

## IV – The Cause of Father Colin

### Chronology (1875-2019) of the Cause for Beatification of Jean-Claude Colin<sup>1</sup>

Ron Nissen sm

#### 1875

Jean-Claude dies on 15 November at La Neylière and on 27 November is given a simple burial in the gardens of the property. Plans are soon made to build a chapel in which his remains could be kept. At this time there is no question of introducing his Cause.

#### 1877

Superior-General, **Fr Julien Favre** (1812-1885) asks Marists to collect the letters or other writings of Fr Colin. This was an act of respect and devotion, and a desire that this material should not be lost and could be used in preparing a life of the Founder.

One Marist who had carefully kept all letters received from Fr Colin was **Fr Benoît Lagniet** (1806-1884) who had worked closely with Fr Colin. On his part, Fr Colin had destroyed most of his correspondence, including letters Fr Lagniet had sent to him.

**Fr Eugène Ducrettet** (1819-1902), superior of the scholasticate at Belley, was also asked; he, too, had carefully kept all of Fr Colin's letters to him. Predictably, **Fr Gabriel-Claude Mayet** (1809-1894) had collected much material

#### 1884-85

The next Superior-General is **Fr Antoine Martin** (1822-1905), a devotee of Fr Colin. He instigates research and makes efforts to bring the Society of Mary back to be more under the influence of Fr Colin's spirituality.

**Fr Auguste Detours** (1837-1895), was a great researcher and had conducted a private research about Fr Colin. He took copious notes from his questioning of people who had known Colin, Chavoain and Champagnat.

#### 1893

The idea of initiating the Cause for Beatification is launched by the general chapter of 1893, the first chapter with delegates not only from France, but also from England-Ireland, America and New Zealand. It began with a *postulatum* to collect canonical information on Fr Colin, since the witnesses who knew him were disappearing day by day. The chapter approved it, but the secretary, having first written 'unanimously', corrected it to 'by a majority'. From the beginning, therefore, there were Marists who believed that it was not opportune to introduce the Cause.

The postulator general would be **Father Claude Nicolet** (1825-1900) who had succeeded with Peter Chanel's cause in 1887 and who was the likely author of the *postulatum*.

Other testimonies were influenced by the six-volume work of **Fr Jean Jeantin** (1824-1895) edited in 1895. Fr Jeantin had worked closely with Fr Colin on the constitutions and during the latter years of the Founder's life. The most relevant testimony is that of **Fr Georges David** (1827-1907) who had worked closely with Fr Colin and Fr Jeantin.

#### 1894-95

Fr Mayet dies in 1894 and Fr Detours and Fr Jeantin the following year. The work is continued by Fr David.

#### 1899-1901

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly shortened version of a leaflet distributed by Ron Nissen SM to the Marist major superiors. The chronology is on the Jean-Claude Colin website (with updates): <https://www.jeanclaudecolin.org>

The Cause for Beatification is introduced in the archdiocese of Lyon and on 14 October 1899 the preparatory tribunal set up in Rome. The writings of Fr Colin are collected, copied and examined, an official search for the writings and the ordinary process being held in Lyon from the end of 1899 to 1901. Witnesses are questioned, but by this time hardly anyone is still alive who had known Fr Colin, except Fr David. His testimony is important, as a biographer, especially regarding the last years of Fr Colin's life. He recounts all he knows, but very little not already known from other sources.

During this process, the postulator, Father Nicolet, dies, and he is replaced by **Father Benoît Forestier** (1821-1906).

### 1902-05

Fr Ducretet dies. The following year postulatory letters are obtained from bishops throughout the world who knew the Marists. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1904, the lawyers sign the *Informatio* declaring that there were good grounds for introducing the cause. The promoter of the faith then puts forward his objections, based on those of the censor who had studied the writings. He reproaches Fr Colin with practically everything: rigorism, Jansenism, Gallicanism, lack of respect for Mgr Devie and Fr Favre. The weightiest problems are not tackled.

