

What Do Our Marist History and Charism Call Us to Today?¹

“My Lord, this is the day the little Society of Mary begins. Mr. Déclas arrived in Cerdon.” Thus starts a letter of Pierre Colin, pastor of Cerdon, to Bishop Devie of Belley. The letter is dated October 29, 1824 (OM, doc. 114). As it happens, we know it was received in Belley and answered the very next day. The reply granted Déclas faculties for hearing confessions, which the pastor's letter had requested for him. Did the bishop, however, agree that Mr. Déclas's arrival in Cerdon signalled the beginning of the Society of Mary? We may well wonder.

Fifteen months earlier, the bishop had taken over a diocese which for twenty years had been a backwater of the enormous Lyon diocese. Having been vicar general in the nearby diocese of Valence for the preceding ten years, Devie had a keen sense of the structures and services a diocese needed to function. Throughout the diocese of Lyon, the diocesan congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph ran schools for girls in most parishes. The sisters working in Devie's diocese suddenly found themselves to be the Sisters of St. Joseph of Belley, much to the displeasure of the authorities in Lyon (OM 1, p. 350). Devie's concern was to have people committed to serving diocesan needs. This concern prompted him to free two priests from parish duties to form a diocesan missionary band based in Bourg, the largest town in the diocese (OM 3, p. 354). At the same time, he allowed Déclas to leave his parish and form with the Colin brothers a second team, temporarily based in Cerdon but meant to move to Belley the following June. In the bishop's eyes, Déclas's move to Cerdon was part of his plan to set up a diocesan congregation of priests to provide retreats to every parish of the diocese. Not that the bishop thought much of Déclas as a preacher. A few months earlier, when Jean-Claude Colin asked Devie to release Déclas for mission work, the bishop asked Colin: “What will you do with him? He has no talent” (OM 3, doc. 819, § 56). But since Colin requested him, it suited the bishop's plan to let him join Colin because this made two missionary teams possible instead of one, and they could later be consolidated into one diocesan congregation.

Poor Bishop Devie! You may think that, in allowing Déclas to move to Cerdon, you are skillfully laying the foundations of your own congregation of home missionaries. For more than ten years, you will refuse to see in the future Marists anything but diocesan missionaries. Without defiance but with quiet assurance, a different reality will continue to be placed before your eyes: “My Lord, this is the day the little Society of Mary begins. Mr. Déclas arrived in Cerdon.”

How does such a down-to-earth, such a pedestrian event as Déclas moving out of one rectory into another miraculously grow wings and take flight as the beginning of the little Society of Mary? Understanding that may help us grasp how our own day-to-day decisions about ministry and in ministry can also signal the beginning of the little Society of Mary. When Déclas resigned as pastor to become a missionary, his bishop thought he was becoming a diocesan missionary, but Déclas knew he was becoming a Marist missionary. The bishop saw his permission to Déclas as part of a chain of events that led to a diocesan missionary congregation, but, outside his control, it also belonged to a chain of events that led to the foundation of the Society of Mary. If, for more than eight years, Terraillon, the Colin brothers, Déclas, kept asking first the vicars general of Lyon, then both the new apostolic administrator of Lyon and the new bishop of Belley to be relieved of parochial duties, it was not in order to offset the monotony of their jobs by becoming itinerant preachers. It was in order to begin the Society of Mary. And when, a few weeks later, on January 9, 1825, the first Sunday after Epiphany, Jean-Claude Colin and Étienne Déclas set out on foot from the rectory of Cerdon and climbed the steep path of La Tière which led out of the village and across the hills to the neighboring village of La Balme to give there their first mission, they were not just diocesan missionaries obeying their bishop's orders; they were the little Society of Mary setting out to make the whole world Marist.

What attracted them? What gave their path its pattern? Colin gives us the answer in words that take us to the heart of the early Marists' concerns:

¹ An address delivered before the 1981 assembly of the members of the Boston Province. The ideas developed herein owe much to the talks given by Father Jean Coste during a two-week workshop held in Framingham in the summer of 1980.

