In *A Founder Speaks*, there is an entry from 1838-39 with the heading ‘A Moral Theology of Mercy’. Fr. Colin begins by acknowledging his debt to Bishop Devie of Belley ‘for theology, cases of conscience, ways of dealing with things in the confessional’ and for his own subsequent broadmindedness in such matters. Colin then observes:

“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 human nature, without however falling into a laxist theology.”

In this article, I would like to explore a) the practical application of these statements by Colin and b) what such pastoral practice reveals about his moral theology in relation to his own time but also in reference to today.

I will approach the task by using an inductive method applied, first, to two case studies from Colin’s life and, second, to material offering consistency about Colin’s views on confessional ministry and spiritual guidance. Helpful in all this are the headings ‘Ministry of Confessional’ and ‘Spiritual Direction’ found in the second Index of *A Founder Acts*. This Index offers a helpful working guide in selecting the relevant passages as distinct from, for instance, comments of Fr. Colin that are *ex tempore* or rhetorical devices to make a point.

The discussion has five stages: a) a brief outline of the influence on Colin of Alphonsus Liguori through Bishop Devie; b) Colin’s guiding principles in sacramental absolution leading to two case studies; c) insights from Colin on confessional ministry and spiritual guidance (with particular reference to young men); d) considerations about Colin’s attitudes on Rome, salvation and the law; e) some final thoughts.

### 1. Liguorianism and Devie

Given Justin Taylor’s treatment of this issue, for our purposes, only key aspects need to be noted. Raymond Devie was one of the first in France to embrace Alphonsus Liguori’s ‘system of moral judgment’. Once Liguori’s doctrine was given authority by Rome after his beatification (1816), Devie felt free to teach it at the seminary in Viviers. Once he became Bishop of Belley, he promoted it in his diocese. This was given particular impetus by the Jubilee Year (1826) and the Pope’s encyclical *Charitate Christi*. Despite some French charges of ‘laxism’, Rome affirmed in 1831 that Liguori’s opinions could be ‘safely’ followed and professed, though without prejudice to the opinions of other ‘approved authors’.

As indicated earlier, Colin’s conversion to the Liguorian moral system was mainly due to Devie. When it came to attitudes and practice in hearing confessions, Colin seems ‘to have found it difficult to shake off the rigorist principles and practice in which he had been trained’. They are reflected in his sermons and addresses during his four years of preaching missions (1825-1829). Taylor sums it up:

“there was probably a fairly long period of development in his thinking, beginning with the Jubilee and completed by his contact with Roman theology in 1833-1834.”

---

5 Taylor, Jean-Claude Colin, 258.
What we do have is clear documentary evidence of Colin’s attitude in 1833. It is found in the *Summarium Regularum* in which missionaries (working either overseas or at home):

“will read the works of Saint Alphonsus Liguori with special attention and will strive in the direction of souls to follow their example.”

Consistent with this is the second half of the entry already cited at the start of this chapter. With these guideposts, we move to the next phase.

2. ‘Absolves Once He Sees Contrition’

In giving ‘greatest play to the mercy of God’, Colin is very open. Speaking in 1851 of a ‘very serious matter’ in which ninety out of a hundred priests would refuse absolution, Colin (without blaming them in any way), openly acknowledges he would be the ‘one of the ten who would give absolution’. As soon as a priest can ‘give absolution, he must give it’. He cites the example of St. Alphonsus Liguori.7

Elsewhere (in 1848), Colin observes of himself that he never refused anyone (absolution) during a mission.8 At the same time, Colin points out that ‘we must not move without discernment, or go at things full tilt’. Wisdom and patience are needed. People may return to the sacrament again after a mission because ‘they had not been given time to tell their sins’.

Colin’s rationale for this approach is indicative of his underlying theology of grace (and of its power).

The justification of a man requires only a moment, when that moment is seized and to it is joined the grace of the sacrament.

