

God Comes from the Future to Us.
Prophetic and Mystical Thinking of Colin, the Founder of our Society of Mary
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In the time I taught Marist studies with our students in the International Theologate in Rome, I came to a renewed understanding on a profound level, that Colin developed remarkable thoughts in a prophetic and mystical style. Both are connected with each other. His spiritual insights enabled Colin, to judge his time critically and in spite of this he looked into the future full of hope. The article of Justin Taylor, "A neglected source of Colin's spirituality"¹ and the retreat talks of Jean Coste in Canada on Colin as "man of the future"² as well as the study of Michael Fitzgerald on the prophetic dimension of our spirituality³ all became very valuable for me.

Colin as mystic

Our founder lived in a time when the mystic was not much appreciated. In spite of this Colin liked to read mystical writings⁴ and developed within himself precious spiritual thoughts. We can discover in his writings and sayings many beautiful words about prayer. The aim of the novitiate is 'to taste God'. "You have to learn to taste God - yes to taste God - and that is to feel your heart wounded"⁵. When a novice "once tasted God, he will turn to him again and again. It is a treasure in his soul, something to which he is constantly brought back as to his own center"⁶. And if Colin had to make a visitation, he would first of all ask the confrere if he has an inner desire to pray. If this was the case, Colin would not have any fear, even if some things in the life of this confrere were not well. This person will return to God. And God will guide him⁷.

When I say that I now count Colin among people with a mystical approach, I do not want to define him as a man with extraordinary mystical experiences. The study of Alois Greiler on Colin, the Marists and the Supernatural gives the impression that the supernatural can be found in a preferential way in extraordinary things like visions, prophecies and private revelations.⁸. Certainly there exists in Colin the phenomena, that at certain occasions he asked visionaries for their insights. But the depth of his spiritual connectedness with God does not come from there. In his time the main focus in the development of the spiritual life was seen in what can be achieved by our ascetic practices. But Colin always underlined what is possible by the grace of God. For me the mystical life is not love for the extraordinary. Mystical life is the normal development of the divine life, which is given to us in baptism. Mystical contemplation is the normal development of each Christian prayer.

Jean Coste must have been similarly dismissive about the extraordinary, when he resisted for a long time a mystical approach to Colin⁹. But he comes closer to the mystical approach in his talks in Valpré. "Understanding the mystery of the hidden God in all its dimension means, accepting the phenomenon of secularization, having solidarity with people for whom God is hidden and keeping faith in the hidden God."¹⁰

In his article "A neglected source of Colinian spirituality", Justin Taylor went back to the mystical tradition in the Society of Jesus of the 17th century in France, to Louis Lallemand (1578-

¹ Justin Taylor, *A Neglected Source of Colinian Spirituality: The Mystical Tradition in the Society of Jesus in France in the 17th Century*, in FN 5, 4 (2001) 405-442; see for a summary in French FN 6, 1 (2003) 83-84.

² Jean Coste, *Un vision mariale de l'Église: Jean-Claude Colin - A Marian vision of the church: Jean Claude Colin* (Maristica 8), ed. by Gaston Lessard, Rome, 1988, 199-295.

³ Michael Fitzgerald, *A Marian Consciousness. Marist spirituality as prophetic - "Penser comme Marie". Spiritualité mariste et prophétisme* (Maristica 5), Rome, 1991.

⁴ Fritz Arnold, *Der Schatz im Acker Deines Lebens*, St. Ottilien, 2013, 259-268.

⁵ FS 65, § 3.

⁶ FS 63, § 2.

⁷ Cf. FS 132, § 6+7.

⁸ Alois Greiler, *Offenbarung, Prophezeiung und Sendung. Colin, die Maristen und das Übernatürliche*, in Id., *Inspiriertes Leben*, Ahmsen, 2002, 1-26.

⁹ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 421f.

¹⁰ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 470 f.

1635) and Jean-Joseph Surin (1600-1665), but also to François Guilloché (1615-1684) and Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure (1588-1657). Especially the last two are of interest for us, because Taylor connects their thoughts with phrases in our Constitutions on the spirit of our Society¹¹.

In a central place of our Constitutions we find the text: “*to think, judge and act like Mary*”¹², “*to follow her footsteps, to breath her spirit*”. Very often we understood these texts as an invitation to imitate Mary. We use all our strength to think, judge and act like Mary. But one could ask: “Is that all together possible?” Or is it not more a promise? If we try to live as a Marist God will give us the gift to think, judge and act like Mary. It is the fruit of God’s work in us, not the result of our own effort.