Yes, gentlemen (here his voice became solemn), I am pleased to repeat it here again, the words: I upheld the church at its birth, I shall do so again at the end of time were, in the very beginnings of the Society, what served us as foundation and encouragement. They were ever before us. We worked in that direction, if I may so speak. (FS, doc. 152)

Colin was speaking in January, 1848, on the eve of the third French revolution. Using the words he quoted to make sense out of the events he was living, he showed how Mary's words had always been the magnet that drew them forward, the beacon that lit their course. You recognize the words I upheld the church at its birth, I shall do so again at the end of time. They are Colin's version of what Mary told Courveille at Le Puy on August 15, 1812, and around which the Marist aspirants rallied on July 23, 1816, at Fourvière, when they committed themselves to making those words come true by forming Mary's society. Colin tells us they were ever before them, acting as a foundation on which the structure rested, as an encouragement to keep working despite all obstacles, as the plan which dictated the shape of the finished building.

Let us picture ourselves, in January 1825, struggling with Déclas and Colin along the path to La Balme, on our way to give our first mission. It is very cold; the ground is frozen hard; the path climbs abruptly. La Balme is nearly a thousand feet higher than Cerdon, but not quite two miles away. Not even an hour's walk. Déclas prays his breviary as he walks (OM, doc. 819, § 59). Just time enough for our meditation.

I

The first thing we know is that Mary addressed us and we replied. We still recall the day at the major seminary of Lyon when we first heard the story of Courveille kneeling before Our Lady's statue at Le Puy and of Mary asking that a society bearing her name be founded so she could care for her Son's church now as she did at the beginning. This was Mary beckoning us to be part of her motherly concern for the church. Who were we to be singled out to share her concern? What a privilege! How she loves us! With what joy and single-minded generosity we accepted her invitation! Each step we take now on the way to La Balme is fulfillment of the pledge we took at Fourvière eight years ago: we are Mary's sons on our way to do Mary's work. The first reality the early Marists kept before their eyes was their link to Mary. How does that link define their mission? How does it guide them as they make their decisions about and in ministry? By creating a tension between two orders of reality: Mary's motherly concern for the church on one hand, Mary's will to entrust this concern to a concrete body on the other.

1. The early Marists' meditation on Mary's words at Le Puy led them to see with Mary's eyes and to feel with Mary's heart. This seems to be at the core of Marists' relationship to Mary. The relationship tends to express itself not so much in looking at Mary, in honoring her, in saying things to her or about her, as in calling upon the one who would bear Mary's name to stand where she stands. One expression of that approach is the way Colin sees the bond between Mary and Marists. The most basic expression of that link is that Mary said: "I upheld the church at its birth, I shall do so again at the end of time." If you want to know what Marists are about, listen to those words, repeat them to yourself, receive them as addressed to you. Here is your mother telling you what she has at heart.

As the first missionaries went from parish to parish, we know they carried their sermons in a black bag (OM, doc. 581, § 3). It may well be that, as he made his way to La Balme, Colin had in his black bag the sermon on Mary which contains the following lines:

... she is the mother who in her tenderness is more of a mother than all mothers on earth, the mother of all christians, for whom she underwent on Calvary all the pains of childbearing, whose motherly heart is forever open to all and whose boundless charity extends to all ages of the new covenant, to all nations and all peoples, comforts all miseries, meets all needs, grants all prayers. (APM 241.42, n. 28)

Whether he composed those lines or not, Colin wrote them out in his own hand. We shall not be far off the mark if we suppose that he linked them in his mind with Mary's words at Le Puy. To understand these words is to understand that a mother cannot bear one of her children being left out. Her care extends to all. If one is sick or in danger, that is the one she will look after.