After the 1905 General Chapter **Fr Louis Copéré** (1867-1940) is appointed postulator. He would actively conduct the next phase of the Cause.

### 1907

Fr David dies. In Rome, an examiner begins raising questions about the letter to Pius VII (25 January, 1822), the third letter to the Holy See from the Marist aspirants. The first (February 1819, from Lyon) and the second (November 1819, from Cerdon) had received no reply. The third letter ('we've written twice but received no answer') was clearly composed in Cerdon by the Colin brothers (probably by Jean-Claude) with three signatures, including that of Jean-Claude Courveille ('s. p. g.') with the return address of Cerdon.

In 1870 Fr Colin had said, in a printed letter to Marists: '*I put Fr Courveille's signature there by myself, without his knowledge.*' And so, the question was raised about his having done something dishonest. But this was not seen to be an insuperable objection. The advocates reply based on Fr Jeantin's book, and in 1907 the Founder's writings are approved.

### 1908

9 December: Pope Pius X signs a decree introducing the Cause of Fr Colin which now rose from the diocesan to the apostolic level and therefore under the supervision of the Holy See. Fr Colin had the title of *Venerable*.

### 1910-13

The process has to begin again because the law then required that all that had been done under the authority of the ordinary should be repeated under apostolic authority. A new process, therefore, the 'apostolic process', begins in 1910 (to continue until 1921, interrupted by the First World War, 1914-18). This second process brought nothing new to light, since the witnesses at this stage knew Fr Colin only from hearsay.

Another process begins to examine Fr Colin's virtues (*'fama sanctitatis'* - 'reputation for holiness') and miracles through his intercession. This would continue for another fifteen years before deeper discussions began, the delay a possible combination of the slow-moving procedures of the Congregation of Rites and the Society of Mary's lack of interest at the time.

### 1926-28

Fr Copéré leaves Rome in 1926 but is not replaced as postulator until the Chapter of 1928, the new postulator being **Fr Jules Grimal** (1867-1953). The validity of the process is confirmed by the Vatican in 1926.

In 1927, Superior-General, **Fr Ernest Rieu** (1868-1953) asks Lyon artist, **Antoine (Tony) Tollet** (1857-1953) for a portrait of Fr Colin based on photographs taken during the 1866 Chapter. The

original is hung at La Neylière. A replica, requested by Fr Rieu, is taken to Rome (but disappears some time after his 1947 resignation).

### 1935

Fr Grimal had done much work responding to objections especially regarding the letter to Pius VII, providing more documents and responding as well as he could.

12 November: the first ante-preparatory congregation takes place, in which the proofs for the heroicity of Fr Colin's virtues are discussed. The Cause is then allowed to proceed but the objections now become more specific: particularly the difficulties with Fr Favre, the length of time taken to draw up the constitutions and the problem of the Courveille signature.

Fr Grimal sets about writing a *Synopsis historica* of the origins of the Society and the history of the constitutions. In this way, he helps to move the Cause from the level of texts to the level of facts. But the result of his work was not what he had hoped for.

### 1936

17 October: the preparatory congregation meeting sends the Cause back for further study. The main result of Fr Grimal's *Synopsis* was to show just how complex were the controverted points, and the consultors ask for more enlightenment and more documents. A new objection is raised concerning Fr Colin's relations with the vicars apostolic in Oceania. As for the Courveille case, the problem is openly raised about the identity of the signatory to the petition addressed to Pius VII. And so the Cause is blocked.

Fr Grimal works on but with a style given more to repetition than proof. He collects a quantity of photocopies of documents and seeks the help of the expert historian at the time, **Fr Gobillot**, but only asks him questions rather than allowing Fr Gobillot to structure the report. Basically, Fr Grimal did not change his view of things, continually repeating that, if Fr Colin spoke falsehoods, it was because he no longer remembered.

### 1941

After four and a half years, Fr Grimal's new report is ready and the second preparatory congregation takes place in February 1941. The consultors are very severe and the Cause is blocked again. More research is needed. The Cause is sent back to the historical section of the Congregation of Rites, which appoints an advocate to examine the problem issues: the Courveille signature, Fr Colin's relations with vicars apostolic of Oceania, his relations with Fr Favre and his slowness in writing the constitutions.

