

December 24, 1836: in whatever part of the world

On Christmas Eve, 1836, an hour before noon, after two months of waiting, the right combination of wind and tide finally enabled La Joséphine and La Delphine to leave Le Havre. On La Joséphine, Bishop Blanc was taking twenty one missionaries, priests, brothers, and sisters, to New Orleans. On La Delphine, which was sailing for Valparaiso, was the Marist party en route to Western Oceania: Bishop Pompallier accompanied by Fathers Pierre Chanel, Pierre Bataillon, Claude Bret, and Catherin Servant, and by Marist Brothers Joseph-Xavier (Joseph-Marie Luzy), Marie-Nizier (Jean-Marie Delorme), and Michel (Antoine Colombar). Reciting their names is a way for us to salute them as they take off.

Their departure opened the way for all those that followed. Among those departures, let us single out that of December 8, 1840, about which Colin wrote:

We have done great things. Fourteen missionaries, priests, brothers, artists, engineers, booksellers (libraires, in French) have been sent off to the other world with bag and baggage. People say that not since a hundred and fifty years had such a convoy been seen moving off at one shot for the savage countries. (Colin-Lagniet, December 13, 1840)

The first thing to notice about these departures is that, even though juridically the mission of Oceania had been entrusted to the congregation of Marist priests, the only one approved by the pope, as a matter of fact that juridical concept was too narrow to contain what took place. For people in France, the Society of Mary continued to refer to the larger reality it had always referred to before 1836. But also from the very beginning the priests were never the only Marists at work in Oceania. We already saw three Little Brothers of Mary on board La Delphine in 1836; of the fourteen who left in 1840, only four were priests (Antoine Séon, Michel Borjon, Antoine Garin, and Louis Rozet); five were brothers, two were clerics yet to be ordained, three were baptized men (Louis Perret the architect, Jean-François Yvert, Xavier Dausse). In 1845, Françoise Perroton broke the barrier which had prevented women from taking part in the great undertaking.

The symbolic date of April 29 was a point of arrival, the result of twenty years of busy hoping. September 24 is like a hinge which connects the Society's past with its future: it is the present in which the Society constitutes itself by establishing the bonds which structure it as a body. December 24 opens up the future of the Society in both time and space. Under that symbolic date I would like to consider with you the relevance of Marist spirituality to two aspects of the life of the church which are of special interest today: the church as local and the place and role of baptized women and men in the church. These two realities, of course, bring us right to the heart of ecclesiology.

Colin formulated Marist spirituality within an ecclesiology that flowered at Vatican I, and which emphasized hierarchical dependence and obedience to authority. Fr. Tillard characterizes it as a juridical ecclesiology. Vatican II opened the door to an ecclesiology of communion, according to which the church exists in a place before it is a universal church and the church is church before there is a hierarchy. Marist spirituality had interesting things to say about the local church and the people of God despite the ecclesiology of the time, and what it had to say can really flower in an ecclesiology of communion. The contemplation of Mary in the newborn church put Colin and the early Marists ahead of their time. Our deepening of that contemplation can put us ahead of ours.

1. Marists and the local church

Relationships between bishops and religious have always been complex and often difficult. Before being the Sacred Congregation of religious, CRIS was the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars and a substantial portion of its work consisted in solving the conflicts between the two. The local church, rooted in a place, tends to stay in place. It tends to have the characteristics of small, closed communities, where what has been done until now is the supreme rule for what can be done. Religious want to change things. They feel the gospel has been watered down, the church has compromised with the ways of the world and it must be called to go back to the pristine fervor. Also, once they are approved by the pope, religious are not part of a local church in the same way as the people in the parishes and the priests of the diocese. They are people on the move, who may be called to go anywhere in the world.

Colin saw Marists as religious, who would call the church to renewed fervor, and he also saw them as approved by the pope for the service of the church in any part of the world, but he also envisioned Marists as different in their way of relating to the local church. Actually, Colin tells us that it was precisely on this point of relations with the bishops that he parted ways with Courveille:

What imperceptibly put me at the head of the Society is that some of my confreres wanted to fight the bishops. Then I separated from them. I have received a great grace; the greatest grace I have received is that I have always kept united to the bishops; I was persuaded that nothing would succeed except through the bishops. (OM, doc. 467)

At the same time, when Bishop Devie did all he could to transform the Marist plan into a diocesan congregation, Colin made it very clear that the Society of Mary would either be universal or it would not exist.