In that light, it makes sense for Colin to say that it may be all right for the Society of Jesus to be made up only of men, but that the Society of Mary is different: "Mary is mother of mercy. Her body shall have several branches. She will be open to all kinds of people" (FS, doc. 2, § 2). Or again: "The Society has three branches because Mary wants to cover the whole earth with her mantle" (FS, doc. 78, § 2). This perspective gives the third order its true dimension: it enables Mary's care to extend to all, even, indeed especially, to those who seem most out of reach. In 1838, Colin said he did not mind if Mary reached every sinner through the Paris archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary rather than through the Marist third order, but he added:

Still, our third order has this advantage that it is not only for the conversion of sinners, but also for the perseverance of the just, hence that it includes all christians. I asked explicitly that none but heretics and schismatics be excluded. (OM, doc. 427, § 5)

Colin's point in this last sentence was not so much to exclude heretics and schismatics as to exclude only them, not sinners or even unbelievers (OM, doc. 846, § 18). A body named after Mary will find ways of including anyone who does not insist on excluding himself.

As Colin and Déclas walk to La Balme, they are not only intent on finding ways of extending God's mercy to all. They are also pressed for time. When Mary said at Le Puy that she would uphold the church "at the end of time," the first Marists took that to mean that the end of time was near, that time was running out and that now, therefore, was Mary's time, the time when all means must be taken to extend mercy to all before it is too late. Such is the reasoning at work in the following words of Colin:

Gentlemen, I am no prophet, but I cannot help thinking that we are at the end of time, that era of which Jesus Christ said: 'When the Son of Man comes, do you think he will find the Faith on earth?' [...] We live in evil days. [...] Where is the faith today? [...] And why has the Society of Mary waited until the nineteenth century to make its appearance? [...] Gentlemen, if not a single hair falls from our head unless it is the will of the Father in heaven, we must not think that this happened by chance. It is because the blessed Virgin will increase her efforts at the end of time to gather the elect. (ES, doc. 118, § 1-2)

This immediately affects how Colin and Déclas see themselves: they are on an errand of mercy in the name of Mary. This sense of urgency was still alive in Colin as he instructed Marists twenty years later:

... in an age of unbelief such as ours, a minister of souls must burn with the desire to fly to the salvation of his brothers, and be as it were impatient for the moment when he can race to their aid. (FS, doc. 102, § 4)

If we imagine ourselves with Colin and Déclas while they give their mission at La Balme, if we follow them as they speak from the pulpit and as they work in the confessional, perhaps we will see how Mary's words at Le Puy, received by Colin, prayed on, kept in mind, could flower into the pastoral approach we find illustrated in the following example quoted by Colin:

For instance, you tell a child: 'My little friend, I committed several sins, but there is one, a big one... Oh! I'll never be able to confess that one... Can I obtain forgiveness without telling that one?' You imagine what the child will answer. Then, the priest repeats that answer in a fatherly way; he brings forth all his love; he shows the tenderness of a mother. This does a marvelous amount of good and opens hearts. (ES, doc. 102, § 23)

The French word I translated by tenderness is *entrails*: "He shows the entrails of a mother." While unacceptable in English the expression describes vividly one dimension of the impact the Marist's relationship to Mary has on his ministry: he becomes a true mother.

2. In speaking to Courveille at Le Puy, Mary asked that a society bearing her name be established to carry out her desire to uphold the church at the end of time. The Marist aspirants responded to Mary in 1816 by pledging themselves and all their goods "to establish the pious congregation of Mariists" (OM, doc. 50). After eight years of pleading, working, praying, desiring, trusting, they can now say that the Society of Mary has begun. Colin and Déclas are its first missionaries. As Marists, they share in Mary's mission of mercy, but as Marists they also belong to a concrete body, where they will learn how to do Mary's work. How does that reality, that second pole of their relationship to Mary, act on Colin and Déclas as they make choices in and about their ministry?

One thing Colin and Déclas are acutely aware of as they approach La Balme is money: the people of La Balme have very little, they work extremely hard for it, and they are very attached to it. They also strongly suspect priests of being after it. Money conflicts have poisoned the relations of

many pastors with their flock. When it comes to parish missions, money is an important issue. A parish mission means extra mouths to feed for a month. At the end, it is difficult not to give the missionaries some sort of stipend. The missionaries may even have suggested keeping the memory of the mission alive by building a cross, which will mean more expenses.