To read “think, judge and act Like Mary” as a promise

In François Guilloché we read: “To put on Christ is nothing else then than an appropriation and an application of his action; so that, it is not so much I who acts, but that I apply to myself the actions of Jesus”¹³. Addressing his spiritual daughter, Guilloché says: “If you are faithful under the movement of the divine spirit, Theonea, you will no longer speak except in Jesus. O divine state! You will no longer think except as in Jesus, because, his spirit being the soul of all that you do, you will no longer operate anything, in St. Paul’s view, except according to his operation in you”¹⁴. In Colin we find the Christological thought adapted to Mary. We should not so much try to imitate Mary, but to identify with her, to allow ourselves to be caught by her spirit. This way a process of renewal in the depth of our personality would begin.

These thoughts are clearly expressed by the anonymous contemporary author of “The Hermitage Within”. He writes: “If you allow yourself to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus, little by little you will have to reach the point where you think like him, judge like him, love what he loves like him, act with the same intention as his. You cannot achieve this without massive demolition. Thus you will allow him to live in you and will deserve the Father’s approval”¹⁵. This text comes very close to Colin’s thinking. To think, judge, act like Mary is the result of a long and usually painful process of renewal, even reconstruction, in the depth of one’s personality.

The same is true for the formulation “*following the footsteps of Mary*”¹⁶ and “*to live her life*”¹⁷. Here too we find in Guilloché a beautiful formulation: “All that we do of holy acts for the neighbor or for ourselves is to live his divine life; without that we are inanimate corpses, and with that we are in some way divinized”¹⁸. Here too, it is God who effects this assimilation.

Guilloché’s writings are in the Pagès-Library which Colin inherited. Therefore most probably Colin has read Guilloché’s writings. Coste also emphasizes that in Colin Mary is interpreted in a way that goes beyond the idea of imitation¹⁹.

To breath Mary’s spirit

Another wonderful image in our Constitutions is “*To breath her spirit = ipsius spiritum haurire atque spirare*”²⁰. I add the Latin text because we find here the image of breathing in and breathing out Mary’s spirit. This text touched me since the early years of my religious life. It means to take in her spirit and to pass on her spirit to the people with whom we live. In this context Justin Taylor makes us aware of another theologian of the French school of spirituality Saint-Jure. In his writing we find the following words:

“Christ is the breath for our mouth and the air that our soul must breathe. In such a way as we need elementary air for the natural life of our bodies, so even more the spiritual and divine air, which is

¹¹ Taylor, *A neglected source*.

¹² Constitutions 1872, no. 49.

¹³ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 415.

¹⁴ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 418f.

¹⁵ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 420.

¹⁶ Constitutions 1872, no. 50.

¹⁷ Constitutions 1872, no. 1.

¹⁸ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 422.

¹⁹ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 212.

²⁰ Constitutions 1872, no. 49.

Jesus Christ, is necessary for the supernatural life of our souls. ... We draw it in and attract it to us day by day, every hour and every minute, at all times and in all places, and then we send it out again... Our soul cannot be without him for one moment in our life"²¹

The picture of breathing in and breathing out also reminds of the Jesus-Prayer. Here we connect one prayerful word with our rhythm of breathing. Classical is the phrase: "Lord, Jesus, have mercy on me", or sometimes shortened to "Jesus Christ". Breathing in we take in Jesus, breathing out we give him to others. In this form of prayer we connect also with our palm of hands. And then we can sense the pulse of our heart in the palms of our hands. Therefore this prayer is also called prayer of the heart. It is a prayer in which the whole body is involved. We do not make many words we rest with one word, which we take into our rhythm of breathing"²².

Unknown and hidden in this world

A central expression of the spirit of our Society is that through our Marist attitude we *may appear unknown and even hidden in the world*²³. Colin considered these words literally as a gift from heaven that was granted to him in Cerdon: "When God speaks to a soul, he says many things with a few words: for instance unknown and hidden in the world"²⁴. This short phrase was for him the fruit of his profound experience of God which changed his life and showed him the way to apostolic fruitfulness. When the preacher forgets himself the message he proclaims can be much better accepted from the hearer of the word of God. What a precious approach for a fruitful apostolate! God himself is hidden and unknown in the world"²⁵.