### 1942

A monsignor working in the Vatican archives locates the letter from Cerdon to Pius VII, checking the signature of Fr Courveille. Was it his or Fr Colin's? Italian and French forensic experts decide it was authentically Fr Courveille's. The problem becomes: Was Fr Colin being untruthful? How did he (Fr Colin) reconcile this?

A set-back comes for the Cause when the Congregation rules that the documentation is not adequate and the Cause is to be transferred to the 'historical' section of the Congregation of Rites (in contrast to process based on witnesses). It now needed to rely on written documents.

All the material gathered from Marists (mostly handwritten) is gathered by Fr Grimal to be handed over to **Fr Pedro Leturia SJ**, (d. 1955) dean of the history faculty at the Gregorian University. It would be ten years before the next significant step would be taken.

### 1952

After very careful study, Fr Leturia presents his report on 15 February, with a special focus on the problem with the Courveille signature. Either Fr Colin had some special reason for saying he had written Fr Courveille's signature, or else there was some other circumstance. The Cause has to go deeper, indeed to start again from scratch, gathering all documentation concerning the beginnings of the Society of Mary. What was really the role of Fr Courveille and what were the relations between him and Fr Colin? **Fr Antonelli**, general recorder of the Congregation's historical

section, entrusted to the Society of Mary the task of carrying out the documentary research and providing the critical publications requested by Fr Leturia in his report.

In Rome now are Superior-General, **Fr Alcime Cyr** (1882-1973), and his vicar, **Fr Franz Wieschemeyer** (1896-1991). Fr Cyr asks **Fr Nicolas Weber** (1876-1968), professor of church history in Washington, to come and deal with the report.

Already advanced in years, Fr Weber produces a 100-page report which contains no new material. By this time **Fr Gaston Lessard** had arrived at the Marist International Scholasticate.

### 1953-54

Recently ordained, with a doctorate in theology at Lyon, **Fr Jean Coste** (1926-94) comes to Rome in the summer of 1953 to begin a two-year licentiate at the Jesuit-run Biblical Institute. Fr Coste also had a keen interest in Fr Colin and the history of the Marist constitutions.

In early 1954 (28 February, anniversary of 1873 constitutions approbation), Fr Coste gives a talk to scholastics in Rome (incl Frs Lessard and **Seán Fagan**) on the evolution & development of the constitutions. Assisted by the scholastics and encouraged by Fr Wieschemeyer, he compiles the *'Antiquiores Textus Constitutionum SM'*.

Aware of Fr Coste's quality as a scholar, Fr Wieschemeyer asks him to consider giving up his biblical studies to focus on the Cause of Fr Colin, gathering together material into a systematic presentation as Fr Leturia had requested.

### 1955-56

Fr Coste in September moves to the General House in Rome to begin a program of research. Later that year Fr Lessard is asked to stay on and work with him. In 1956, Fr Coste is appointed *ad sistens* to the new postulator, **Fr Umberto Giannini** (1906-84). Fr Lessard is appointed to help him, with the same title. So begins a ten-year project bringing together all documents possible regarding the first twenty years of the Marist project (1816-36), including the roles of Frs Courveille and Colin, the evolution of their relationship and the issue of the signature on the letter to Pius VII. This project produces *'Origines Maristes'* (4 volumes) from Frs Coste and Lessard; Fr Fagan worked on it for one year.

### 1962-67

1962-1965: The Second Vatican Council invites religious congregations to work on renewal and revision of their legislation. So the energies and attention of Marists, including the work of Fr Coste, are diverted from Fr Colin's Cause and directed towards preparing for the 1969 General Chapter. Though interest in the Cause gradually cools, the following years would see a keen interest in Marist studies, as the rich bibliography in this field would indicate.