Colin later told of a parish where a rumor spread that the mission would cost a given amount. Colin went to the pulpit and said:

My dear brethren, I hear that some are wondering what this mission is going to cost. Listen carefully: it will cost nothing; and if someone were moved by generosity, gratitude, or some other sentiment to bring us something, we would take nothing, nothing. (FS, doc. 102, § 17)

The man who set out with Déclas to give the first Marist mission at La Balme had spent many a night in the Cerdon rectory working out for himself and spelling out in a rule the implications of having accepted the privilege of bearing Mary's name. His meditation on Mary's role as support of the church at the end of time had led him to realize vividly that doing Mary's work required Marists to rid themselves totally of anything that smelled like attachment to money. Many who were now far from the church had been driven there by their own greed or by that of their priests. To be of any help in Mary's plan to extend God's mercy to them while there was still time, Marists would need to be totally alien to greed. How totally alien? Colin tells us:

All must take extreme care lest the spirit of covetousness should invade the house or hold sway, under whatever pretext. The superior or any of his councillors who should retain this spirit of covetousness for more than a quarter of an hour shall confess his fault before the whole council and say how long he persevered in it. (Ant. textus, h, 5)

Before dismissing Colin as an inept lawmaker, let us allow ourselves to see that the extreme care to uproot covetousness from the heart of Marists was dictated by the extraordinary mission entrusted to them: to be God's last resort in extending His love to those out of reach. So, while Colin abandoned the idea of confessing faults of greed before the council, he maintained at the heart of the Marist rule the total repudiation of greed.

Opposition to greed may seem a narrow base for the Marist apostolic approach. So it is. In its radicalness, however, it gives this approach its toughness, its ability to cut clean and to resist decay. The flexibility, the ability to penetrate remote corners, the complexity, belong to the set of ideas evoked by the words hidden and unknown. If opposition to greed is a narrow concern, hidden and unknown is a negative one, not likely to inspire great deeds. Here again, however, it will be to our advantage to take a second look, for we are at the core of Marist reality. The very words hidden and unknown cannot have been far from Colin's mind as he accompanied Déclas to La Balme in January 1825. Less than two months earlier, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn, who shared fully the Marist story, had reminded Bishop Devie that being hidden and unknown was precisely “the course that was intended from the moment the work was thought of” (OM, doc. 118, § 1).

Once we begin to see what Colin meant by those words, we tend to agree with him when he says: “Only later will people appreciate an expression in the rule: unknown and even hidden. You could say that the whole spirit of the Society is there” (FS, doc. 152). For those two words are only the code that gives access to a rich store of applications to the most varied situations. With hidden and unknown, Colin felt more and more that he had been given the secret of God's power to reach hearts, and we may well surmise that his experience at La Balme was the first of many which confirmed the validity of what he was to write in the rule in 1836:

... so as to remove all obstacles to greater fruit in the vineyard of the Lord, let them everywhere show themselves humble of heart and let them behave in all with such prudence and especially modesty, giving no one cause for vituperation, that, following close in the footsteps of the blessed Virgin Mary, while they may, and insofar as they can

they must, spend themselves in whatever ministry for the salvation of souls, still they are to seem, as it were, hidden and unknown in the world. (Ant. textus, e, 21)

The resolutely negative expression hidden and unknown comes only at the end of a long sentence and is somewhat akin to the immobility of an acrobat keeping his balance on a tight rope: it is the result of a delicate combination of strenuous activities. The unifying element of those activities is the phrase following in the footsteps of the blessed Virgin Mary. On the path to La Balme, Colin and Déclas are accompanied by an invisible presence who can best teach them about being hidden and unknown because that is how she was the support of the church at its birth.