Taylor makes us aware that the formula "unknown and hidden" can already be found in Surin (1600-1665). Here it is more used as a reference to the "Deus absconditus", the hidden God"²⁶.

Surin understood the spiritual life more as a life hidden from the world, while Colin spoke of hidden in the world. Colin does not emphasize a life separated from the world and hidden in God, but a life within the world, but hidden in God. Hiddenness is for him the best way to make God's message known. "Hidden and unknown in the world" is for Taylor the most original contribution of Colin to our spirituality. Colin uses this hidden in "the world as a powerful watch-word indicating to Marists how we should approach other people and the society around us"²⁷. This attitude is also something, which we cannot achieve with our own strength, but which God gives us, when we try to live our Marist spirit.

Second novitiate as help for an apostolic fruitfulness

For Fr. Colin it was important that the care for our spiritual life and apostolic fruitfulness are united. Therefore he recommended that after about ten years of apostolic service Marists needed to have a second novitiate during which the young religious should study mystical theology"²⁸. The first purpose of this study should not be to acquire more knowledge in another area of theology but to come to a second conversion. If someone gives himself completely to God, if someone allows himself to be led by the Holy Spirit, his life will not only blossom internally but also be fruitful for others. In these thoughts Colin has been inspired by Lallemand"²⁹. Love for silence, for prayer and connectedness with God leads to apostolic zeal. This is not only true for the second novitiate, but for the whole of one's life. If someone launches out to the mystical life, he will be more fruitful in the apostolate.

With these recommendations for the second novitiate Colin refers back to his own experiences. He was a serious reader of spiritual and mystical books of the French school of spirituality, like

²¹ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 424f.

²² Arnold, *Der Schatz im Acker Deines Lebens*, 269-275.

²³ Constitutions 1872, no. 50.

²⁴ OM 3 doc 819, §122.

²⁵ Cf. Fritz Arnold, *Sensitive to the Hidden God*, in FN 6, 1 (2003) 41-57.

²⁶ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 411.

²⁷ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 414f.

²⁸ Constitutions 1872, no. 153.

²⁹ Taylor, *A neglected source*, 401-410.

Francis of Sales, Surin, or Lallemand, but also of the great mystical teachers like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross: “How I thank the good God for having given me in the past a taste for spiritual and mystical books”.³⁰ He highly recommended these writings to others. But he saw also the danger of the misuse of the writings of the great mystics like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. For that reason he even forbade his confreres below thirty years of age to read mystical books.³¹ At the same time he emphasized: “St. Teresa has been very useful to me and will be to you also”³², or: “There is nothing like St. John of the Cross to show up pride, and the corruption of the whole of nature by sin.”³³ In Colin’s writings we find deep thoughts on prayer as a way of purification which remind us of John of the Cross. When we experience dryness in prayer, when we feel our prayer is as dry as a bone³⁴, we should, according to Colin, simply remain faithful and carry on. “You must do violence to yourself and see it through to the end. Then if you get nothing out of it, neither taste nor enlightenment nor consolation, well carry on all the same. Such a meditation is always of greater benefit than you think. Sometimes you will have been dry as a bone, even for a long time, you will not have had the slightest illumination and then, when the moment arrives, you will speak well. The Holy Spirit will enlighten you so much that you will be astonished”.³⁵ Colin is aware that God permits us to have times of dryness in order to open our eyes for his greater reality. “Your life must go through a great process of purification, so that you can put on a new life. The good God leaves us as it were in a dark night so that the will no longer knows what to do and the understanding is at loss. But then, when you emerge from that night, you no longer see the good God in the same way – that is faith. True faith is obscure. But then, a new horizon is revealed where truths appear in a new light of day.”³⁶ As long as we experience in prayer wonderful spiritual feelings, there exists also a lot of egoistic self-love in us. But if we remain faithful to our prayer-times in dryness, we grow in our selfless love for God. God can use us as his instruments. So finally Colin can pray: “Lord, do great things through me. Some may say, but that is pride, but I on the contrary say it is humility. For I am nothing and God has made the world from nothing. I acknowledge my nothingness and the almighty power of God.”³⁷ Trusting in the power of God he reflected critically and even in a prophetic way with his time.