In 1833, Colin explained in a letter to Archbishop de Pins:

The Society of Mary will be at once both universal and diocesan, if I may so speak. It will be universal in that it will have its superior general who, by himself or through the provincials, will govern all the houses of the order, to whom all members of the Society will report and who will have them at his disposal everywhere, according to need. It will be somehow diocesan because the religious of individual houses, while not going against the will of the superior general, will be at the disposal of the bishop of the place for missions, retreats, etc.,... and even for replacing temporarily pastors who may be sick or absent, etc.; because each diocese could have a novitiate if necessary; because the surplus revenue (especially of diocesan institutions) could, with the agreement of the superior general, be turned over to the diocesan fund, etc., etc.

This last provision shows that Colin was in earnest about the Society being diocesan, but the fact that it was never implemented also shows that reconciling universal and diocesan was more difficult than it looked. It took some time before Colin found the expression that rendered his thought. In 1846, he confided:

The rule says that we must behave with such esteem and regard for the bishops that they will look upon our Society as their own. These words, as their own, were not put in by chance. It was only after thinking it over many times. While I was doing the rule, when these words presented themselves, my mind came to rest. That is the only expression I found that said what I wanted to say. (A Founder Speaks, doc. 119, 6-7)

That, however, remained a very general description of the attitude that Colin wanted in Marists. A year later, he said:

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. (A Founder Speaks, doc. 150, 4)

"My mind came to rest", "act so as to put the bishop in evidence". You recall Colin saying, at the end of his life: "When God speaks to a soul, he says much in few words; for instance, this saying: 'Hidden and unknown in the world'" (OM, doc. 819, § 122). His expressions concerning the attitude of Marists toward bishops are close to the world which is evoked there. We are in the world where Colin contemplates the image of Mary in the early church ("these words were always before us; we worked along that line, so to speak"; FS, doc. 152). That image enables Colin to picture the church as different from what it is around him, to re-create it.

This Colin does with regard to the local church. For we shall remember that the love and respect that Marists are to have toward the bishop are not primarily a matter of submission to his authority (though that is undoubtedly an important value in the eyes of Colin), but rather of being present in the church of the end time as Mary was present in the church of the beginning. This means, in this case, being present to the diocesan church as symbolized in its bishop in such a way that that church does not feel threatened by the presence of people who do not belong to it in the same way as the people who live there always. Whereas religious tend to be looked upon as outsiders, Marists are to learn from Mary's way of being in the church a form of presence which will make the bishop, and everyone else, forget that the Marists are outsiders. They are to act in such a way that the bishop may, as it were, consider the Society as his own.

If we try to work out how Marist tradition will help us be more effective members of the church today, I suggest that we will find inspiration if we allow Mary to be for us what she was for Colin and the early Marist women and men. As they contemplated her present in the early church, she helped them understand how they should be present to the church of their time. The attitude that Colin wanted Marists to have toward bishops and which he had learned from contemplating Mary present in the church can inspire us in our attitude toward the local church. I believe there is rich material for us in Marist tradition to help us be for a local church the kind of presence that Mary was: one that does not draw to itself, but that is wholly centered on the other; one that enhances, that values, that brings out the best in all.

We are not far from what we seem to be discovering after an era where people were called civilized if their culture happened to be that of a powerful European country and where too often evangelizing meant civilizing. We are re-discovering that the gospel is not an abstract set of truths that has neither color nor smell and that must push aside everything that has. As so often happens, we are re-inventing the wheel, as I find illustrated in the following example, which I quote from a recent paper by Fr. Kerry Prendeville, a New Zealand Marist missionary who lived with us in Hull this past year:

I was told of a village Church somewhere in New Caledonia where an artist, who was a leper, had painted a mural on the back wall of the Church depicting the arrival of the first missionaries to the island. The painting showed the sailing ship out in the bay at anchor with the missionaries coming ashore in long-boats with all their boxes and baggage, goats and animals. While on the shore the local population was lined up with various expressions of wonderment and anxiety shown on their faces. In amongst the crowd there was a person who was different from the others, of lighter color and partly obscured. When asked who this person was, the artist said that this was the Melanesian Christ waiting for the missionaries. (Kerry Prendeville, Karl Rahner in the Context of

Vatican II, A Missionary's Reflections on the Theology of the Anonymous Christian. St. Paul Univ., 1986, p. 2)

Marist tradition prepares us to recognize Christ present among the people whom we are sent to evangelize. For Marist tradition invites us and teaches us to be in the church as Mary, with the disciples, with the learners, the hearers, the perceivers. It prepares us to be at the opposite of what a French writer described as the preacher's mentality: "the mentality you develop when you speak and teach without ever being contradicted" (Alain, *Propos II*, n. 600). Like Colin, through their continued exercise of relating to Mary as the one who "upheld the church at its birth" (FS, doc. 152), Marists learn to perceive how much preaching is in reality bullying. Instead of coming ashore with their supply of foreign goods, they concentrate their energy upon being listeners. They respect, value, honor, whatever gives an assembly of believers its distinctive color and smell. Within the local church, the church as it exists in a specific culture, they learn to disappear, to be "hidden and unknown".

