 160:7), even that she will do 'more' at the end than at the beginning, because the need will be greater.

2. The role of the Society of Mary (p. 255): ‘To this conviction another is added immediately, namely that the special role which Mary is to play at the end of time is also foreseen for the Society which she has chosen and which bears her name’ (thus *FS*, 143:2; 160:7).

3. At this point, Coste asks the question: What does Colin mean by ‘the end of time’?

One set of statements by Colin presents the end as a reality still to come, though already near. The basis of this conviction is very clearly shown. It is a confrontation between what he could see with his own eyes and two Gospel texts that speak of the end: Luke 18:8 (‘When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’), and Matthew 24:24 (‘There will arise false Messiahs and false prophets, who will show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect’) (pp. 257-258).

On the other hand, Fr. Colin did not calculate the days until the end, but ‘spoke very freely according to the occasion, without reference to any fixed calculation’ (p. 258). Nor did he claim to have received a revelation on the subject. Coste cites Fr. David (*OM* 3:886,2): ‘As for whether the time for these great events [the end of time] was near or far, I have never understood that he had received any special enlightenment.’

According to other things Colin said, however, we are already in the last times. As Coste comments: ‘In other words, if, in one way, the end of time is yet to come, in another it is already there.’ And he adds: ‘At this point, we cannot help wondering what Colin found in the New Testament itself on the Kingdom of God which is to come, which is near, and which is already there’ (p. 259).

4. The end of time provides a key for reading any given time (pp. 259): ‘Eschatological reference, thus freed from any gratuitous calculations as to the future, is basically a key to understanding the era in which we live, an invitation not to get settled in it, but to feel all its instability. It is in this line of reference that we must situate Colin’s many utterances which set up a relationship between his time and the end of time.’

5. The name of the Society of Mary has been held in reserve for the last times (pp. 241-242; cf. *FS*, 118:2).

So Jean-Claude Colin found plausible signs that the end was near in the events of his own time; but he didn’t insist on that. His intention was not to announce the imminent end of the world, even as a means of motivating conversions, but to prepare the Church of the end times. Furthermore, if Mary is to intervene at the end of time, it is not in order to protect the faithful from the effects of a universal catastrophe, but rather to ‘support’ the Church then as she already did at the beginning. In the last analysis, Colin puts the emotional stress not on fear but on encouragement.

I imagine that Jean-Claude Colin’s eschatology has embarrassed more than one Marist, probably ever since the second generation, which didn’t necessarily share the outlook of the first aspirants. We may be embarrassed for any one or more of three reasons.

First is the embarrassment of the modern Christian, who doesn’t want to listen to talk about the end times – unless in a theoretical or historical context that puts it at a safe distance: ‘People believed in all that in the 1st century, but not now’. Edwin Keel is one Marist author who has faced up to Colin’s eschatology. He makes the apt comment that ‘Our own late twentieth century ... has relegated talk of the end to the rantings of fanatics and the credulous. Yet, ironically, ours is the first age in which an imminent end of human history is no longer metaphor but concrete, demonstrable possibility’ (‘The Work of Mary at the End of Time’, *FN* 1,4 (1991): 427-444, p. 431). Today, in fact, doomsday scenarios abound, according to which human history will end either ‘with a bang’ or with a ‘whimper’. No less a scientist than Stephen Hawking gives us about 100 years to discover a viable habitat on another planet before this one can no longer support the human species.

In another article (‘On Colin and the Telling of Time’, *FN* 3,3 (1996): 338-357), Edwin Keel quotes the theologian J.-B. Metz (p. 339): ‘[F]ollowing Christ is not something that can be lived without the idea of the Parousia, without looking forward to the second coming... [S]urely we Christians offer the world a painful spectacle: that of people who talk about hope but really no longer look forward to anything.’

A second source of embarrassment is the role that Colin sees as Mary's at the end of time: even if you can envisage the end of the world, can you assign a special role reserved for the blessed Virgin? Jesus spoke of his coming at the end of time. Isn't it unnecessary and a bit exaggerated to speak of a special Marian intervention?

The third source of embarrassment is the idea of associating the Society of Mary in some particular way with the end times. Let's just get on with our work without daydreaming about the Parousia!