Colin as prophet

At first it seems to be presumptuous to count Colin among the prophetic people. The prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were great figures in the OT. They were called by God to change their time. They had the unappreciated task to call to conversion in a time, when the ethical, religious or political situation was awry. The prophets had to say a critical and disturbing word regarding the present situation. They had to remind Israel of their earlier good behavior and of the fidelity of God in this situation. At the same time they had the task to call to repentance, so that the power and grace of God could become effective again in their lives. In this way the prophet Isaiah was called to remind Israel how God had led his people out of the imprisonment in Egypt and to tell them that God wants to bring them also out of their imprisonment in Babylon.

When we look at the basic attitude of Colin we can see some similarities. There is a critical attitude towards his time, which he sees as spoiled. There is a looking back to the early church as the ideal model of the church (Mary at the beginning of the church). There is the trust, that God will be with us at the end of time and enable us to begin a new church (Mary at the end of time).

In his retreat talks in Canada, Coste developed this future-orientated thinking of Colin³⁸. We find a similar train of thought in Michael Fitzgerald’s “A Marian consciousness - Marist spirituality as prophetic”³⁹. In both, the appreciation of Mary is connected with the future.

³⁰ FS 35, §5.

³¹ FS 35, § 6.

³² FS 35, §1.

³³ FS 35, §2.

³⁴ FS 9, §1.

³⁵ FS 9, §3.

³⁶ FS 26, §1.

³⁷ FS 132, §28.

³⁸ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 199-295.

Very often we find in Colin the word of Mary: “I was the support of the newborn church. I shall be again at the end of time”⁴⁰. This word shows that for Colin Mary has a lot to do with the future. This word also serves as an interpretation of the Le Puy message, which Courveille received and which stands at the beginning of our Society. Mary reminds us of the deeds of God at the beginning of the church and at the time of the reformation, when Ignatius was called to found the Society of Jesus. And this message expresses the desire of Mary, to have at the end of time a congregation, which bears her name.⁴¹ Precisely that time, when unbelief has grown strong, is the time of Mary: “In these hazy days, when all ideas of faith are tainted and destroyed by being mixed with the most monstrous errors, in these days we are on top of a volcano. People have eyes and do not see, ears and do not hear. The most absurd errors pass for truths. Well, it is in the midst of this century that the blessed Virgin shows herself. She is saying: ‘My children, it is not you who chose yourselves; it was I who chose you. I know your weakness, your troubles. The enemies you have to overcome are no less numerous, no less to be feared than those the apostles encountered. But I am with you’”⁴². Colin describes the wrong attitudes of his time and says that Mary is present in this time to show us the right way.

We are called to think, judge and act like Mary, but we find in Colin – as Coste showed - a very limited use of the NT-texts on Mary⁴³. Even for the most famous Marian texts like the Annunciation or the *Magnificat*, there exist only five quotations. Colin refers often to Mary in the early church, but he quotes only twice Acts 1:14, where Mary is praying with the apostles for the coming of the Holy Spirit. When he speaks of Mary as the support, the direction, the consolation or the counsel, he has another source, namely Mary of Agreda. But this leaves us uneasy because Mary of Agreda describes in her four books on Mary so many details of the life of Mary. We may have problems identifying with them. Among those four books the last one had the biggest influence on Colin. Mary is the Holy City which comes down from heaven to earth according to Revelation 21. Mary has willingly come back to earth after the Ascension of Jesus, who took her with him. She came back in order to console, instruct and support the nascent church.

In this book Colin found the main perspective for his thinking. Here he found the key to the future of the church. Mary of Agreda holds for Colin the secret of the future. Colin is a man of the future, but also a man, who can wait until the time is ripe.⁴⁴ His thinking is based on the hope which he finds in the writings of Mary of Agreda.

Colin had a sharp sense of the difference between his time and former times. His time is a time of crisis, but it is the time of Mary: “The malady has risen to the head. We live in a century of pride, of madness”⁴⁵. Colin rejected the wickedness of his age as a whole. He rejected especially a certain attitude of some churchmen.