He goes on to cite Prov 8: 17: ‘I love those who love me’. Colin then says that he would give absolution even if he knew the person ‘would fall into sin the next day’ since he believed ‘the person was sorry’.9

In 1848 Colin explains this further. To say to someone that you cannot absolve them, is to ‘resist grace’. The very fact that a person approaches for absolution is a ‘sign they need it; it’s the first step of good will’.10

There are two aspects intimated by Colin’s comments that warrant further examination; a theology of the imperfect response; the process of ‘gradualness’ in the moral and spiritual life.11 I will illustrate these with two case studies from Colin himself.

*The Montlosier Case: Retraction and Repentance?*

December 9th 1838 in Clermont-Ferrand marked the death of a certain Count de Montlosier who had written extensively against the Jesuits. In his final illness, he wanted to make his confession. The bishop required a written retraction. The Count refused but was willing to withdraw his views by word of mouth. This was not sufficient. When he died, he did not receive the funeral rites of the Church.

The incident became a burning issue in its day, with attacks on the Bishop for refusing a Church burial and polemic against the Government in its attempt to have the Bishop censured for his refusal. What is instructive is the position Colin took on the matter. It is consistent with Liguorian principles but also flagged an approach to sacramental ministry ahead of its time.

In speaking about this incident, Fr. Colin expressed his unease with how the Count was treated:

“You see, a person at the very moment of entering eternity was being pushed beyond his capacity, and perhaps he might otherwise have been saved.

---

7 Ibid., 671 citing *Antiquiores Textus* 1, 72, cited, with other references, in FA, 167, note 3 (henceforth AT).
8 FS 186: 1 and 2, 538.
9 *Origines Maristes* 2, n. 675, p. 515 (henceforth OM).
10 OM 2 no. 675, p. 515, author’s translation.
11 See the ‘law of gradualness’ in moral development (with much associated debate) developed much later by Pope St. John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981).
A young theologian (student?) objected: ‘how could he have received absolution? Does a man have contrition when he refuses to retract?’ Colin replied:

He did not refuse entirely…he only refused to sign, to put it in writing, to make it public. To have contrition, a man is not obliged to acts of heroism.”

Colin considered that Montlosier’s attitude of repentance was sufficient. It was a response that could develop further. In that sense, it was an ‘imperfect’ response. Colin suggests that ‘possibly they should not have placed such a high price on the granting of absolution’ and that it be handled in stages. In suggesting this, Colin is alluding to his own approach to a similar case a few months earlier – to which we now turn.

A certain General, well known for not practising his Catholic religion, asked that communion for the dying be brought to him privately (after dark) rather than publicly (the common practice). Colin considered the man demonstrated sufficient good will and, with the Bishop’s support, did as requested. Before the General died, he had not only received the sacraments; he openly blessed his son and asked for prayers from the household servants.

Colin maintains that, as in the case of the General, if less had been asked of Count Montlosier: “maybe he himself would have done much more than they wanted. They should perhaps have continued to hear his confession, to bring him into contact with the workings of grace. When grace begins to work in the heart it does so very powerfully.”

Finally, the overall attitude that Colin saw as essential in relation to the sacrament of reconciliation is captured in a retreat in 1846. He says:

“Finally, Messieurs, show great kindness to sinners who come to you in the confessional. Do not rebuff them, or appear surprised by their crimes, however great they are; that would be a great imprudence and very harmful to souls. Instead, remember that you hold the place of Jesus Christ, and our Lord Jesus Christ knew the profound depths of the human heart, he welcomed all sinners with gentleness….listen, then, quietly…and with kindness”.

We will return to this quote later. For the moment, the second case study

Birth Control and Culpability

In 1850, in his talks on Home Missions during a retreat, Fr Colin supported the Liguorian - based approach to moral questions and confessional practice found in fellow Marist Fr. Barthélemy Epalle’s theological conferences in 1843. Epalle was insistent on the ‘prudence called for in the sacred tribunal’ and, specifically, ‘on the principles to be followed concerning husbands who ‘reenact the sin of Onan’, namely, the interruption of intercourse with contraceptive effect (coitus interruptus). The footnote continues that, in this matter, there is:

“Nothing more delicate, nothing more needful, especially in our own day, of restraint and enlightenment.”

