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A Brief History of the Marist Fathers' Involvement in Education. Learning from our History

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There are three parts to this presentation:

1. Relevant history of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and its impact on the beginnings of Marist Fathers' education ministry, compared to relevant history of late 20th and early 21st centuries, and its impact on a new era of Marist Fathers' education ministry.
2. Themes from Father Colin of particular relevance, then and now.
3. Some reflections on applying this knowledge.

1. Relevant history of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and its impact on the beginnings of Marist Fathers' education, compared to relevant history of late 20th and early 21st centuries, and its impact on a new era of Marist Fathers' education

Late 18th and early 19th centuries

Eighteenth century France was the most populous country in Western Europe, and also the wealthiest and most powerful. The king was an absolute monarch whose authority was thought derived from God. Some of the king's power was limited by ancient rights and privileges of classes and bodies such as the nobility, the Church and the high court, but the kings managed to turn that round to their advantage in other ways. While the Church was recognised as the Church of the nation, with about ninety-five percent of the population being Catholic, the state of the Church in various provinces was different, and within provinces even dioceses and parishes differed. So, there was apparent unity on the outside, but a different perception on the inside.

However, the practice of the Faith was almost universal, and after the Council of Trent, with support from the government, orders like the Sulpicians and Vincentians had established excellent seminaries, and the training of priests in theology and pastoral practice was much improved on what it had been before. As a result, the clergy was held in

high esteem, seen as well-trained, devoted pastors, and indeed the cream of society. There were signs, though, clear for historians now, but not widely perceived at the time, that cracks were appearing in this seeming bastion of the Church:

- Vocations fell over twenty-five percent in the fifty years prior to the Revolution.
- A certain resentment existed between the bishops and the clergy: the bishops possessed enormous money and power while the clergy was poorly remunerated and had little say in the running of the Church.
- Within the clergy there was a battle between the conservative Jansenists and the Roman tradition.
- With Gallicanism, which claimed for the French Church a degree of independence from Rome, there were political motivations as well and the French kings, in turn, used their understanding of Gallic privileges to virtually control the Church in France.
- The Enlightenment attacked revealed religion, in particular the Catholic Church, and its arguments were cleverly promoted by the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot, while at the same time the leadership in Rome was weak and indecisive.

At the end of the 18th century the cracks did indeed open and became a chasm, as the Revolution was born. Crucial to the position of the Church was the Civil Constitution for the Clergy that was promulgated in 1790 by the newly formed National Assembly, which saw its mission as constituting a new France on a democratic basis. While it is fair to say that the Civil Constitution for the Clergy did not set out to interfere with the doctrinal or spiritual life of the Church, in effect it did. The decree that bishops and parish priests be elected by plebiscite, the reducing of the influence of the Pope, and then, when there was resistance to the Civil Constitution, the promulgation of the Oath of Allegiance to the Civil Constitution, all gradually drove an enormous division into the Church. What ultimately happened showed just how divided the Church had been, even though it came as a surprise at the time. The majority of bishops, one hundred and fifty-three to seven, rejected the oath, as did all but twenty-four of three hundred and twenty-seven seminary professors. However, out in the cities and especially the country-side of France, around fifty percent of the fifty-one thousand parish clergy took the oath. Reasons varied from diocese to diocese and parish to parish, but the clear message was that the bishops, recruited almost exclusively from the nobility, had long ago lost contact with their clergy.

Important to us, as Marists, is the fact that Jean Claude Colin was born into this political and religious maelstrom, and it had an effect on him from his earliest years. For the first four years of his life, during the persecutions suffered by those who rejected the Civil Constitution and their supporters, Jean Claude's father was on the run. After his return home, it was within a year that his wife, Jean Claude's mother, died, and then he died, apparently of a broken heart, only three weeks later.

We know well the early history of Jean Claude Colin's life, coinciding as it did with a deeply divided France and French Church getting to its feet again after the Revolution and its fall-out. Of great significance are these facts:

- During the aftermath of this turmoil, Colin was studying for the priesthood.
- There was a certain climate of revival and zeal that saw the foundation of numerous new religious orders.
- Colin took on the mantle of leadership of the would-be Marists.
- Colin also took on the mission to the Bugey, a physically demanding mission to a neglected and spiritually impoverished people.
- All the time he was negotiating and manoeuvring towards getting the Society of Mary approved.
- He took on, much against his personal will, the College at Belley.
- It was here, drawing on his hard experience in the hills, that he framed the first principles of Marist Education. We call it "Les Avis."
- Six years later, in the midst of this "missionary" experience in education, the Marists were awarded approbation on the condition of accepting the mission field of Oceania.