We are all familiar with the three” No’s” of Colin: No to pride, No to greed, No to power. Colin says a strong No to an attitude which searches for prestige, honor, and privileged positions of power. He says No to an attitude which looks for money even if that is done for spiritually satisfying reasons. He says No to the use of power which does not include others in decision making⁴⁶. He wanted religious to be prophetic witnesses against a culture of power, of materialism, and against an elitist culture that puts the emphasis on prestige, success, and positions of honor. Too many church personnel displayed these attitudes. He wanted Marists to be different. We find these thoughts wonderfully synthesized in number 50 of the Constitutions of Jean Claude Colin, which are also quoted in the new Constitution in number 228:

³⁹ Michael Fitzgerald, *A Marian Consciousness. Marist spirituality as prophetic – “Penser comme Marie”*. *Spiritualité mariste et prophétisme* (Maristica 5), Rome, 1991.

⁴⁰ FS 4, §2.

⁴¹ Edwin Keel (ed.), *A book of texts – for the study of Marist spirituality*, Rome 1993, 3f.

⁴² FS 176, §3.

⁴³ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 204-208.

⁴⁴ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 208f.

⁴⁵ FS 99, §1.

⁴⁶ Cf. private notes, photocopied version, Jean Coste, Framingham Retreat, July 1980, conferences 5-7; Fitzgerald, *A Marian consciousness*, 72-86.

”Following the footsteps of their mother, 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, seeking not their interests, but only those of Christ and Mary...using the things of the world as if not using them, sedulously avoiding, in their buildings and living quarters, in their lifestyle and in all their dealings with others, anything that might suggest display, ostentation or a desire for attention.”⁴⁷

Colin had a special sensitivity for the obstacles, which can be created by the church, when she looks for strength, power or applause.

No to pride

Colin is aware, that the people of his time were jealous of their freedom. Therefore Marists should “remember our maxim: hidden and unknown. Today this is the only way to do good; we should bear that in mind. Let us imitate our holy mother, who did so much good during her life and the apostolic life of her Son, but without anyone talking about it.”⁴⁸

‘Hidden and unknown in the world’ is for Colin the best response to the needs of the present time. This was for him a kind of divine insight: “When God speaks to a soul, he says many things in a few words, for instance this word ‘hidden and unknown in the world’.”⁴⁹ The more we live this attitude, the more our works will be fruitful. “The Society is called to do an enormous amount of good. It must be faithful to its vocation. To be small, hidden, and unknown. The times call for that, we must accommodate ourselves to our time.”⁵⁰

The fruitfulness of the hidden approach was true for his time. It is even more true for our time. The whole church is called to be hidden and unknown in our days. Hidden and unknown is not a psychological technique or a trick, but it is God’s way of acting in the world.

“Let us take courage and work hard, but always hidden and unknown...The Society must begin a new church over again.”⁵¹ By behaving in this way the church starts in a certain sense as a new church. Colin certainly wanted a church that seeks not to be served but to serve in simplicity and humility.

No to greed

Colin had a real abhorrence of anything even remotely connected with the spirit of greed or cupidity. His personal life experiences and his understanding of the mystery of Mary in the church made Colin into a strong enemy of greed in any form. Cupidity is for Colin as “loathsome to God“, “a scourge”, a “pest”, as Corcoran describes it⁵².

No to power

Closely connected with the No to greed is the No to power. Colin was concerned that the power to make decisions may be misused. Therefore he recommended that in council meetings the superior shall always express his opinion last so as not to influence the others in their voting.⁵³ And he adds: “If the votes are equally divided among both sides, the superior is invited and even beseeched for the sake of humility to choose the side which is contrary to his own. Mary always followed the will of others rather than her own.”⁵⁴ He saw this attitude as an intrinsic part of the role of a Marist superior.

Prophetic thinking of Colin

⁴⁷ Constitutions 1872, no. 50.

⁴⁸ FS doc. 157.

⁴⁹ OM doc. 839, §47.

⁵⁰ FS 158, §1.

⁵¹ FS 120, § 1.

⁵² Antony Corcoran, *Strangers to Cupidity. Cupidity in Fr. Colin’s Approach to Marist Poverty. An Interpretation with Particular Study of No. 224 of the 1842 Constitutions*, in *The Study of Marist Spirituality*, Rome, 1984, 85-99.

⁵³ FS 133, §2.

⁵⁴ Coste, Framingham retreat, conference 7, 1; Fitzgerald, *A Marian consciousness*, 78-82

Colin was aware of the ills of his era, but also hoped to emerge from those ills by Mary's intervention. The central focus of his thinking was not the present, but the future, the final stage of the future.