This is the context for the second case study - mentioned by Colin in 1841-2 while reminiscing on his home mission days and his struggles with rigorism. Colin notes that God helped him overcome his rigidity ‘because of his upright and pure heart’. He illustrates this with an incident.

It concerned a pious woman who was the unwilling victim of her husband’s demands for contraceptive intercourse (Onanism). She held such a grave sin ‘in horror’. Still, Colin felt obliged to deny her absolution for six months. This was despite the fact there were serious reasons indicating the same sin (‘crime’) she abhorred would be repeated, despite all she was doing to avoid it.

12 FS 14: 5, 69 (emphasis added).
13 Taylor, Jean-Claude Colin, 497.
14 FS, 14:7, 70 (italics added).
17 OM no. 542, 308-310. See also Taylor, SM, Jean-Claude Colin, 671.
Being deprived of the sacraments caused her much pain. Colin himself felt for her even more. Still, her persistence in prayer prevailed. Her husband ceased to make demands about the contraceptive practice. Colin speaks of his happiness in being able to admit this lady to the sacraments after denying her such access because he made an ‘honest mistake’ (une erreur innocente).

His misguided approach reflected the teaching Colin had received at the seminary, namely, the more rigid view:

“the woman also committed a grave sin if she did not refuse intercourse and actively resist her husband – even, some moralists insisted, at the risk to her life.” 18

Responses from the Sacred Penitentiary (1816, 1822, 1823) had rejected such an ‘extreme position’ (a more moderate approach is implied). The footnote also points out that Fr. Colin was hardly in a position nor had the means to know about these responses. 19 We do know that even earlier, while preaching missions (1826-1829), when faced with this problem, Colin had ‘instinctively struggled’ with ‘the extreme position’ taken by some moralists. 20

In reflecting on this incident from years earlier, Colin offers an insight into his application of the Liguorian approach. First, he appreciates that he was ‘honestly mistaken’ in the ‘overly severe’ approach he took with the woman in deferring absolution. He had acted in good faith.

Second, as to his being ‘honestly mistaken’, on what grounds does he make that admission? There is no explicit answer in the text. But, from the facts of the incident viewed in the light of the milder Liguorian principles, it can reasonably be inferred that Colin better appreciated how the woman was acting out of fear for herself (and, perhaps, for her marriage). She was under pressure to go against her beliefs about the procreative end of marriage. This was compounded by this pattern of (objectively) grave ‘sin’ continuing, despite her efforts to resist. 21 On the other hand, Colin is very aware of her prayerfulness, her desire for God, her ongoing yearning to be absolved and to receive Holy Communion.

It seems that Colin is intimating that, looking back, he was evaluating her actions in the light of the conditions needed for grave sin as articulated in moral theology. In this instance, the sexual act in marriage must not only be open to life; it must also be freely given. Given that her consent was not free it follows that any grave fault was diminished, if not, removed. Further, her ongoing faith and her ‘good will’ were again indicative of her persistent openness to the action of grace. Despite his ‘honest mistake’, Colin still extended to her sensitivity, tact and compassion.