Late 20th and early 21st Centuries

This period in our history has been dominated by the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath. The stated intention of Pope John XXIII in calling the Council was to "throw open the windows of the Church to the world" and the Church leaders and the faithful were encouraged "to read the signs of the times." To say that there followed a period of turmoil would be to understate it. Some would say the turmoil continues to this day. Clearly over the thirty years immediately after the Council there were events and trends that are easily identifiable and that have significance for us as we sit here now:

- The Council promoted a fresh and more universal understanding of "Church".

- While the doctrinal and moral teaching authority of the Church was affirmed, the faithful were explicitly called on to inform their consciences and take responsibility for their choices and actions.
- The Second Vatican Council coincided with a huge shift in society at large. The 1960's became a seed bed of social revolution, exemplified by the civil rights movement in the United States, the fall-out from the war in Vietnam, and the agitation for change by students and young people across Western Europe.
- This new seeking of independence from greater authority by individuals and small groups was mirrored by the struggle of colonised people in most parts of the world to free themselves from colonial masters.
- Both within western civilization as a whole, and within the world at large that had been dominated by western civilization, there was unrest and agitation for change.

Many more things could be added, but for our purposes here, there were consequences that soon niggled at our consciousness. The world was changing radically; the Church was changing radically; we, of our generation, were caught in the middle, holding fast to the past where there was apparent security and certainty, but attracted, too, toward the future where there were exciting possibilities still shrouded in mystery. Like most other Religious Orders, the Marists suffered the ordeals of the time: some confreres clung to the past and would not let go; some confreres launched themselves precipitously into the future and lost contact with the mother ship; others of us disengaged slowly from the past, but made our way cautiously forward. As a result, these are some of the things that happened, and that we still grapple with now:

- Our own state of uncertainty meant that recruits dried up.
- Once numerically-powerful apostolates, such as education, saw diminishing numbers, and in the eyes of many people, including many Marists, this was seen as weakening the apostolate.
- The rediscovery of the Society of Mary as a “missionary” order prompted many Marists to re-examine their life and work in the light of our early history.
- Traditionally fertile ground for vocations became sterile, and “mission territories” began to provide more vocations.

Outside the Society of Mary's specific apostolates, there were other trends occurring that have come to affect us greatly, especially in terms of our education apostolate. In 18th century France there was a loss of the relationship between the bishops and their priests that led to huge

division. I believe that in our age the loss of relationship has been even more significant. I believe that in the so-called first world, the loss of relationship has been between the clergy and the people. This is abundantly clear in parish churches on Sundays, especially when we compare the number of young people who attend Catholic schools with the number of young people, and their families, who attend Church on Sunday with any regularity. I am not sure of the statistics here in Canada, or in the United States, but certainly in New Zealand and Australia, only between seventeen and twenty percent of those who call themselves Catholic attend church on Sunday with any regularity. This is historical fact, and I will make some reflections later on what I think some of the implications are, but I make the point here that there are some significant similarities between the situation faced by Father Colin and those involved in early Marist education, and those of us who are now on the threshold of a new age in Marist education.

Some Historical Similarities

Here are some of the similarities:

- A time of social and religious turmoil;
- A time when the authority of the Church is being challenged and questioned;
- A time of division within the Church, often characterised by a conservative/liberal contrast in stance;
- A time of rapid social change;
- A time characterised by deep spiritual searching;
- A time of comparative lack of vocations;
- A time requiring the search for new horizons;
- A time dictated by the plight of the young;
- A time when the Church seems slow and hesitant in responding to the signs of the times.