Colin appealed to an idealized past - the early church. The early church should be the model, the only model. All should be one heart and one mind. Inspired, guided and supported by Mary they should work as the apostles.

And Colin projected the ideal model onto the future. Colin concentrated on the final stage, where Mary will have a decisive role. "Mary is at the center of this movement. She inspires the rejection of a certain manner of behavior, she incarnates an ideal attitude...., which enables the church of the last days to be conformed with the church of its beginnings."⁵⁵

Our Society of Mary has, according to Colin, a special task in Mary's work for a renewed church. "The Society of Mary must re-create the early days of the church"⁵⁶. "We must re-create the faith of the first believers"⁵⁷. In these words we find the prophetic dimension of Colin's thinking.

"The blessed Virgin, who did such great things, will do even greater ones at the end of time"⁵⁸. Looking into the future Colin glimpses the possibility of a globally different social reality and a different presence of the church in this society. "The Society must begin a new church again."⁵⁹

Holistic Integral consciousness

Colin aims at an explanation which encompasses the whole of time, but also the whole world. "The whole world will be Marist"⁶⁰.

Mary appears as a global response to agonizing questions on the destiny of the world and its future. Mary is almost linked to the ultimate principle of explanation, to God himself⁶¹. So Colin speaks of Mary, where we may more exactly - as Coste rightly remarks - speak of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit. Often it would be hard to decide whether to put God or Mary in the sentences of Colin:

- The Society of Mary is sometimes called the work of God, sometimes the work of Mary
- Founder: God alone is the founder; Mary alone is the founder
- The call: God calls; Mary calls
- Being sent: Christ sends us; Mary sends us
- The Spirit: the Holy Spirit is present; Mary is present.

For Coste this simplifying holistic thinking is an expression of a mythical approach - a non-scientific form of explanation.⁶² But for me another explanation is possible. According to Eyonymia Lasalle the whole of humanity is in the process of development from childhood to adulthood. By now humanity has made its way from the archaic over the magic and mythic consciousness to the rational consciousness. For him humanity is now at a turning point, the turning point from the rational to the integral consciousness. The conceptional rational consciousness is not sufficient to grasp the religious truth. Therefore beyond the system forming theology there awakes the desire for a holistic thinking⁶³. My understanding is that we can see in Colin something like the rising of an integral consciousness.

Mary as bearer of hope

⁵⁵ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 222.

⁵⁶ FS 115, §5.

⁵⁷ FS 117, §3.

⁵⁸ FS 117, §3.

⁵⁹ FS 120, §1.

⁶⁰ FS 189, §1.

⁶¹ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 224.

⁶² Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 226-235.

⁶³ Eyonymia Lasalle, *Wohin steuert der Mensch*, Freiburg, 1988; Cf. also Fritz Arnold, *Befreiungstherapie Mystik. Gotteserfahrung in einer Welt der "Gottesfinsternis"*, Regensburg, 1991, 184-186.

The word of Mary: “I was the support of the newborn church. I shall be again at the end of time”⁶⁴ was for Colin the conclusion of the founding experience. Mary has supported the church at its beginning and she will do it also at the end of time.

Mary is the bearer of hope and is an answer to the crisis of faith in his time. According to Coste “the view of Mary as bearer of hope turns out to be, in theology, extremely valid and rich”⁶⁵. He refers here to the theology of hope as it has been developed by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann⁶⁶, Johann Baptist Metz⁶⁷, or Edward Schillebeeckx⁶⁸. These theologians tried to integrate the reflection on the past deeds of God in history, the eternal presence of his love today with the future. This is what Paul calls “God of hope” (Rom 15:13). They reflected on God, who created the world and human beings in his love, who finally sent his Son into our world to redeem us. They reflected how in the suffering and death of Jesus God’s unlimited love was revealed to us and how in his resurrection God’s victorious love became visible for all of us. But they also proclaimed his presence here and now. They focused on the hope, that God’s wonderful deeds would bring the whole universe to a good end.

Hope is indeed an important attitude for our time. The process of the erosion of faith, which we experience in the Western world of today, in the declining number of church-goers, in less knowledge of the doctrine of faith, and less vocations to priesthood and religious life, may move many to pessimism. There is a strong temptation to fall into resignation in these times of darkening of faith or alternatively into blind activism. It is important to recognize that it does not depend on us alone. God decides if we live in his light or in a time of the eclipse of his presence. It is important to accept what his providence has given us, so that we can find our way to a purified faith. Even if the sun darkens, the moon does not shine anymore and the stars fall from heaven, we shall know that the time for salvation is near and that the Son of God will come with power and might in the sky of heaven”(cf. Mk 13:24-32). In spite of the negative assessment of his time Colin would agree with the dimension of hope. Exactly in the midst of the negativity of his time Mary will intervene powerfully.

