

# A Lay Woman's Reflection on Marist Spirituality and the interface with Spiritual Direction

by Bev McDonald, B.Theol.



## Introduction

I have recently completed two years formation as a spiritual director with Spiritual Growth Ministries (New Zealand) and in that time my understanding and experience of spiritual direction expanded enormously. The formation experience did not change my spirituality, which is essentially Marist, but added depth and integration to it. In this paper I offer a taste of Marist spirituality, particularly as experienced by laity today and reflect on how that spirituality sustains and develops my direction ministry. As a third generation *Pakeha* (European New Zealander) I have a deep respect for *tikanga Maori* (Maori culture) and *te reo* (language) as a precious *taonga* (treasure) for New Zealanders. When used I will translate Maori to English in brackets.

## My understanding of spirituality:

A spirituality is a particular way of opening to the Divine and of incorporating that relationship and experience into our life and actions. Arguably every religious belief system is expressed through a spirituality so here I focus specifically on Christian spirituality which I suggest is a way of life marked by prayer and acceptance of the Revelation of God through Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, which leads to a relationship with God expressed in a new way of relating with others and the world.

Even within Christianity there are nuances in the way individuals live the Gospel according to their personality and experience of life and over time these become recognizable as particular spiritualities which if authentic, are always expressions of the one Christian quest for Christ. So for example we can talk of a Franciscan spirituality, where Francis focused on Christ who was one with the poor, or the spirituality of John of the Cross who discovered Jesus as the Lover, drawing him to the peaks of contemplation and intimacy. Reflecting on and learning from these varied Christian strands of spirituality is like standing on the shoulders of our forefathers and finding hidden treasures in our *whakapapa* (genealogy or family history).

## A Taste.

Marist spirituality is a broad topic and I offer only a taste of those aspects which I have experienced as significant for laity; living everyday ordinariness open to and aware of the Divine, the image of Mary at “*Nazareth*” and among the birthing church at “*Pentecost*”, living in a way which is “*as it were, hidden and unknown*”, and seeking to live as “*instruments of divine mercy*” by imitating the discipleship of Mary both in relating to Christ and the world.<sup>1</sup> Tradition had emphasized Mary as the embodiment of all the great virtues, Marists brought fresh insight drawing inspiration from Mary in relationship: to Jesus, the Church, and the contemporary world (Larkin, p. 40). I will comment briefly on the interface between spiritual direction and my experience of this spirituality throughout the paper and then highlight this aspect in my closing reflections.

The bulk of this paper is sourced from the founder, Father Jean Claude Colin with reflections by Marists on his legacy. As background I approached three Lay Marists and have incorporated the essence of their responses.

### **Spiritual Direction:**

My understanding of spiritual direction may also be helpful. A definition I believe congruent with Barry and Connelly (p.8) is that spiritual direction is a ministry of sacred companionship which aims to nurture both growth toward inward reflection and contemplation of God and outward into a lived expression of that relationship with all of life.

### **Marist Spirituality; Aspects and Interface with Spiritual Direction.**

#### ***The Beginnings.***

In post-revolution France 1816, at Fourviere in Lyon, twelve men committed themselves to living the Gospel like Mary. Through the convictions of Jean Claude Colin and those he gathered round him, the Society of Mary was birthed and in 1836 was finally constituted as a congregation of priests and brothers according to what was legally possible at the time. However the Marist project had envisioned a movement, likened to a tree with many branches, including Laity and this has never been completely lost (A Founder Speaks, intro. p.5/6 & 117:3, Larkin, p.40). Once Pompallier and the first Marists arrived at Hokianganga in January 1838 (King, p.44), Marist spirituality influenced the Catholic Church in *Aotearoa* (Maori for New Zealand; literally ‘Land of the Long White Cloud’) and has strongly impacted my own faith journey. Mary is a lay woman and Marists seek “to promote and anticipate a church in which the clergy abandon their privileged role, step back among the People of God, and work with them on a basis of equality.” (Larkin, p.40; quoting Snijders).