1967: Fr Lessard returns to Canada. **Fr Kevin Roach** (1934-97) is called to Rome to study the objection about Fr Colin's relations with the vicars apostolic (In a doctoral thesis awarded at the Gregorian University in 1963 he had written on the origins of the Catholic Church in Oceania and the difficulties between Fr Colin and Bishop Pompallier).

He works on the objection during 1967 and again in 1970, being fully engaged in 1968-1969 with chapter preparation. In 1971 he is recalled to his province.

### 1968

*'Origines Maristes'* is completed, having gone beyond what was strictly required for the Cause. Its principal aim was to provide the historical section of the Congregation with a critical edition of the documents relating to the main difficulty, the Courveille case. It involved extensive research on the documents and a detailed commentary on them.

Fr Coste noted that Fr Colin always spoke of the *letters*, in the plural. The letter of Nov 1819, sent from Cerdon to Rome by the Colin brothers has never been found.

### 1969-70

Following the request of Vatican II, the Marist General Chapter is pre-occupied with the revision of the Marist constitutions, a project which was to continue for twenty-five years.

During this time little or no impulse would be given to the Cause of Fr Colin.

### 1970-81

Following the General Chapter, Fr Coste continues to work on the history of the Society and on publications on Fr Colin (*A Founder Speaks* in 1975 and *A Founder Acts* in 1981). He gives many talks and conferences on the Founder, but is not specifically working on the Cause.

### 1982

Fr Coste leaves the general house and from that moment there is no postulator general officially named.

### 1983

25 January: the apostolic constitution, '*Divinus perfectionis Magister*' is promulgated, with a new series of laws for the causes of saints. The aim of this reform is a greater involvement of diocesan bishops, raising the level of critical study of causes and a streamlining of procedures.

In fact, the Cause of Fr Colin had stopped in 1941, the year in which the four main objections were presented (the Courveille signature, Fr Colin's relations with vicars apostolic of Oceania, his relations with Fr Favre and his slowness of writing the constitutions) and when the demand was made for a more detailed historical documentation.

### 1985

Revised Marist constitutions are presented at the General Chapter. Meantime, a new Code of Canon Law revamps cause procedures for beatification and canonisation. They are simplified, yet more demanding and critical. By this time, Marists generally have lost interest in the Cause, especially in Europe, and canonisation is not an important issue in the Church. Nevertheless, interest in the Cause, especially from Oceania and the Philippines, would re-emerge periodically in chapters and councils of the Society.

### 1987

12 September: The revised Constitutions are approved by the Holy See, this date chosen for its special Marist significance.

### 1991

At the Council of the Society in Suva, there is a request for the reopening of the Cause, but differences of opinion militate against proceeding further.

### 1993

At the General Chapter, Fr Coste presents an historical review of the Cause and **Fr Mauro Filippucci** gives information about current procedures, in the event of re-opening the Cause. The Chapter resolves not to re-open the Cause but asks that a biography of Fr Colin be written.

**Fr Donal Kerr** (1927-2001) would write a history of Fr Colin covering the years of his life until 1836 (*Jean-Claude Colin, Marist*, published in 2000). He began what might have been a second volume, but failing health prevented him from going further.

### 2007

22 February: The Vatican issues the instruction '*Sanctorum Mater*' following on from the 1983 apostolic constitution on the causes of saints.

### 2009

The General Chapter considers the Cause again. By this time, however, it would need to begin again, following new procedures and starting with the diocesan process in Lyon. The '*fama sanctitatis*' of Fr Colin would need to be examined, as with any miracles through his intercession, and then referred to Rome.

The Chapter empowers the General Administration to explore the possibility of reopening the

Cause.

## 2010

In Rome members of the first Annual Review Consultation of major superiors are consulted about the Cause and a decision taken, though not unanimously, to proceed with its re-introduction.

Vicar-General, **Fr Larry Duffy**, is given the portfolio, on behalf of the General Council, of liaising with work on the Cause. **Fr Carlo Maria Schianchi** is appointed as the new postulator general. **Fr Justin Taylor** is asked to write a definitive biography of Fr Colin and **Fr Ron Nissen** to produce printed material and set up a web site promoting the Cause.