3. **Confessors and Spiritual Guides**

The case studies discussed above can be supplemented by other passages from Fr Colin that confirm the consistency of his Liguorian conviction of giving greatest play to mercy. In terms of moral theology, we are talking about the pastoral approach noted above - officially acknowledged by Rome, implied in the Papal encyclical (1823) and promoted by Bishop Devie. Justin Taylor sums it up:

“According to this doctrine, often called ‘equiprobabilism’, where reputable moral authors are equally divided about whether a certain act is sinful, the confessor may follow the opinion that is more lenient.” 22

In 1848, Fr. Colin, in speaking of confessional practice, begins with ‘let us have compassion on poor sinners’. He uses the image of someone entering a tunnel who, through a pattern of mortal sins, ends up groping in total darkness: ‘so it is with a soul which has forgotten God’. Colin continues:

\[18\] Taylor, Jean-Claude Colin, 671.
\[19\] OM 2, footnote 4, 309-310.
\[20\] Taylor, Jean-Claude Colin, 671.
\[21\] Colin’s words above: ‘not obliged to acts of heroism’ seem also to apply here.
\[22\] Taylor, Jean-Claude Colin, 257.
“when grace seeks it out [the soul] and good will responds, it is like a little glimmer of light in the depths…it is impossible that the poor sinner who is at such a depth could enjoy the same enlightenment as you.”

Colin then proceeds to outline specific aspects of a pastoral attitude in this situation:

“Let us not ask of them more enlightenment than they could be expected to have. Let us form a true idea of their position, and then we will absolve them more readily.”

These two excerpts are part of an extended paragraph that offers an insight into Colin’s own experience and convictions (and is consistent with what he says elsewhere, cf., footnotes 26, 27 below). The key metaphor used is that of darkness and of grave sin as a habit. The final phrase above indicates that Colin’s main concern is the withholding or denying of absolution (and clear signs of a ‘firm purpose of amendment’). That, in turn, is related to whether a certain act is sinful and the more ‘lenient’ approach noted above.

Colin’s words above (especially concerning ‘enlightenment they could be expected to have’) appear to be consistent with the case studies discussed earlier and his comments elsewhere (see below). In those earlier cases, there was awareness of moral standards that were contravened either willingly (Montlosier) or unwillingly (the married woman being ‘pressured’ into onanism).

By contrast, the two sentences above from 1848 prompt two observations.

First, one could reasonably infer from these words (and their context) that Fr. Colin was sensitive to the impact of habits on culpability, namely, when a person’s direction of the will is against the associated actions. Traditional moral manuals would evaluate such a situation in the light of factors that impede or mitigate the human act. Take, for instance, those who repent of, yet still struggle with, habitual masturbation, or (using a contemporary example), addiction to pornography. These are cases where the person’s repentance is an ongoing disposition of the will against such behaviour. ‘The true idea of their position’ (before God) seems to suggest one where any guilt of mortal sin may be diminished or removed.

Second, the phrases above about expected degrees of ‘enlightenment’ raise a (tentative) question concerning moral knowledge that comes from practical reason. Is Fr. Colin intimating in himself some form of awareness of a person ‘knowing’ (speculatively) that something is wrong in principle but has not grasped it at the appreciative level, namely, as a value personally significant to them? That they have not so much ‘forgotten’ God but have not ‘known’ God and the moral law in an evaluative sense?

This flawed knowledge could occur from the influence of mitigating factors such as culture, upbringing, custom, stage of development etc. This was certainly an issue for Liguori whose view is summed up by Kevin O’Shea:

“There are moral precepts which cannot be made interiorly clear to ordinary people of good will, even if much time and effort is put into their education.”

Very often, a person’s moral vision and capacity are limited but not through their own fault. We are talking here about those who are ‘invincibly ignorant or mistaken (‘in error’). Again, as indicated earlier, while I raise this with hesitation, that it may be part of the Liguorian influence on Colin cannot be excluded.

Such defective moral knowledge (of practical reason) may also be associated with the emotional and spiritual maturity needed to uphold a moral standard. In other words, moral (and

---

23 FS 163:1, 467. See also FS 95; 116:11; 132: 17-24.
24 The traditional treatment of this is found in Summa Theologiae 1.2. 94.4 concerning speculative and practical knowledge and their different levels of certitude. Since Colin’s time, modern discussions of this issue have refined further the distinction between conceptual and evaluative knowledge. See Richard Gula, Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1989), 83-7. The same distinction is the basis in contemporary Canon Law for interpreting ‘grave lack of discretion of judgment’ as a ground for nullity of a marriage, again not part of Colin’s historical context.
Moral Theology and Pastoral Practice

spiritual) life is gradual, a step-by-step process. Colin seems to suggest this when speaking of young men:

“But you have to offer them a helping hand, go along with what is needed and not be too demanding. Personally, I only ever ask for what I cannot avoid asking for. I take a broad path; I wait till their faith grows. Then they fend for themselves and everything follows on.”