Mariology - a theology of the future of Mary

Coste proposed that Mariology needs to be expanded to include Mary’s future. Mariology is traditionally focused on the biblical texts on Mary. Mary is present at the beginning of the gospel and at the beginning of the church. Mary is there when something new begins.

Mary was present at the first Parousia, when God became man - in the Incarnation. Mary was present at the second Parousia - when the Holy Spirit was poured out over the apostles, when the church began. It follows that Mary will be present at the third Parousia, when Christ returns - at the end of time. At the end of the document *Lumen gentium*- the Vatican II Constitution on the Church, we read: “The mother of Jesus in glory is the image and beginning of the church and a sign of sure hope and solace to the wandering people of God”.⁶⁹ She intercedes before her Son until all families of peoples, whether they are honored with the title of Christians or whether they still do not know the Savior, may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one people of God for the glory of the most holy and undivided Trinity.”⁷⁰

Mariology focuses also on the central Mariological dogmas like Mary, the Mother of God, Mary as Virgin, the Immaculate Conception or Mary’s Assumption. The dogmas show us how closely divinity and humanity are connected. In the womb of Mary Jesus Christ has taken on humanity and he never gives it up again. When he ascended into heaven, he took his humanity with him to the side of his Father in heaven. We can lock our life like an anchor into this humanity, which takes its place at the right side of the Father. The dogma of the Assumption

⁶⁴ FS 4, §2.

⁶⁵ Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 236.

⁶⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope*, München, 1967.

⁶⁷ Johann Baptist Metz, *For a theology of the world*, Mainz, 1968.

⁶⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God - the future of men*, London, 1977.

⁶⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 68.

⁷⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 69.

refers directly to the foundation of our hope. Our Lady is assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven. What has happened to her is promised to us as well. We all shall find our home in God. The church, which believes in the resurrection of the body, believes that this same body has been created in the image and likeness of God and is called to super-natural destiny in Christ. Mary stands at the origin of the regeneration of humanity. The eschatological destiny of humanity is revealed in the unification of God and human being, as it has happened in the womb of Mary.

The Assumption of Mary is the glorious culmination of the mystery of God's preference for what is poor, small and unprotected in the world. It offers hope and promise for the whole of humanity. Humanity as God wanted it and how he leads it to perfection becomes visible in Mary. So Mary is the way to a renewed church. Mary is the image and beginning of the church, as it is perfected in the world to come.

If we relate the focus of Coste on the future orientation of our Marist spirituality with the mystical thoughts on the spirit of our Society in our Constitutions, we may discover some new things. To think, judge and act like Mary, to breath her spirit and to follow her footsteps is not only related to the historical life of Mary, but also to her presence today. It is related to the role of Mary at the end of time.

A church open for everybody

In Mary we find a church open for everybody. For Colin it was important that we as Marists should have openness to everyone. The expression "the whole world Marist" expresses exactly this openness to all. He liked the vision in the Book of Revelation, that in the New Jerusalem the doors are open day and night to everybody.⁷¹ He was inspired by the interpretation of Mary of Agreda of this text in her "Mystical City of God". "The wall of the Holy City has twelve gates, the entry into it is free and generally open to all nations and generations, without excluding any of them, but instead it invites everybody so that no one, unless he should not wish it, should be deprived of the grace and gifts of the Most High."⁷²

Colin was attracted by these ideas because he saw in this mystical city a description of Mary's role in the church. "The gates of mercy of the most holy Mary were never shut nor are they now... The treasures of heaven are open to everybody without limitation of time, place, age or sex."⁷³

It was Colin's fervent wish that the Society of Mary should be non-exclusive. "We must gather together everyone - heretics alone may not belong to it."⁷⁴ We should be open to everybody, while respecting the free will of those who choose not to belong to us. But we should be careful to leave the door open for them. In this sense we should begin a new church. "The Society must begin a new church over again. I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new church."⁷⁵ Colin had a visionary view of a church that is humble and open to all. A church which gives the lay-people an important role in the community of the believers.