## 2011

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints requires Fr Schianchi to attend a postulators' course, with theological, historical and juridical exams.

6 May: with diploma, and letter of appointment from the Superior General, Fr Schianchi's appointment is ratified.

August: Icon of Fr Colin, written by New Zealand iconographer, **Michael Pervan**, is shipped to Rome to be installed in the chapel of the General House.

September: Fr Justin Taylor comes to Rome to work on the Colin biography.

## 2012

15 November: the 'Colin Year' begins with Marists encouraged to reflect on the words of Fr Colin in weekly texts published on the Colin web site, launched on the same date.

## 2013

January: **Fr Bernard Thomasset** is appointed Vice-Postulator of the Cause, to assist with Cause matters in France.

February: At La Neylière, the 1927 Tollet painting of Fr Colin is recovered and carefully imaged.

**Fr Alois Greiler** is asked to prepare a descriptive chronology of the life of Fr Colin.

## 2014

Fr Greiler's chronology is published.

24 September: An important phase of the Cause process ends when postulator, Fr Schianchi, sends documentation to the archdiocese of Lyon: '*Origines Maristes*', '*Colin sup.*', '*Colin Fondateur*', '*Conférences et discours du p. Colin*', '*Autour de la Règle*', '*Jean-Claude Colin - Descriptive Chronology of his life*', '*Antiquiores Textus*', '*Quelques souvenirs*' and '*Entretiens Spirituels*'. These are to be studied by committees of historians and theologians.

Fr Schianchi comments: '*Now it's up to the diocese of Lyon to activate all necessary procedures for the further development of the cause. The only work which remains for us Marists is to accompany this moment with a special prayer to Fr Colin.*'

October: a petition is sent to Rome from **Cardinal Philippe Barbarin** (Lyon) to re-open the Cause.

## 2015

27 June: death of **Fr Craig Larkin** (1943-2015), prolific author of Colin-related books and articles, including '*A Certain Way*' (1995), '*Pilgrimage—a guide book to places of Marist origins*' (2013), '*Bearings*' (2011), '*Colin in Rome, a Superior-General at work*' (2014).

Renovations are completed at La Neylière, including a new tombstone for Fr Colin's grave.

## 2016

8 July: 'Nihil obstat' from **Cardinal Amato**, Prefect of the Congregation of Saints, is received by Cardinal Barbarin allowing the Cause to move forward at the diocesan level. A letter asks that the writings of Fr Colin be studied by two theological censors, and that an historical commission should examine the difficulties between Fr Colin and the Vicars Apostolic and Propaganda Fide, as well as questions about the writing of the constitutions, and other difficulties that might arise.

November: At their meeting in Lourdes, the French bishops give full support ('with a massive vote') to the Cause. Oceanian Marist bishops **Ghislain de Rasily** and **Michel Calvet** are present.  
December: **Fr Justin Taylor** completes the biography text.

### 2017

26 January: the Cause is officially re-opened in Lyon. Frs Thomasset, **Paul Walsh** and **Paul Loubaresse** represent the Marists.

April: Fr Lessard's reflection '*Who is Jean-Claude Colin for me?*' is distributed.

6 June: in Lyon, testimony is heard for the Cause, marking the official beginning of the investigation.

11 October: On its closing day, the General Chapter of 2017 votes unanimously in support of the Cause.

November: Assistant-General, **Fr Paul Walsh**, appointed to the liaison role for the Cause of Fr Colin.

### 2018

September: Publication of the definitive biography '*Jean-Claude Colin, Reluctant Founder, 1790-1875*', authored by Fr Justin Taylor.

### 2019

January: First draft of the 'very short life' of Jean-Claude Colin, an abbreviated biography by Fr Justin Taylor with the permission of publishers of the full biography, ATF Australia.

August: Launch of the refurbished Colin website [www.jeanclaudecolin.org](http://www.jeanclaudecolin.org).

September: Assistant-General, **Fr Bernard McKenna**, is given the Cause portfolio