2. Marists and the people of God

Marists are called upon to honor the local church, the church as rooted in a place, the church as made up of people who have their own ways of eating, of dressing, of relating to each other. As our Marist historian, Fr. Coste, likes to say, Marists are called upon to bury themselves in the rich soil of the church of a place. But as they lose themselves in the reality of the local church, Marists bring with them a vision which will be a source of constant challenge and renewal for that church, a vision which will prevent it from closing in on itself, the permanent temptation of any community.

This vision is at the source of all Colin ever said about the third order of Mary. It goes back to the earliest years of the Marist undertaking. It is the most novel element of the Marist reality, the one that made Cardinal Castracane most uncomfortable. Of the various components of Marist tradition it is possibly the least exploited and yet potentially the most enriching for the church today.

On his first trip to Rome in 1833, in his written presentation of the Marist plan, Colin expressed this vision in the following terms:

The general aim of the Society is to contribute in the best possible way, both by its prayers and its efforts, to the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, and to gather, so to speak, all the members of Christ, whatever their age, sex, or standing, under the protection of the blessed Mary Immaculate, Mother of God; and to revive their faith and piety and nourish them with the doctrine of the roman Church, so that at the end of time as at the beginning all the faithful may with God's help be one heart and one mind in the bosom of the roman Church and that all, walking worthily before God and under Mary's guidance, may attain eternal life. For this reason entry to the Society is open even to lay people living in the world in the confraternity or third order of the Virgin Mary. (Ant. textus, s, 109: fasc. 1, p. 83)

In 1834, as we know, the Marist plan was rejected but, through the vagaries of bureaucracy, indulgences meant as a consolation prize for the priests were granted to the third order. Listen to Colin speaking in 1838 to Marists gathered at table for a meal:

How I laugh when I think of the innocence and simplicity with which I acted. I quite simply put into my petition for the approbation of our confraternity of the Third Order that there would be seen at the end of time what was seen at the beginning: *Cor unum et anima una*. I put that in this way all the faithful, all who remained true to God would have but one heart and one mind. Cardinal

Castracane burst out laughing and said to me: "So then, the whole world will be Marist?" "Yes, Eminence," I told him, "and the Pope too; he is the one we want as our leader." Well, right away I obtained three briefs for the Third Order. Ah! Messieurs, let us liven up; our undertaking is a bold one; (laughing:) we want to march in everywhere. When will the moment come? (OM, doc. 427, §§ 1-2)

As you see, the vision of 1833 was still very much alive in Colin's heart in 1838, and it remained so until his death. Here again, we need to remember where this vision came from. It came from contemplating Mary's presence in the early church, but with the belief that we are now at the end time and that Mary now makes her presence felt in a special way because there is a special need in time of crisis. The vision of One heart and one mind is bound up with an apocalyptic and eschatological vision, that of Mary as the mystical city of God coming down from heaven. From this presence of Mary at this time, Colin constructs an image of the church which is quite different from the church he can experience. It is in that context that he speaks of the call to Marists to begin the church again.

It looks as though, in Colin's eyes, the church in his time was a failure and therefore needed to be redone, because people had forgotten an element, Mary. Try it again, the Marists say, but this time pay attention to Mary, make sure she is present, both by her merits and prayers and by her modeling, and you will see what happens. Go back to the beginning, when Mary was present; what do you see? You see *Cor unum et anima una*. You see everybody being united in heart and mind. You see fellowship extending to all. This is what Marists are called upon to make happen again.

Such is the line of thought out of which proceeds everything connected with the third order of Mary. And the main things to be said about the third order are these: for Colin, it always went in the direction of a universal confraternity, extending to just and sinners alike, the main point of which was to stretch the boundaries of the church, for this is what you do when you work under the name of Mary. For just about everyone else, including Pompallier and Eymard, the third order always went in the direction of a selective group that tended toward religious life.