2. Themes from Colin of particular relevance, then and now

Les Avis of Jean-Claude Colin penned only months after his arrival at Belley,¹ are not particularly revolutionary or even original. They are the result of his own reading of current pedagogy, and without doubt his observations of the current state of affairs in the school at Belley. However, there is also present the wisdom of the missionary on two

¹ F. Drouilly, *Les avis de Jean-Claude Colin, au personnel du petit séminaire de Belley* (Maristica.textus et studia, 3), Rome, 1990.

counts - attitudes honed by the experience of ministry in the hills of the Bugey, and the deep understanding of someone sensitive to the needs of a young people suffering a lack of direction and moral fibre. I do not want to do the venerable gentleman an injustice or a disservice, but his advice to his teachers can be distilled into a very economical formula. First there is his quite simple and uncomplicated educational philosophy, and it is based on a reflection on Mary in the Gospels:

The Founder: The Source of our Education Philosophy

Mary the Mother of Jesus is not something to be talked about at great length, or an object to be made the centre of attention for the students. Rather,

MARY IS A SUBJECT WITH WHOM THE EDUCATOR IDENTIFIES. IT IS IN TRYING TO EFFACE OURSELVES, AND KEEPING OURSELVES, LIKE MARY, HIDDEN AND UNKNOWN, THAT AS EDUCATORS WE TRULY FULFIL OUR ROLE.

Here we have the heart of what might be called the secret of Marist pedagogy.

Marist pedagogy, according to Colin, could be summed up as this:

- An approach not of conquest, but of humble and discreet assistance.
- Not of putting self out front, drawing attention to self, or playing games of prestige.
- Marist educators interest themselves in the real needs of those they have in front of them.
- The pedagogy is student-centered: what counts is them, what they make of themselves.
- Self-effacement of educators in the work of the team is vital - it is the group who teach.
- Unity of staff is paramount, the quality of relationships among them, because the students are always sensitive to that.

Colin's ideas weren't something new, or a Marist monopoly, then or now, but the combination of them has proved effective and remarkably enduring. How could the ideas be summarized?

Colin's three aims of Christian education were:

1. The formation of Christians.
2. The formation of good-living people.
3. The formation of scholars.

He wanted educators who

1. have real care and concern for the students as individuals
2. don't get in the way of learning
3. form a Community of Education.

Real Care and Concern for the Students as Individuals: Colin wanted

- teachers who would get to know each student, who would not show favoritism, who would spend time with students outside of the classroom, who would involve themselves with aspects of their broader education;
- teachers who would consider themselves as being at the service of the students – like Jesus who came “not to be served, but to serve”;
- teachers who would gain the respect and confidence of the students, not to be considered popular, but so that the students might become open, trustful and sincere.

Teachers who don't get in the way of learning: Colin wanted

- teachers who would not let themselves be a barrier to students' learning; thus self-effacement and avoidance of pet schemes; students are more important than the curriculum;
- teachers who would treat the students with respect, keeping in mind the adults they will become;
- teachers who would avoid anything the students might ridicule, and who would avoid seeking popularity because it will lead to being despised (*Avis*, nr. 20);
- teachers who have a sense of humour and are under no illusions with regard to the students: they aren't angels and they aren't devils - they are young, they will make mistakes and be disrespectful. Don't expect more of them than they can deliver.

Staff who form a Community of Education: Colin wanted

- a staff presenting a “united front” to the students, and behind that front he wanted the reality of a true “community of educators”;
- all to contribute ideas at staff meetings or in the appropriate forum, but not to lobby or form factions, and for everyone to get behind the decision when it was taken;
- teachers not to ask ancillary staff to be involved in inter-departmental disputes;
- staff members not to side with a student against another staff member;

- staff who would not set themselves up on a pedestal, or be right out front demanding that people follow, but work together as members of a team right in the midst of people.

3. Some reflections on applying this knowledge

The Society of Mary was given approbation as a missionary order. I have read and re-read the history and some of the writings of the early Marists in the Pacific, and especially in New Zealand. These were hard men. They were physically deprived much of the time. Many of them lived for months at a time off the land that was foreign to them. They learned local native dialects, and most of them English as well. They persevered. They sowed the faith and it flourished. I owe my faith to them. But no matter what else they did, and how they did it, these men were absolutely steeped in the Gospel. Not only did they preach the Gospel; they lived the Gospel, and they lived it in a very special way, the way that we would now call the Marist way. Among the Maori of New Zealand where the Catholic faith seeded and grew, the local people could tell the difference between the faith of the French priests and the faith of the Protestant ministers. The French priests taught what they lived. The Protestant ministers taught from the book. The French priests' experience was honed in post-revolution France. They knew the value of their faith because they had had to fight for it. It was precious, to be treasured, but it was trustworthy, and they knew it would see them through. It had been tested.