We are half way to La Balme. Mary had been the dominant presence filling our thoughts as we put one foot before the other: Mary, who spoke to us at Le Puy of her loving concern for the church in its hour of greatest need, and Mary, who teaches us at Cerdon how to equip ourselves to be in the church now what she was at the beginning. Her loving concern will stimulate our generosity; her example will teach us the skills. Keeping her words before us, walking in her footsteps, we will know where to go and what to do.

II

But that is only half the story, only half of what we need to keep in mind to make good Marist choices in and about ministry. Cerdon and Le Puy are behind us, but La Balme is before us. La Balme is the church. It is not enough for us to work out of our relationship to Mary. Mary refers us to the church: "I upheld the church at its birth, I shall do so again at the end of time." Our relationship to Mary is defined by an attraction to two poles: Mary's concern for the church and the Marists as instruments in her hand. In a similar way, our relationship to the church is defined by two poles: the church as it exists, the church as it is meant to exist. The Marist knows that he is making good choices about ministry and in ministry when he is making his way to a point from which he can see at once those four directions.

1. To our knowledge, there was no special reason for Colin and Déclas to choose La Balme for their first mission, except that it was near by and had no pastor at the time. If we see it as only the first of the parishes evangelized by the Marists in the following four years, it can serve as a prop to help us formulate the first dimension of the Marist way of relating to the church. This dimension is that of the local church, the church near by, the church as it exists concretely.

It may not be easy to define it exactly, but there is a way for Marists to be in the church which is specific to them and which they learn from Mary. They are called upon to be in the church as Mary was. In fact, it is through them that Mary will be in the church at the end of time what she was at the beginning of the church's time. This way of being is defined by the word support or upholding. Colin visualizes it as Mary being among the apostles and doing the greatest good by making the least noise. It is a presence that does not draw attention to itself because it is not centered on itself.

At La Balme, and in all the parishes where they will preach in the coming years, the first Marists are in contact with the church as it exists. It is a poor church, a hurting church, an uneducated church. They come to it with the respect, the tenderness, the care that guide a mother's hands as she approaches the bruised body of her son.

A combination of prayer, of meditation on Mary, of pastoral experience, of natural gifts, had enabled Colin not only to develop this approach in his own ministry but to articulate it clearly enough to teach it. At the 1847 retreat, Colin said:

The time we live in calls for the greatest prudence in preaching, prudence in castigating vices, prudence in presenting teachings. Let us understand that our age is mostly an age of pride. People call it an age of enlightenment, and that may be true under the material aspect, but under the religious aspect it is an age of deepest ignorance. [...] It is necessary,

therefore, to instruct, to present teachings, to preach dogma, but we must do it with great tact. This age is touchy: no allusions, no bitterness. Let us present the truth purely, nobly, simply; no irritating applications. (FS, doc. 142, § 2)

The concern is not to irritate, to take people's allergies into account. Not that the gospel will be watered down, but the preacher will use all his intelligence, all his skills, to by-pass the obstacles to people's heart. He is not out to impose truth, he is out to tend the body of Christ.

When we read the constitutions, we may wonder why, after treating the name, goals, and means of the Society, Colin immediately defines how the Society relates to people (pope, bishops, pastors, others). Against the background of Colin's approach to the church, his point stands out more clearly. How the Society of Mary relates to the church as a body, a concrete, humble, imperfect, vulnerable body, is just as specific to the Society as are its name and its spirit. And while the church exists bodily as the universal church headed by the pope and as the parish headed by the pastor, still it is most typically the body of Christ as a local church headed by the bishop: "the church of God which is in Corinth" (2 C 1, 1), "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Th 1, 1), the church in Lyon, the church in Belley. It is with regard to bishops, therefore, that Colin most vigorously defined that pole of the Marists' relationship to the church whereby Marists treat the church as the humble, concrete, day-to-day reality where Christ is present. Marists will learn from Mary how to behave with that unavoidable aspect of the church which is the bishop: like her, they will be as hidden and unknown within the church, as unobtrusive as they will be active. Let us listen to Colin, speaking in 1847:

If God gives me the leisure to work on the rule as I want to do soon, I want to draw a clear line of conduct concerning respect for bishops, the union we must have with them. In a diocese the Society is not to draw everything to itself nor to work on its own; it is to work at the common task, the task of the church, of the bishop, and it is to act so as to put the bishop in evidence. (FS, doc. 150, § 4)

2. Colin and Déclas are at La Balme. Their mission has started. After a week, Pierre Colin writes to Bishop Devie:

My Lord, Mr Déclas and my brother began the retreat at La Balme on the first Sunday after Epiphany. They give two instructions a day, one in the morning, the other in the evening. They also teach the children catechism after dinner. I went up to La Balme myself twice this week. I too addressed that population, which attends the exercises of the retreat with eagerness and assiduity.

By the fourth and fifth days of the retreat, the movement to go to confession was general. It is thought that almost everyone will appear before the holy tribunal, and already some have appeared who dated from very far back. (OM, doc. 131, § 1-2)

The contact with the local church is well established. The people at La Balme are being healed by Christ in the sacraments. Bishop Devie is kept informed, not only that the retreat is taking place, but also that, as Pierre Colin goes on to write:

If this retreat meets with some success, we can only attribute it to the prayers of Your Lordship and to those of the good souls who pray for the conversion of sinners. (ibid., § 3)

In case the busy bishop had not got around to praying specifically for the success of the retreat at La Balme (four hundred souls, no pastor), he is gently reminded that the success of the mission depends on his prayers. Thus the retreat is more than a parish event. It is a church event.

Nor is the bishop the only one involved in making it a church event. There are also "good souls who pray for the conversion of sinners." The French expression rendered by good souls might

refer to the fourteen Marist sisters who, Colin informs the bishop in his last paragraph, are too many for their small house in Cerdon, but it might also refer to others besides them.

Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn, the superior of the sisters, told Father Mayet in 1840:

When the Fathers Colin were in Cerdon, they were loved by the whole parish. If they had stayed there, the whole parish would have been like a community. Already thirty men met at the rectory like children. (OM, doc. 513, § 1)

A priest of Lyon also wrote in 1824 about an association of the Holy Family whereby, “in the last centuries of the church,” God wanted his Son to be honored with Mary and Joseph, and this priest mentioned that Courveille had wanted (in 1817) that association “to be the third order of Mariists” (OM, doc. 105, § 3 and 1).

You also remember that, when Colin spoke of the third order, he was really referring to the confraternity for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just.

It may not be too far-fetched to make a link between the good souls in Cerdon who are praying for the conversion of sinners and are thereby insuring the success of the retreat at La Balme, and Colin's grandiose plans for a confraternity that would bring the whole world under Mary's mantle. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that, while he preached at La Balme, Colin kept before his eyes a vision that was a vital ingredient of his understanding of the Society of Mary.

This was the vision he took to Rome in 1833 and about which he spoke in these terms five years later:

Ah! Gentlemen, he told us one day, pray God that he may rouse someone to spread the third order throughout the earth. I wish it with all my heart, I ask God for it; I need someone who has apostolic zeal, who is filled with the spirit of God, who preaches à la apostle. Oh! I laugh when I think of the good-natured and simple way in which I acted. I just quite simply put in my request for approbation of our confraternity of the third order that there would be seen at the end of time what had been seen at the beginning: One heart and one soul. That by this means all the faithful, all who remained for God, would have but one heart and one soul. Cardinal Castracane burst out laughing and said to me: ‘So the whole world will be Marist, then?’ ‘Yes, Eminence’, I told him, ‘the pope too; he is the one we want for our head’. Well, you know, right away I obtained three briefs for the third order. Ah! Gentlemen, let us bestir ourselves; our undertaking is a bold one; (laughingly) we intend to invade everywhere. When will the time come? (OM, doc. 427, §§ 1-2)

Thirty five years later, at the age of eighty two, Colin was still driven by the same dream, just as vivid, just as young, just as unreal:

Now, let us all have but one heart and one soul... We must become saints. Let us practise much the humble and disinterested virtues, those the blessed Virgin practised.

