

## 12. UNDERSTANDING JEAN-CLAUDE COLIN

By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

### A Prayer

Ever-faithful God, so constant in your love and concern for us that you raise up men and women in every age endowed with a vision for our times. Our Marist founders' were such people, such precious gifts.

Mary, instill in us a renewed purpose and vigor by your call to live the Gospel in your ways, especially as portrayed by Jean-Claude Colin. We ask this so that by our faith and witness, we may give greater glory to God and honour to you, Mother of us all.

### Learning From Colin

The focus of these reflections has been on "Colinian Marist spirituality." That expression can have us thinking that Colin set out to devise a systematic, integrated, meticulously planned spirituality. The reality, however, is that Jean-Claude Colin sought first and foremost to establish a religious congregation with a mission. Over time, he learnt by way of experience and prayer just what the spirit of the men and women, lay and religious, comprising this body was to be. Often he was left amazed by what he had written. It was as if he was just a mere instrument in somebody's hand.

In common with Marcellin Champagnat, Jean-Marie Chavoin, the first Lay Marists' and the pioneer Missionary Sisters, Colin was very taken by the unexpected intervention of Mary in 1812. This intervention made him marvel at the gracious choice of Mary and at the immense privilege to now be the bearer of her name. In fact, all branches of the Marist tree relate similarly to the Latin phrase, "Sub Mariae Nomine," under the name of Mary.

To BE Marist, as an individual, institution or work, is to recognise that the very name we have evokes Mary and her living, vibrant presence with us still. "Mary wants something" here! Without this realization, it's as if we play for Marist but haven't got around to putting their jersey on! Also, belonging to or associated with Colin's branch, in terms of what it means to be "Under Mary's Name," there is only one interpreter, one authority – Father Jean-Claude Colin. In so many ways, ignorance of Colin and his themes is an ignorance of what belonging to, or being associated with the Society of Mary is actually about. We are focusing on mere shadows, not the real thing.

Colin's Marist spirituality verges on being more about the Church than Mary herself! "Mary, support of the Church" is to have special meaning for us. Mary present, helping, promoting others in the church at its birth and now working, prodding to bring about a new Church in our times. A new church wherever we are – our home, our street, our work environment – through you! This not only asks for, but also promises us so much more in faith, hope and love than having a simple devotion to say our own saint's name, or to the patron saint of our parish church or college.

Colin's themes are particularly evangelizing of us so that we might then be humble, empathetic evangelizers of others! His themes reiterate that our Marist mission-field is not primarily some far off place like Oceania, but as Colin declared, it was just as much to France – wherever home is! It is above all, to a situation – our secular age. Hence, the question that inspired the first Marists is still ours: Who are "most in need", those most cut adrift and on the periphery of the Church today?

For Colin, all are welcome into the Marist venture because Mary wants to extend her warm embrace to all people. Maybe by 'being' Marist your hope will be to do good for others, or to become a better person or a better Christian. It might also be about finding or deepening Mary's place in your life. All are stepping stones to being one with Mary and one with her Son.

“We are all founders,” Colin once declared (Founder Speaks 175:3). His themes are not static. In his own case they tended to develop as he transitioned from one role to another and as he aged. Colin, throughout his life it seems, remained attentive to the Sower passing by, calling, inviting.

And so, a last important point to leave you with. Ideally, these reflections will become more than those of just one more Marist priest. A major challenge for us all as Marists today, is for laity to be the ones writing and developing Marist spirituality for these our times – and from their own distinct lay experience. So, what do these themes say to you then as a parent, grand-parent, a college youth, a university student, an employee, a boss, a parishioner? But then, given your insights, how might you apply these themes practically, concretely yourself?

#### **One Last Thought from Fr Jean Claude Colin:**

“We must study the Marist spirit more and more. I feel, alas, that unless we renew ourselves, our treasure will run out. Our poor humanity drags us down! We must constantly overhaul it, and wind ourselves up, as people do with clocks to make them go. Yes, unless we are attentive and generous, the spirit of our Society will soon be lost. Let us keep to our own spirit.” (FS. 59:2).

#### **One Last Thought From a Contemporary Marist:**

“What Fr Colin does as our inspirer, our animator, is not to hand us a lot of thoughts, but a way of thinking, a way of seeing things, of deciding and acting. It could be said that Colin directs our attention to nothing else but the Church and world of our day, to their needs and struggles, hungers and cries for help. But Colin suggests that as we look upon these contemporary realities, we should project upon them, like a photographic transparency on a screen, the image of Mary, particularly her presence in the early Church. ” (Edwin Keel, SM DOCUMENT 4, ‘The Mission of the Society of Mary,’ Rome 1980, pp.4-5).

#### **Possible Questions**

1. Individual Marists and Marist works are to have a real sense of bearing the name of Mary. What might this entail for you here and now?
2. If Jean-Claude Colin is the “only one interpreter and authority” of the Marist spirit of his branch, how then can it be said that “we are all founders”?
3. Having sat with this series of reflections, are you ready for something that with the companionship of Mary, will ask more of you and your current practice of faith, hope, love? Why is that so?