#### ***Nazareth***

For Colin two images of Mary stand out. One being Nazareth, the other Mary amongst the Apostles and birthing church at Pentecost (Acts 1:13-15, 2:1). While inextricably linked in Colin’s thinking we shall explore Nazareth first.

---

<sup>1</sup> The italic’s are mine and highlight key aspects of Father Colin’s vision which will be explained as they arise throughout this paper.

Colin reflected on the events and meaning of Nazareth as a place where Mary, Joseph and Jesus encounter God, retreat to and are sent out from. (cf. Lk 1:26-38, 39-56, 2:19, 40, 51-52, 4:16-22, Mt. 2:19-23) However his approach is not simply imaginative reflection on biblical imagery. He saw Nazareth as a complex intuitive symbol which represented for him the 'cradle' of the church (Keel, para.553, p.332 & Coste, p.424). It symbolized a place of prayer and reflection to learn dependence on God, and the virtues of humility, obedience, simplicity, self denial and service (Larkin, p.88). This symbol sustained him amidst frustration as he reflected that Jesus was thirty before leaving Nazareth (Keel, pp. 337/8, para.565/6).

Nazareth represents a contemplative stance toward the world, an openness and willingness to seek God first, placing myself alone before God as part of discernment for action. A contemplative stance grounded in Christ is also foundational to Christian spiritual direction. "Colin says, 'it is from Nazareth' that we get a balanced perspective on life" (Larkin, p.88). Coste elaborates:

"The image is that of a path. I have to leave Nazareth and do what I have to do by going out to the world, to other people. But to see what I have to do, I had to enter the house in Nazareth and find myself alone there, before God ...and then from there ...I can leave again and go forward." (Coste, p.430 & APM 921.41)

### ***Home***

Nazareth also represents 'home' which touches a chord for many laity. Being at home means being immersed in everyday ordinariness; allowing the simple routines of life to become the place for encounter with God. It represents a place of the heart for transparency before God. In a sense we are invited to be 'at home' with ourselves, our *whanau*, (extended family) Jesus, the Holy Spirit and about our faith, making our relationship with God the linchpin for all other facets of life (cf.Col.2:6-7). It is our "private room" (Mt 6:6), a place to 'taste God' and face silence which is so anathema to our world. Colin wrote; "But having once tasted God ...it is a treasure in his soul ... to which he is constantly brought back as to his own centre." (A Founder Speaks 63:2 p.196) Blaise Pascal wrote: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."(Larkin, p.87, quoting *Pensees* no.136).

Reflecting on this sense of being 'at home' encourages me as a director to foster a welcoming space of hospitality within myself, where I am called to be present and open to God and my directee. This in turn invites the directee to contemplate the presence of God in their 'home'.

### ***Pentecost***

For Colin, Nazareth is a place of deep interior relationship with God which carries the seed of Pentecost as it represents submission, discernment and contemplation in readiness for whatever the Holy Spirit asks. Marist spirituality emanates from this point of stillness. The two mysteries are not treated by Colin as separate theological events needing analysis. "The key point for him was to keep looking at the person of Mary, who found a home at Nazareth and in the early church...she who was the woman who pondered the Word in her heart was also the woman on mission, her heart on fire with the Spirit"

(Larkin, p. 102). Colin recommended "warm[ing] yourselves at the fire of God's love" (A Founder Speaks 140:13, p. 398).

By contemplating both Nazareth and Pentecost through the person of Mary, Colin brings an enriching perspective whereby the two become telescoped in her life. "In Mary, a Pentecost had already taken place at Nazareth when the Holy Spirit came down on her at the Annunciation. In Mary, the still life of Nazareth was being lived in the Pentecost life of the early church." (Larkin, p. 102) Marist spirituality carries the call to be *like* Mary, to be contemplative in action and active in contemplation. "It is not a question of choosing one or the other, or of choosing one at one moment and the other at another, but of keeping the two realities in balance" (Larkin, p.90 cf. A Founder Speaks 141:5, p. 401).

Fidelity to the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the unifying principle of Marist spirituality.

