

5. MARY IN THE CHURCH

By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

A Prayer

Jesus, you founded the Church to be your Holy People, Spirit-led and graced. We struggle to be that community, that Body. Forgive us.

Mary, support of the Church at its tenuous beginnings, be the support of the Church through us today, and continue to be that support until the end of time.

The Central Marist Motif

Marist spirituality has a number of key themes. We have already reflected on the images of Fourviere, Cerdon, Bugey. These names are not simply historical places or events but also living, evolving moments in the development and growth of our own love and service of God. Assisted by Mary, they represent an entire quest for God: a movement from interest to commitment, prayer to personal interiorization, an openness to people that leads to service of others that then bears fruit in a life-giving expansion of one's own mind and heart.

Historically, the various branches that became the Marist tree, the Marist Laity, Marist Teaching Brothers (FMS), Marist Sisters (SM), Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM's) and Marist Fathers and Brothers, all trace their origins back to Fourviere and the inspiration behind the 1816 pledge. However, when the idea of a single congregation, united under one head, was presented to Rome for approval in 1834 it was rejected as too vast and unwieldy.

However, this still means that today all our Marist branches acknowledge Mary as taking an enterprising initiative in 1812 for these our times of unbelief. We all rejoice in bearing the same name, refer to the same motto and hold Mary as our founder, leader and inspiration. So, although history has meant that each branch has had to stand alone, we continue to share a substantial common heritage. Today though, we also do well to nuance Marist spirituality as, for instance, Champagnat Marist spirituality or Colinian Marist spirituality. Essentially in what follows I will talk about aspects of the spirituality bequeathed to us, both religious and laity, by Jean-Claude Colin.

Of all our Colinian themes, none is older, nor as significant for us, than Mary in the Church. Mary, present alongside us, wanting something. In a sense, it is the sun in our spiritual galaxy, around which all the other themes revolve and thereby receive their own particular light and significance. Listen out then for the echo of this theme, its telling reverberations in Colin's thoughts and words. Fr. Colin referred to this theme frequently and saw it as especially rich and meaningful:

“Yes, [his tone became very solemn] I do not mind repeating once more: the words, ‘I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be again at the end of time’, served us, in the very earliest days, as a foundation and an encouragement.” FS.152.

Our Marist existence and spirituality begins then with the acknowledgment that Mary has intervened saying that she “wants a Society of Mary,” men and women who are “Marists” (her name for us!), in order to do her work of supporting and building up the Church in our time! There is here, the sense of a call, a “gracious choice.”

There is great encouragement then to be taken from Mary's initiative. If Mary has chosen us, and it is her work, then she really must help us! So, as Marists, we put our trust in her choice and presence. Even when faith and love are tough to live out, we can, (indeed we must) demand that Mary helps us!

Marists' also see a second crucial angle to this theme. Given the 'allergies' many people have to faith today, Mary's presence and particular way of relating to others will give the Church a new face. To this extent, as Marists, we hope for, and seek to be, a 'new' Church, the fragile and nascent church coming into being here and now in our time!

An Insight

"For Marists, Mary is not the object of one's private devotion. Rather, we find in Mary a better understanding of the relationship of the Church and the world, thus shedding light on our lives and work and the specific needs of the times" (Jean Coste, FR COLIN AND MARIST TRADITION).

The Practice

"Having confidence in Mary is not something we have for dessert after the main courses of planning and organizing. It is at the heart of our Marist life. We became Marists by a personal intervention of Mary: the call of Mary. We are carried by a personal relationship to Mary: our confidence in Mary. We are called to join in her mission: the work of Mary" (Jan Hulshof, WITH A MORE LIVELY CONFIDENCE).

Possible Questions

1. Mary has been portrayed in a rich variety of ways in art and in prayers. What have you personally found helpful and unhelpful in the various ways that Mary is presented and why?
2. Thinking and imaging Mary as "in the Church"; how helpful is that to you in terms of relating to her? Share a little bit about why that is so?
3. "If Mary has chosen us she must help us." Personalise and tease that out for yourself. What meaning or significance does it have for you now, and how might it come to mean more?



(Image Credit: "Pentecost" by Sulpician Father Peter W. Gray)