Therefore Coste challenges us: "Let us not be afraid of being on the side of those who want the church other than it is"⁷⁶. If we are faithful to Colin, we have to be creative. Colin was not satisfied with the church in which he was living. He wanted to begin a new church. Mary is the way to a renewed church.

Being instruments of mercy

For Colin it was important that we as Marists are instruments of God's mercy. "The confessional, Messieurs, is a noble, sublime, divine und fruitful ministry... In the confessional we need to put aside our human nature... We must put on Jesus Christ. We must be close to God,

⁷¹ Cf. Rev 21:25.

⁷² Mary of Agreda, *The mystical city of God*, 3 volumes, translated by Fiscar Morison, Hammand, Indiana 1902, vol. I, 273.

⁷³ Mary of Agreda, *The Mystical City of God*, I, 308.

⁷⁴ FS 120, §1.

⁷⁵ FS 120, §1.

⁷⁶ Cf. Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 250.

with one ear to our penitent and the other to Jesus Christ. ...Let us put on Christ's feeling for sinners, for the Samaritan woman, for Mary Magdalene. Jesus Christ is my model. Christ is to speak with my lips".⁷⁷

He reminds his confreres to count on the power of God's grace and be full of compassion. "Let us have compassion on poor sinners, let us not ask of them more enlightenment than they could be expected to have."⁷⁸ And then he uses the image of a tunnel. Through our sins we move into the tunnel that gets darker and darker. "When grace seeks it out and good will responds, it is like a little glimmer... Do not rebuff him, receive him back into grace, ask little of him and grace will do the rest. Little by little day will dawn upon him as he goes forward."⁷⁹

Colin trusts in the transforming power of God's work in the human soul. Colin had learned this in the years working as a priest in Cerdon and even more when he was in Rome. "It was there that I learned the maxim. Law was made for man. If I cannot save him with the law, I shall try to save him without it."⁸⁰ And finally he gave the maxim for our Society: "In the Society we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God, on account of the great weakness of our poor human nature, without however falling into a laxist theology."⁸¹

Mary as the response to the needs of the times

Coste starts with the observation that "more than once, the image of Mary has served to legitimize affective disorders, for example theological fundamentalism... This has been the case with more than one person, but not with Colin. For him, on the contrary, Mary is the best response to the needs of the times."⁸² Colin understood his time. Cardinal Castracane, with whom Colin had some struggles, said finally: "Colin is a saint. He has understood the age in which he lives"⁸³ He has understood the sensitivity of the people of his time for freedom. And therefore he has recommended a pastoral approach which is humble, unassuming, but this way, most effective. He has understood that the church should be stripped of all triumphalism and clericalism. He has understood that hidden and unknown is not only a fruitful pastoral approach in our time, but it is God's way of presence in our world.⁸⁴

God comes from the future to us

For many years I have appreciated the approach of Jean-Pierre Caussade (1675-1749) who speaks about "the sacrament of the present moment". For him it is very important to believe that the divine is working in the present moment as surely as the meeting with God in the Sacrament. The present moment is full of unlimited treasures. The one thing necessary can always be found in the present moment. For Caussade the attitude of Mary towards the angel has a deep spiritual meaning. The word "May it happen according to your word" contains for him all the mystical theology of our ancestors. The present moment has a sacramental character⁸⁵.

Our founder, Jean Claude Colin, would certainly agree with the "Yes" to today. But even more he focuses on the future. We can meet God, Christ, Mary in what the signs of the time announce to us, in what comes to us from the future. Mary appears at the end of time to prepare for God's final coming. Mary is the bearer of hope, who helps us to find the way into the future. Mary had a special place at the beginning of the church and also has it at the end of time.

⁷⁷ FS 102, §27.

⁷⁸ FS 163, §1.

⁷⁹ FS 163, §1.

⁸⁰ FS 163, §2.

⁸¹ FS 37, §2.

⁸² Coste, *A Marian vision of the church*, 271f.

⁸³ OM, doc 544, §18.

⁸⁴ Cf. Arnold, *Sensitive to the Hidden God*.

⁸⁵ Jean-Pierre Caussade, *Self-Abandonment to divine providence*, Illinois, 1987; Cf. Arnold, *Der Schatz im Acker deines Lebens*, 240-243.