"It was the Holy Spirit who guided Mary and fashioned her so ... In this sense, to live the Marist spirit is to listen to ... the thousand suggestions of the Spirit speaking to us about our particular situation." (Larkin, pp. 90 & 161)

For Mary, the focus is always on God and this offers a strong interface with spiritual direction. We seek to discern the presence and work of God within everyday life and to encourage the directee in this intentional attentiveness.

***Hidden and Unknown.***<sup>2</sup> (A Founder Speaks, 57:1, 119:7 & 146:1 & index p. 560)

"Hidden and as if unknown" is Colin's précis of a complex Christian value, (Mk 10:42-45, 1 Cor.9:19,20) which functions as something of a touchstone for Marists yet if not interpreted through the other facets of Colin's teaching is open to misinterpretation. It must be linked with the fact that Marists have an outreaching spirituality which nevertheless seeks to walk alongside, listen and share, rather than stand and shout. "Hidden and unknown" does not promote inactivity. It grounds *how* we act, not *whether* we act. (Duffy & Girard, p.76) It means being about the often hidden quiet work of the Kingdom of God.

Let me draw out some scripture points for reflection. Long before the birth of the Church, the Kingdom of God (Mt 13:24-36) existed in obscurity in a hidden and unknown way in the ordinary life of one family at Nazareth. The conception of Jesus must have been one of the most hidden moments in history. Jesus was born in obscurity, hidden and unknown by most. Mary was not an Apostle in the church but her original 'Yes' was instrumental in everything they did and we do today as followers of Christ. Scripture tells us Mary was quietly present from the Annunciation, through the Crucifixion to Pentecost. She was not the figurehead but Jesus and the early church invert all comfortable notions of power. Her profound 'Yes' to God was also a resounding 'Yes' to service and love for humanity and we are invited to follow her example.

---

<sup>2</sup> "Quasi ignoti et occulti in hoc mundo" ('hidden and as if unknown in the world') is spoken of as "Colin's favourite article", while there are subtle differences in the saying 'hidden and unknown' forms the basis of all renditions. It is linked with and appears in some 53 other references in his teaching.

"Mary's one desire was to do the will of the father which she sought throughout her life, and to cooperate with her whole being in the saving work of her Son. Our lifelong task is to learn to put the interests of the Lord before all else, trying to discern His will each day and to forget ourselves in loving Him." (SMSM Constitutions 1984, p.55, no.51)

These words echo for me the call to self forgetfulness and kingdom values inherent in offering spiritual direction. Any form of obscurity challenges our value system calling us to recognise that our true value comes not from what we do, but from who we are in ourselves and before God. In an age of individualism, ego and self development, the example of Mary challenges us to put God first and to think of others with simplicity and humility.

This core aspect of Marist spirituality offers a rich stream of reflection for spiritual directors. Marist spirituality invites reflection on the immanent incarnational mystery of God; it is almost as though God hides in everyday life. We do not bring Christ to the world, he is already here (Lk17:20-21), our role is to reveal the Word by relating with people in a way which expresses the mercy, compassion, faithfulness, joy and integrity of Jesus. Marists are invited to reveal the presence of Jesus by our way of being, to imitate Mary's way of relating to God, Jesus, events and people and thereby support others in their own unique experience of the divine hidden in their midst. This is also my understanding of spiritual direction at its best.

Marist spirituality is also equally at home with the One who is utterly transcendent, sensed only in darkness, who strips us of falsehood and invites ongoing communion only through self abnegation and becoming real with God, ourselves and others. Christians have a relationship with this immanent and transcendent God, whom the secular world searches for often unawares and people long for companion disciples more than abstract teachers. By imitating Mary, embracing both the light and dark of discipleship, and being comfortable with the paradox of God both immanent and incarnational yet also hidden and utterly transcendent, known at times only through darkness, Marist spirituality offers a deep source of sustenance to directors and those we companion.