Consistent with what is said above is Colin’s advice that it is incumbent on the confessor (and guide) to try to make an informed appraisal of the inner attitude of this individual person. Picking up the same passage cited earlier (see note 23), Fr Colin uses the image of falling into ‘darkness’ to convey the growing grip of habitual mortal sin on a person. He continues:

“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 on him as he goes forward.”

This brings us back to the theme present in the two cases studies we discussed earlier and is also implied in what Colin says above about young men: what matters is the basic ‘yes’ to God. It may not be perfect but it is a seed, a ‘glimmer of light’ from the depths of the darkness. ‘Someone who makes his confession with sincerity is not far from conversion’. The process of being released from the grip of a habit takes time. Do not push a person beyond what they are capable of giving (and doing). Let God’s grace (the Holy Spirit) work slowly and the person will make progress into greater enlightenment (about himself/herself) and a deeper desire for God (in love).

Ministry with Young Men: Representative Samples

We return to what was mentioned earlier about Fr Colin’s pastoral approach to young men (a ministry he valued very much no doubt enhanced by his work in education). We must keep in mind that Colin, understandably, is careful to couch his comments in general terms given the confidential nature of the original contexts. He leaves it to the listener (or reader) to read between the lines.

Earlier, in 1841, Colin says of young men:

“The sins they have at that age are not like those of later years, they are not deeply rooted. The soul is not so guilty, not so marked by them.”

Colin speaks of a confessor and spiritual guide’s attitude to young men (as teenagers and in early adulthood) particularly as they work their way through what can reasonably be inferred (then and now) as normal developmental issues (emotional, relational, sexual, spiritual). Taking the ‘long view’ is crucial. He advises to always receive them with kindness. He says ‘I make them go to confession often, and that way you support them’. He goes on to say:

“A poor young man said to me ‘Oh, Monsieur, I cannot: how difficult it is!’ I told him ‘I ask only one thing of you, yes, even if you were to fall again, to go to communion every week’. The suggestion surprised him.”

In Colin’s time, a confessor would require that a penitent had gone without grave sin for more than a week before giving absolution. This clarifies Colin’s dissenting comment elsewhere that:

26 FS 40:4, 131. The final sentence in this excerpt also indicates Colin’s awareness of a danger for a spiritual guide, namely, of keeping the person being ‘guided’ in a state of dependency.

27 FS 163: 1, 467.

28 FS 95:3, 261.

29 FS 40:2, 130.

30 FS no. 40: 4-6, 131-2. Also, FA 213:2 and Colin’s reassurance to one young man that he is not the only one of his age who has such moral struggles. He encourages him to ‘make a good start’ (through confession) and then weekly reception of the sacrament (s). Again, Colin makes a brief allusion to the need to view such present ‘difficulties’ in the light of marriage in the future.

31 The young man’s surprise is intriguing. At first sight it seems to refer to weekly access to Holy Communion – going against the general practice of the time (until Pius X). But could his ‘surprise’ be about Colin’s advice to ‘go the communion’ every week ‘even if you were to fall again’ – which seems to imply that Colin’s discerned there was no obstacle (grave sin) that prevented the young man from receiving Holy communion?
“Even if I knew that my penitent would fall into sin the next day, I would absolve him if I believed he was sorry.”

For Colin, kindness was also needed so that the young person maintains at least a ‘respect’ for religion ‘even if they come only from time to time or only go to communion at Easter’.