You will be surprised. I have a great ambition: it is to take over the whole world, under Mary's wings, through the third order. The third order is not an essential part of your body, but the blessed Virgin entrusts it to you as a bridge (the expression is not mine) to go to souls, to sinners. Never have people shown such eagerness to address themselves to the blessed Virgin, and at the end of time there will be only one kingdom, the kingdom of the blessed Virgin! (OM, doc. 846, § 35-36)

Whatever else we may say about Colin, at least he saw far and wide. What he so candidly confided to the Marist capitulants in 1872, Colin, we may be sure, already had before his eyes as he addressed the people of La Balme in 1825. True, the hundred or so people who gathered in the little church to hear Déclas's sermons may have been a most uninspiring congregation. Upon the tired faces of the country people, seeing with Mary's eyes, mindful of Mary's words, I upheld the church at

its birth, I shall do so again at the end, Colin beheld a beautiful vision of a renewed people of God gathered under Mary's mantle, bringing together to form but one heart and one soul through the ingenious care of her servants, all the lame and the blind, all the publicans and prostitutes, all the sinners one would never have thought would make it to the great feast.

Our trip to La Balme is over. What can we learn from it? We can learn how to make the Society of Mary begin each day through the decisions we make. Our decisions may be long-term ones: will the province open or close a high school, accept or give up a parish, respond to a bishop's request, support a Marist's daring venture into a new field? They are what I would call decisions about ministry. There are also decisions in ministry, short-term decisions: will I answer the phone or continue my interview? Will I allow this divorced and remarried woman to receive communion? What will I preach on tomorrow? All that the province does, all that each of us does is the outcome of decisions. What is the quality of those decisions? What do we take into account as we make them? What values do we choose to affirm through them?

As we ponder these questions, we may find it helpful to make a little trip from Cerdon to La Balme in the company of Déclas, Colin, and all who climbed that path before us. Let us keep firmly in mind that we belong to Mary, by her loving choice manifested at Le Puy and by our own choice expressed at Fourvière. As we bear her name, we want to be led by her spirit. We learn from her to see the world through the loving eyes of a mother who cannot bear not to reach out to her child in need. From her, too, we learn to be totally free for her work: no self-interest, no ambition, no greed will distract us from the needs, the weaknesses, and, yes, the oddities, of each of her children. We will work in such a simple way that, while doing all that needs to be done, we will appear hidden and unknown.

While keeping alive our sense of belonging to Mary, with what it implies by way of loving concern for all, especially for the little ones, and of painstaking detachment from all that could make us less effective in Mary's work, we will also allow Mary to direct our attention to the church. With her we will walk to a point where we can see the church through her eyes and with her heart. This will enable us to define further good Marist decisions. Marists work in such a way that bishops don't look upon them as intruders or as competitors, but as their own. Marists care about the church and want to serve it. They are not in the business of self-aggrandisement or of self-promotion.

At the same time, the Marists are incurable dreamers. They are well aware of all the warts of the church, but they are like the author of the Acts of the Apostles. They believe there was a time in the life of the church when there were no conflicts, no selfishness, a time when all believers had but one heart and one soul. They also believe that Mary, the discreet mother, was the secret center of that perfect communion. And now, faced with the divisions, the sluggishness, the rigidity of their church, they don't lose hope. Indeed, they believe this is the time when Mary will intervene again and renew the miracle of perfect unity: all sinners brought home, all having but one heart and one soul.

The problem is to keep all that in mind at once, not to concentrate on one aspect at the expense of another. A perpetual balancing act. But that seems to be the price to pay for good decisions, the decisions that will enable us to say: "This is the day the little Society of Mary begins."

Holyoke
June 16, 1981

Gaston Lessard, s.m.

Abbreviations:

OM = J. Coste, G. Lessard (editors), *Origines maristes*, four volumes, Rome 1961-1967.

FS = J. Coste (ed.), *A Founder Speaks*, translated by Anthony Ward, Rome, 1975.