### *Instruments of Mercy*

Marist spirituality is founded in Mary's discipleship of Jesus (Larkin, p.53). Luke has Mary call herself 'handmaid' (Lk 1:38, cf. Ps. 123:2). This highlights for me another way in which Marists seek to focus upon God alone, while being ready to reach out to others with the grace of God. We are called to be instruments of mercy and bearers of hope (Coste, p.258). Colin adopted the approach of 'call' which offers the opportunity to hope in others and draw out the best in them; another integral part of spiritual direction.

"Only call conveys the feeling of being desired and useful ...gives a life meaning and restores the person to the fullness of dignity. Only call goes to the limits of mercy" (Coste, p. 260, using Colin's example: A Founder Acts 331:4, p. 308). Calling Marists to compassion and hope for others in 1846 Colin said;

"show great kindness to sinners ...Do not rebuff them, or appear surprised by their crimes, however great they are; ... Instead remember you hold the place of Jesus Christ

...Jesus knew the profound depths of the human heart [and] welcomed sinners with gentleness. Listen ...quietly and with kindness." (A Founder Speaks, 116:11, p. 337)  
This attitude typifies the Marist charism and while spoken to priests, his words apply equally to spiritual direction today.

To imitate Mary means considering her as mother and this can be contentious. All Christians can relate to her as the mother of Jesus, but Marists specifically seek to imitate her in the way she herself related to God and others. Coste explains:

"We imitate the mother, not the child. ... Like the mother who increases her efforts when her child is sick, so ...also should we increase our efforts to take care of this world which is increasingly pagan, increasingly estranged from Christ, and try to bring it back; we should be instruments of mercy." (Coste, p. 336)

Spiritual Direction today often reaches far beyond the boundaries of established church, and quietly embodies this principle of Marist spirituality.

Colin saw the laity as being best equipped to be instruments of God's mercy in every corner of secular life because that ordinary world is our Nazareth, our *Turangawaewae*, (literally our 'rightful place to stand') (Larkin, p. 86). He spoke of the laity as a "bridge to souls" (Girard, 310:6, p. 529 & 313:10, p.533). In today's secularised society, as traditional churches struggle to be effective instruments of Good News, Colin's insight is perhaps even more compelling. The church is no longer in a position of authority in the world but must learn to operate more as 'yeast in the dough' or the 'small seed that is sown' (Coste, p. 460). Spiritual direction has a role to play here.

### **Closing Reflection; the Interface with Spiritual Direction**

Spiritual directors, like Marists are called to be available to those who ask for help in experiencing and discerning God. Knowledge and skill are important, but willingness to experience God more deeply in discipleship is crucial in being a worthwhile companion for directees. My experience is that Marist spirituality interfaces deeply with spiritual direction:

- Nazareth calls for a contemplative incarnational stance toward life and ministry and this is also foundational to spiritual direction. The intuitive symbol of Nazareth encourages an interior life which reflects on God's presence and action in the ordinary everyday circumstances of life and invites me to be present with directees in a way which encourages them to do the same. It invites self-reflection, emotional and spiritual hospitality, acceptance of self and willingness to be open and aware of my utter dependence on God, perhaps especially as a director. It reminds me that a balanced life of contemplative action as a director must be grounded in my own abiding relationship with God.
- Pentecost invites me to imitate Mary in seeking to be obedient to the Holy Spirit and warm myself in prayer at the fire of God's love, both for myself and my directees. It reminds me that it is the Holy Spirit who is the real director, that God must always be the primary focus of the relationship and that I am deeply privileged to participate and assist in the process of discovery and growth with another. Pentecost invites me to always try to be present with the Holy Spirit

- when I am with a directee and that the praxis of my ministry must flow from personal stillness and attentiveness before God.
- Hidden and unknown gives me a touchstone for how to relate with directees. The directee and their personal relationship and experience of God are paramount. Coste highlights this when he says: "The [person] has come to meet God, not me. I must be able to stand aside." (Coste, p.260) Marist spirituality calls for an open style of communication emphasizing listening and acceptance of the other without attempts to fit the directee into a predetermined mould or process. The constant invitation to self forgetfulness and humility as a director, along with a quiet awareness that God is experienced in presence and absence, light and darkness make this aspect of Marist spirituality particularly fruitful for me as a director.
  - The Marist charisms of mercy and hope remind me to encourage directees to search for how God is calling them into growth and wholeness. Mercy calls for empathy when they face struggles. Hope looks forward and envisions growth in wholeness and holiness, sometimes holding that hope in silent prayer long before they experience it for themselves. It calls me to compassion and solidarity with directees as I become ever more deeply conscious of the fact that I also share the journey of discipleship and must keep my eyes fixed on God alone to be of real benefit as a director.

