

8. One Yes; “Three No’s”

By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

A Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, touch our minds, move our hearts that we might be present in the Church in Mary’s way.

Help us “to love the Church as it is while at the same time being an agent of its renewal and unity”. Remove from us, all those attitudes that undermine this great work.

Goals to Occupy Us as Marists

Father Jean-Claude Colin was a product of his times. Having endured the horror of the French Revolution, along with its Napoleonic aftermath, and then having to contend with the all too frequent political upheavals where monarchs and republics rose or fell, it is little wonder that he, like so many other French, looked to Mary. What stands out regarding Colin and the first Marists, however, is their utter conviction that Mary herself undertook an initiative with them saying, “This is what I want...”

The request originating at Le Puy in 1812 galvanized the first Marists to work to establish a Society of Mary. However, what is perhaps most striking about Colin, is that he understood these words to have ramifications that far exceeded the concerns of his times and indeed of his little Society of Mary. He believed that Mary’s initiative and her ongoing presence in the Church, meant that ‘the Church of the end times’ was now emerging more to the fore.

The Church of the end times for Colin was of course still Petrine, the Church of Peter and the apostles, however, Marists especially were now to say ‘Yes’ to this emerging more Marian Church, a Church characterized by a mothers sensitive, very active concern for her most struggling, lost children.

Colin himself was very aware of the challenge in this. In his words, “the Society of Mary was not to model itself on any other existing congregation.” It’s vision was to be much more far-reaching than being set on merely completing just the regular everyday tasks of service in the Church. All Marists, whether vowed Religious or Laity, were to grasp that Mary was intent on achieving something much more than this, even when working on their ordinary tasks. A new way of being Church was to mark what Marists did. Accordingly too, Marists could engage in all manner of evangelizing works. This task was so vital, so necessary now for Colin, that Marists were not to be tied to just one or two so-called traditional apostolic works.

This Colinian theme, then, cries out for laity to practice it in their own right, women and men, young and old, taking to heart the challenge “to think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things” and thereby, be a catalyst for transforming how the Church and even society itself thinks and behaves. Colin even dared to dream of the whole world eventually doing this, at which point, Mary, this great woman of hope, would have helped achieve as it were, a second incarnation – and at least in part, through us.

For Colin, Mary was the critical foil to what he saw as the three great obstacles disfiguring the Church of his day – greed, pride, power. There was widespread clerical greed and pressure to return to heavy Church taxes. Also, Catholics at every level, were too intent on the Church regaining positions of privilege and of control of society, locally and nationally, positions lost to Revolutionaries and their enduring Enlightenment ideas. Worse still, the Church was seemingly blind to the alienating effects this clamouring and negativity towards the changed landscape continued to have on ordinary people.

Consequently, Marists, because they were to be so mindful of Mary, had to practice a truly vigorous NO to any thought or action that even hinted at one of these three forms of self-seeking within them. In Colin's mind greed, pride and power were the very antipathy of who Mary was both as a person and as a disciple of Jesus her son. To be a Marist, really does mean letting Mary 'get under our skin' and into our everyday less redeemed attitudes and behaviours. We do this so that the world will see what hope the Church, and the Gospel can have, when embodied in a person or a people taking on Mary's dispositions and likeness.

An Insight

"Under the guise of a warning against a few excesses, there is a profound criticism of a whole set of behaviour within the Church. Colin rejects three forms of power: the power which comes from money, the power which comes from having within one's hands the key to decision making, and to power which comes from prestige. When the apostle lets a seeking for power come into his heart, can he still say that he is speaking of Christ, that he is announcing the kingdom of God? When confronted with a Church with these kinds of behaviour, what is needed is not another Church but another kind of Church which we must make new again by transforming it" (Jean Coste, A MARIAN VISION OF THE CHURCH, pp.384 – 386).

The Practice

"In the contemporary world, as we experience an increasingly radical secularization, we are also seeing a new vitality of religion [but] it may not be 'main-stream' Christian. Faced with the explosion of religion, we are likewise called to humility and the renunciation of every kind of power-seeking. In those situations too, Christians, or at least Catholics, often in a minority and subject to suspicion, can only respond with the offer of dialogue and friendship in all respect for the other" (Justin Taylor, A MARIST RESET, pp.103-04).

Possible Questions

1. What do you find most positive and attractive about the Church, locally and also internationally?
2. Are Colin's Three No's still relevant today? Explain your answer.
3. Being Marist means "being an agent of both the Church's renewal and unity." How comfortable and easy do you think it is to do both and is one easier than the other for you?