Colin's real perspective on the third order was perhaps never better expressed than in the words of Fr. Alphonse Cozon. In the 1870s, during the last years of Fr. Colin's life, Fr. Cozon discussed the third order of Mary several times with Fr. Colin and this is how he summarized Colin's thought:

According to the mind of Fr. Founder, the third order must not be enclosed within the limits of the Society. It must, in a sense, be a work outside the Society, to which the Society will communicate its spirit, the spirit of the blessed Virgin. Its growth is not to be restricted to the dimensions of the Society. It is not to remain within our hands but go through them. It is not to be one of the wheels of the Society, nor revolve around it like a planet around the sun, but it must radiate freely in the church. It would be wrong to look upon it as a way of helping the Society by stirring the interest of the pious faithful in favor of the Society's works. Rather, it is a means for carrying further the impulse received from Mary, which goes through the priests and the third order members, and goes on to lose itself at the very limits of the church, as it were, without any personal consideration (APM).

Marist tradition is made up of the spiritual experience of Courveille, Champagnat, Chavoine, Colin, and all the women and men who in some way embraced the Marist vision of Mary in the church. That spiritual experience is characterized by a personal relationship to Mary which establishes a link between Mary, the church, and the needs of the time. That treasure of spiritual experience and of pastoral concern has been placed in our hands, and it puts us in a position to serve the local church, wherever we are, in a way that is particularly relevant today.

Preparations for the October 1987 synod of bishops on the theme: "The vocation and mission of lay people in the Church and the world" are under way. As can be expected, some theologians are already thinking further ahead and suggest that the very use of the term "lay" should be abandoned, because, as Canadian theologian Normand Provencher put it:

It continues to convey a negative dimension of Christians, since it defines them as non-clerics in the world, or as non-ordained Christians. (*Eglise et théologie* 1984, p. 92)

We don't need to be very perceptive to see that the ecclesiology of hierarchy is still dominant. Nor is there any call to become upset about it. It is possible, however, to dream of the day when a different vision will take hold of all of us. This is a vision of a church where baptism makes you a full member, whether you are poor or rich, whether you are a woman or a man and, I would go so far as to say, whether you belong to the Roman Catholic church or to the Orthodox church or to the reformed church. That is the church that Galatians 3, 27-28, talks about

All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

If we succeed in making the shift to an ecclesiology of communion, the life of the church will find itself enriched by all that a predominantly clerical and male church now prevents from developing fully. In such a church, all baptized women and men will feel fully responsible for their assembly and for the evangelization of their sisters and brothers. Making such a vision a reality will involve extensive and profound changes in our way of being church, in the way we celebrate the eucharist, in the way we initiate new members, in the way we set up ministries.

Marist tradition opens us to such a view of the church. More importantly, it accompanies us and guides us as we work toward it. The starting point is a limited, particular one, the person of Mary. Not just Mary in herself, but Mary saying: "I upheld the church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time". Because we take these words as addressed to us, we can see ourselves as charged with making them come true. We are called upon to be Mary now, and in order to do this, we meditate on Mary in the church, on Mary in her relationship to the church. As we do this, we find we can imagine the church as starting again. We are freed from all that freezes our image of the church, from all that makes the concretely existing church a fixed reality that resists change. Instead we see the church at the moment of the outpouring of the Spirit.

But because we see the church as Mary sees it, we see it from within, from the point of view of one who loves it, who recognizes in it the body of her Son, the risen Lord. With Mary, we see with sorrow all that disfigures this body, all that prevents it from being the full revelation of the Father's love, but every one of our gestures proceeds from love and seeks nothing but healing and growth.

Conclusion

The more we work from within Marist tradition, the more we shall have to contribute to two vital aspects of a renewed church: the rich differentiation of the church as local, its all-embracing universality as the people of God. As we learn with Colin and the early Marists to place ourselves where Mary stands in relation to the church, we shall become experts not only at recognizing and fostering the differences of time and place which make the church assembled in Sydney in 1986 different from the church assembled anywhere else in the world at any other time, but also at helping the church of Sydney in 1986 grow in the awareness that in it there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female, but that all have been baptized into Christ.

We left Pompallier, Chanel, Marie-Nizier, and the others on board La Delphine. With them, the Society of Mary truly became universal. It stretched to the end of the world. But the bonds they had created on September 24 when they took their vows and elected the superior general remained strong despite the distance and the difficult communications. The quality of those bonds measured the quality of their work at the service of the church in Oceania. The congregation they belonged to had full status in the church through pope Gregory XVI's approval of April 29, and what thus entered the life of the church was the spiritual experiences that were tied to the Fourvière pledge of 1816 and, through that, to the inspiration of Courveille in Le Puy in 1812 and those of Colin in Cerdon, the experiences that are summed up in the name Society of Mary.

Sydney, August 27, 1986 G. Lessard, s.m.