### **Summary**

Imitating Mary's way of relating to God and others, invites reflection on God's presence in everyday life; the Marist call is to focus on God as Mary did, in the challenging, busy or boring reality of ordinary life and spiritual direction encourages the directee to do likewise. Marist spirituality is radically incarnational and open to the transcendent; it is both contemplative and missionary yet grounded in ordinariness and therefore not locked up in monastic tradition but accessible to all. St Paul spoke of our whole life being "hidden with Christ in God" (Col.3:3). As Marie de la Croix wrote; "Our vocation is to be unknown, hidden in God. Zeal – but the quiet zeal of Mary; the silence of the heart of Mary, but deep down, this furnace that burns before God in secret..." (SMSM Quotations, p.10, no. 52).

So much more could be said but I hope I have given enough of a taste of Marist spirituality that the reader may reflect for themselves on its value for supporting and sustaining the spiritual director. Colin said it well with these words: "The spirit of Mary is something most delicate and profound, obtained only through sustained meditation and prayer" (Larkin, p. 169).

### **References**

#### *Abbreviations:*

*APM*, Archives of the Marist Fathers (Rome: reference to Archive classifications)

*SM*, Priests and Brothers of the Society of Mary (also called Marist Fathers).

**SMSM**, Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary.

Barry, William and William J. Connolly. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.

*Constitutions*: 1984 of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM) and accompanying *Quotations Booklet*. Rome: 1985.

Coste, Jean SM. *A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean Claude Colin*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1998.

Duffy, Larry, SM and Girard, Charles, SM. *Like a Bridge: The People of God and the Work of Mary*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1994.

Fitzgerald, Michael. *A Marian Consciousness: Marist Spirituality as Prophetic*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1991.

Forissier, Antoine. *For a Marian Church: Marist Founders & Foundresses*. English ed. Slough, UK: St Paul Publications, 1992.

*A Founder Acts*: Reminiscences of Jean Claude Colin by Gabriel-Claude Mayet, Selected and introduced by Jean Coste SM. Eng. Trans. by William Joseph Stuart SM & Anthony Ward SM. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1983.

*A Founder Speaks*: Spiritual talks of Jean Claude Colin selected and introduced by Jean Coste, translated by Anthony Ward. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1975.

Gioannetti, Franco. *A Spirituality for Our Time (Jean Claude Colin)*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, English ed. 1989.

Girard, Charles, SM. *Lay Marists: Anthology of Historical Sources*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1993.

Keel, Edwin L. SM. *A Book of Texts for the Study of Marist Spirituality*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1993.

King, Michael, *God's Farthest Outpost: a History of Catholics in New Zealand*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1997.

Larkin, Craig SM. *A Certain Way: An exploration of Marist Spirituality*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1995.

McKay, Frank S.M. *The Marist Laity: Finding the Way envisaged by Father Colin*. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1991.

De Mijolla, Marie Cecile, SMSM. *A Woman from Lyons, Marie Francois Perrotin: Missionary in Oceania*. Translated from French by Yvette Marie Mizzi & Marie Lamerand, SMSM. Rome: Centre for Marist Studies, 1997.

*Cover picture is of Mary in the church, "The Mystery of Mary: Marie, Mere de l'Eglise, Lk 2:51". FRESQUES de Notre Dame de L'HERMITAGE; G. CREPIN, 1958 . " She is the resource of the house. She always has her loving child either in her hands or her heart". (from a letter by Fr. Champagnat). Used with permission.*

---