Aware of and indeed sharing this embarrassment, I want nonetheless to take up the challenge. Let's decide to take seriously the eschatology of a Colin – and of the Bible. There *is* something more to come: a final divine intervention in the history of the world. In order to speak about it, the Bible uses symbolic language: last judgment, victory over Evil (or over the Evil One), new creation. This last idea has given rise to the disturbing images of the dismantling of creation we find in the Bible: stars falling out of the sky, sun and moon darkened; this turns out to be the prelude to the creation of a 'new earth' and a 'new heaven'. For this reason, one can call the final catastrophe rather a 'eucatastrophe' – to use the neologism coined by J.R.R. Tolkien. This is the way – as a catastrophe that turns round unexpectedly to end well – that the New Testament invites us to think of the end of time; thus 2 Peter 3:10, 13 ('The heavens shall pass away... and the elements shall melt ... the earth also ... Nevertheless, we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness makes its home'); in Luke 21:25-33 Jesus describes the unsettling events to come, then concludes: ('And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption is drawing near'). According to the Judeo-Christian revelation, this eucatastrophe will be the crowning moment of the whole of human history. As for the second and third sources of Marist embarrassment, Edwin Keel asks this challenging question ('On Colin and the Telling of Time', p. 339): 'Could a recovery of the eschatological edge in Colin's faith make for a crucial Marist contribution to the Church of our own days? Is there an important lesson to be learned from Colin's manner of telling time?'

Time past and time future – but what about time present? We have been looking at the newborn Church and the Church of the end time. How should we regard the Church of the present time? How should we regard – with the eyes of Jean-Claude Colin – the moment of history in which we live?

Edwin Keel, commenting on the 'revelation' by Mary to Courveille at Le Puy, makes the following point ('The Work of Mary at the End of Time', *FN* 1,4 (1991): 427-444, p. 430): 'The problematic of the word we are interpreting arises from the fact that there is no present time expressed – there is reference only to the past of the nascent Church and the future end of time – and yet the word is addressed to people who find themselves at neither of these two end points, but somewhere in between. We are tempted to resolve the apparent anomaly by simply reducing the "end of time" to "our time", as if all that Mary was talking about was being present now without further qualification. Or we try to insert the present, expanding the text: "Mary was the support of the new-born Church, she supports the Church today, and will do so until the end of time." But this makes of the text a meditation on Mary's constant activity in the Church, takes the edge off the prophetic character of Mary's intervention at this particular moment of history, and reduces the "end of time" to a simple temporal limit and conclusion of Mary's never-varying activity on behalf of God's people in this world.'

On the contrary, for Colin, history does not take place in three moments – past, present, future – but in two only: past and future-already-beginning. Or, in the last analysis, there is perhaps for Colin only 'time-coming-to-an-end', for the end will be like the beginning, and the utopia of the newborn Church is striving to become a reality in the Parousia.

In other words, Jean-Claude Colin 'reads' his century, not simply as a time of crisis, but as already the last time. We have to add, of course, that he did not necessarily think – at least it was not his habitual and characteristic way of thinking – that the world was literally going to end tomorrow (even if he saw signs of the approaching end). It's a bit like the eschatology of the New Testament, as Coste has pointed out: the kingdom of God is 'close at hand', even 'already here', although it is 'yet to come'. For Colin too, the 'close at hand' is nearer to 'already here', even though we do not know the 'times and dates' that the Father has fixed by his own authority (cf.

Acts 1:7). In other words, if Mary is acting now in the Church, if – as she told the young Jean-Claude Courveille at Le Puy – ‘it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be another Society, one consecrated to me, one which will bear my name’, it’s because she wants to be ‘the Protectress’ of the Church ‘in this last age of impiety and unbelief’ (cf. *OM* 3:718,5).

Colin thus lines up with the New Testament, where it is a matter of living now as if we were living in the last days, without necessarily thinking that we are there in the most literal sense of the words. For example Saint Paul can write to the Christians of Corinth: ‘I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with this world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away’ (1 Cor 7:29-31). But the same apostle does not forbid his disciples to marry or have children on the pretext that the world is soon coming to an end. Christians continue to buy and sell, to work and manage their affairs. Nonetheless, to live as a Christian, is to live now as one will have to live at the very end, in accordance with the values that will then be the only ones that remain. And that’s how to live as a Marist – with the assurance of Mary’s ‘support’ for the Church and of our own role as her collaborators.

This, I suggest, is a vital, though neglected, element in the context of the Work of Mary.