“You can still get them to go to communion even once a year, whereas if they abandon religion, they experience incredible difficulty in coming back later on.”

Colin’s sense of perspective and discernment is especially captured in these words:

“They say young men fall again…were they to return eight, four, three days later, does that mean that they did not have contrition? I sometimes see some of these young men who should go to communion and who really give it up for things that are scarcely worth bothering about’.”

Entries along similar lines confirm that Colin’s way of handling, for instance, teenage masturbation was not only enlightened but also advanced for its time. Here, as elsewhere, he distinguished the person from their behaviour. He was trustworthy and sympathetic, encouraging them to be quite open about it with him, which they were. For instance, he speaks of one lad stopping him in the corridor and saying (euphemistically) ‘Things are not going well’. By enabling such openness, any aura of shame is, hopefully, dispersed, things kept in perspective and perhaps any compulsive urges are eased.

Take one case of a young boy who was helped by Colin to overcome kleptomania. An assessment of Colin’s approach from a behavioural psychologist viewed it as ‘remarkable’:

“Colin employed what in our day would be considered state of the art techniques for treating self-initiating behavioural disorders.”

Looking back, Colin’s experience was that ‘open-hearted admissions were the saving of young men’. The long-term implications are illustrated in a case of a young man in whom Colin saw real potential and told him so. ‘God has great plans for you’. Colin gently challenged him; if he really wanted to ‘he could shake off the habit’. His appeal to the youth’s best ‘self’ seems to trigger a sense of self-belief (as if emerging ‘from a deep sleep’). It strengthens his resolve to address the ‘problem’. Colin says this same young man went on to become an exemplary priest.

In these incidents, concern about serious sin does not appear to be foremost in Colin’s mind. This must be measured against the rigours of his earlier training and of the prevailing Catholic culture in France. Again, there was the Church’s tradition that, on matters sexual, a failure such as masturbation was, in principle, a matter of grave sin. Colin also continued Liguori’s encouraging view about the regular reception of holy Communion.

Finally, Colin insisted that confessors ‘educate’ themselves so as to foster confidence in anyone opening themselves up (to be helped). Again, what Colin says of the Marist involved in ‘missions’ has wider application: the need for ‘great knowledge of the human heart’. The priest as confessor, holds the place of Jesus Christ ‘who knew the profound depths of the human heart, he welcomed all sinners with gentleness’.

---

32 FS 186:2, 538. I am grateful for Gaston Lessard sm for this clarification in a personal communication 20 July 2020.
33 FS 40:6, 132.
34 Raymond P. Carey, ‘Jean-Claude Colin from the Perspective of Behavioral Psychology’, The Study of Marist Spirituality - Colloquium held in Rome Sept. 24-28, 1984 (Rome: via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1984), 71-83, at 78-9. Colin used negative reinforcement (rather than punishment). This helped prepare the boy to learn that the urges to steal can be modified and controlled. Finally, he continued to praise the boy, hence, instilling confidence that he could always tell Colin about the problem and would not lose his esteem.
35 FA no. 331: 8, 309.
36 FS 52, 156-7.
37 Liguori opposes those who ‘seek only purity and perfection for admission to Communion…and who separate the faithful from the sacrament, the only cure for our weakness’. See Theodule Rey-Mermet, Moral Choices: The Moral Theology of St. Alphonsus Liguori (Liguori Publications, 1998), Ch. 6, 13 (e Version).
We are offered a further insight into this when, in 1851, Colin expands on the priest confessor holding ‘the place of Jesus Christ’. He speaks of those times when, in hearing confessions, he ‘was perplexed’:

‘I used to say, ‘O my Saviour, what would you do if you were in my place?’ Then I would feel the scales of mercy shift… ‘O my God, I can feel it, you can change this heart. Well, change it in that same way, this very moment.’ And I would finish up giving absolution. If the Lord reproached me for it, I would reply ‘My God, this is the kingdom of mercy’.

What is instructive here is how Colin is very aware of the divine help needed in moments of discernment, especially when the inner state of the penitent or the advice needed is not clear. But just as significant is Colin’s appeal to a benchmark – ‘the kingdom of mercy’ which, here, is mediated and embodied in the person of Jesus (which we will pursue later).

We come to the next stage of this discussion.

4. ‘For Myself, I am Roman’

The Liguorian approach evident in Colin is viewed (rightly) by him in the context of the Church. It had received the ‘rubber stamp’ of approval from Rome. He saw his first visit to Rome (1833-1834) as an opportunity to become more informed and attuned to such a perspective. At the end of the entry discussed above (note 27), Colin sums things up:

“Rome was very useful to me on this point. It was there that I learned the maxim: ‘Law was made for man. (cf., Mk 2:27)’. If I cannot save him with the Law, I shall try to save him without it’.

Looking back in 1845, Colin makes this further observation:

“For myself, I am a Roman, and in the confessional I follow the same approach as they, the Romans do. I am very fond of those principles: All for souls and Salvation before the Law.

These two quotes distil the foundations of Colin’s approach as applied in what has been discussed above. Some explanation might be helpful.

We need to keep in mind that in Colin’s time (and into the twentieth century) moral theology was viewed predominantly in terms of law. Mahoney reminds us that ‘the location of interpersonal morality and of man’s religious relationship with God within the categories of justice and of law’ has a justified basis in Scripture and reason. Liguori himself worked from within that framework and, in the process, strove to transcend it. This appears to be what Colin is trying to do here.

Colin is intimating that one needs to view law in perspective. The aim of any law is to achieve a goal, some form of the good or benefit for a community. In this case, the purpose of the moral law, as mediated by the Church, is the good of the individual and the community in rightly ordered relationships. Its ultimate goal is the ‘right relationship’ with God and eternal life, captured in the divine plan of salvation. ‘All for souls’ is consistent with this; it also distils a theology of the person for Colin, namely, souls are so ‘precious’ that:

“they brought the Son of God to the earth…to seek them out…and he has confided to us a part in his mission.”

This is the context, then, of Colin’s phrases - ‘all for souls’ and ‘salvation before the law’. However, as Church tradition and theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and, later, Alphonsus

---

39 FA 385: 1, 419. Also, FS 102:27, 295-6. The original French in Mayet is ‘règne’ which denotes ‘reign’ (a temporal aspect) rather than ‘kingdom’ which is a spatial reference (as in ‘royaume’). Hence, the ‘reign of mercy’ refers to a period of time when mercy reigns. There will be another (future?) time when justice will reign. Again, I am indebted to Gaston Lessard sm for his illuminating comments on this matter in a personal communication 20 July 2020.

40 FS 163:2, 467.

41 FS 95: 3, 261 (emphasis in original).

42 Mahoney, The Making, 252.

Liguori, acknowledge, law (even natural law and moral norms) cannot cater for all the variables in life. Situations arise that are not envisaged by the law as formulated. In such situations, in both canon law and moral theology, appeal is made to the principle (and virtue) of ‘epikeia’, described in a felicitous phrase as ‘sweet reasonableness’. This is not a strategy to find loopholes to the law. It is about measuring a situation (and the law) against a higher law (implied in ‘salvation of souls’).

And so, when Colin says he ‘will try to save him without it’ (the law) and ‘salvation before the law’ do we gain any insight into those phrases from our considerations so far?

Our discussion has been anchored in specific people and situations, as reflected in Colin’s reminiscences. His ‘eye’ is always on this person, this ‘precious’ (soul), on discerning how God and grace are at work in this individual’s life. In other words, Colin’s moral theology, like Liguori’s, appears to be very much person-centred. Importantly, its spotlight is on the mercy and saving love of God reaching out to each person, of ‘letting grace do its work’. The ‘higher law’ against which the ‘law’ is measured is that of God’s love for each individual person (as ‘precious’) and its saving action as an expression of ‘the kingdom of mercy’ (noted earlier).

In the light of such thoughts, is it unreasonable to suggest that, in some ways, Colin foreshadows the more personalist moral theology of the mid-twentieth century? Further, while he, with Liguori, shared the individualistic approach to sin found in the manualist tradition, nevertheless, both saw the moral life in a broader context. Colin drew on a broader French heritage that framed the moral life (and its struggles) in a setting of spirituality. The faithful, whatever their level or of education or way of life, were capable of more than just avoiding the potholes of grave sin. They could live a life based on response to a divine call.

In other words, it was Colin’s conviction that when a person is open to God through a sense of need (the first Beatitude) - often expressed in sincere repentance and humility- then divine grace and the Holy Spirit are able to work. Spiritual progress can follow, especially through ongoing prayer and cultivation of the virtues. The depth of that belief for Colin is found in his incorporation of laity into his vision of the Marist project from its very beginnings.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have, in many ways, been observers of Jean-Claude Colin ‘at work’ and given privileged access to his reflections on his ministry and attitudes. In so doing, a consistent picture of his Liguorian - based moral theology reflected in his pastoral practice seems to emerge (while not claiming to be comprehensive). It is one that is very much centred on the person, where the interplay of sin and grace occurs within a domain in which the ‘greatest play is given to the mercy of God’. Such a positive approach was distinctive in its time, all the more so given the intermittent pessimism Colin experienced from the rigours of his seminary training and from the social and political upheavals of his age.

Still, as we know, there is a world of difference between today and Jean-Claude Colin when it comes to moral theology. There have been major developments in relation to scripture,

---

44 See n. 24 and reference to Aquinas on this matter. For Alphonsus, see Mahoney, The Making, 253.
45 See n. 39 and 36. In this latter entry, ‘Kingdom of mercy’ is followed by FA 385:2: ‘This is the kingdom of mercy; mercy here is boundless. Justice will take its course in the next world’. Coste’s commentary puts this binary in its historical context and clarifies its provenance. He suggests that Colin ‘encountered’ the idea in St. Alphonsus Liguori’s The Glories of Mary. Without access to that work and the other sources noted by Coste, the theological standing of the two ‘kingdoms’ idea in Colin’s thought cannot be fairly evaluated. It could be an ex tempore remark with a rhetorical flourish to support his view of Mary as an approachable, merciful, caring and maternal presence in the Church.
46 And, of course, well after Colin’s death, we find what points to its ecclesial expression in canon 1752, the final code of the Code of Canon Law (1983) which is part- imperative and part- exhortation: ‘Let the supreme law be the salvation of souls’.
47 AT 1, p. 83. Note the Liguorian parallel: ‘The source of Alphonsus’ pastoral theology is a threefold trust: in the mercy of God, in the good will of the sinner who has gone to the trouble of going to confession, and in the transforming and sanctifying grace of the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist. This demonstrates the quality of the faith and the confidence in humanity’. See Rey-Mermet, Moral Choices, Ch. 6, 10 (e Version).
conscience, ecclesiology, the autonomy of the secular (and its theology), religious freedom, the modern 'self', the emergence of empirical and human sciences, the importance of social justice and a greater appreciation of social and structural evil. All these have fed into advances in moral theology and, in fact, form the context of, for instance, someone such as Pope Francis.

That said, Colin’s pastoral stance on moral discernment and spiritual guidance is still relevant. It could well be summed up in two ways. First, as a respectful and ‘enabling presence’, hence, consistent with a phrase commonly used of the Marist spirit.

Finally, as ‘instruments of mercy’, captured so well by Justin Taylor. By an increasing union with Mary through Jesus:

“we can act, as it were, in persona Mariae’ as she carries out her mission in the Church and in the world…

…We can offer ourselves, individually and collectively, to Mary, to be her eyes, her heart, her speech, her hands and feet, as she brings motherly care to a wounded world and her suffering children.”

---