I believe that we, in the modern Church, especially we who have the precious charge of this world's young people in education, are facing a time not unlike that which Colin and the first Marists faced. We are living in probably the greatest and most sustained revolution in history. I don't think it is a revolution of our choice, but rather something elemental, something so basic that it calls into question the deepest values of our various cultures, our view of what civilisation means, our very ability to apply meaning to what goes on from day to day. It is that very point, our ability to apply meaning to what goes on day to day that I want to dwell on for a moment. Between seventeen and twenty percent of those who identify themselves as Catholic, in New Zealand and Australia, grace the pews on Sundays. I do not know the statistics of North America or Europe, but my suspicion is that they would be similar, or even more extreme. Most of those who do go to church are in the older age bracket. The simple fact is that the vast majority of

young people do not find the institutional Church very relevant. Some of them still look to the Church in some ways to serve them, but they do not look to the Church for meaning. They are searching, and they are searching in many places, and most of them are not finding, but they are not coming back to the Church as the logical terminus because they have not found what they are looking for elsewhere. They are in a vacuum, without anything to anchor them to the real meaning of life, and I believe it is largely because the Church has not changed its models of ministry during this time of revolution (and God help us, there has been enough time!) that the vacuum exists.

We have an opportunity to address that. In Marist education we have a rare gem, a charism, which, I believe, presents us with a means to reignite the real meaning of life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in the hearts of our young people. I believe that an essential part of our charism as Marists, (and not just professed Marists) is that the four founders of our Marist family never saw themselves as anything other than instruments of Mary the Mother of Jesus. Colin always said that Mary was our Founder, our first and perpetual Superior. It is her spirit that we live and breathe. She is no different in the early twenty-first century than she was in the early nineteenth century, because the Gospels have not changed. Our spirit as Marists comes from our reflection on Mary in the Gospels. It is as raw and elemental as that. Something as basic as that, as close to Mary's Son, is actually attractive to young people if we live it – IF WE LIVE IT! If we are there in the Gospel, walking alongside Jesus as Mary did, then our life is transformed, and so are the lives of those around us. It happened in the Pacific and in New Zealand from 1838 onwards. The French missionaries did it. The early Irish and English Marist educators did it. Our colleges in New Zealand and Australia and Ireland – and probably in many parts of the world I don't know so much about – bear witness to it.

However, I also believe that this is the time of the lay Marist. We who are religious of the Society of Mary have reached a significant cross-road. We have been generously and magnanimously handing over control of our schools to lay people, and simultaneously patting ourselves on the back and congratulating ourselves for being so forward looking in letting go of the power. (Now that I have exorcised my fantasy, I will return to reality.) It is nonsense, isn't it? We have let go largely because we ran out of religious to run the schools. In some places we kept Marists in charge and pretended that we were collaborating with the laity. In some places we didn't have enough

Marists to place on the staff, and so we abandoned the schools. In some places, too, we left Marists on the staff and they were a source of division and a cause of dissension behind the scenes because they were feeling emasculated. If we are honest, we will own up to our sometimes sad history. But to me the irony is that when we finally let go of what we do not need to hold on to, then and only then, will we be able to be missionary again, and when we are missionary again we will have any number of people wanting to join our ranks as prophetic religious. Missionary means “going where we are needed but not wanted, and staying until we are wanted but not needed.”

Well, have we got that out of our system? The charism of being Marist is not the preserve of the religious orders. Father Colin intended from the beginning that there be a lay branch of the Society of Mary. He never intended that it be lesser in importance: he wanted the “whole world Marist.” So, you don’t have to be a religious to be Marist. You don’t even have to be Catholic, in actual fact, to be Marist. What you have to do is live the Gospel in a certain way (it is no coincidence that Craig Larkin’s book on Marist spirituality is called *A Certain Way*) and that is the way of Mary as reflected on in the Gospel.

In the *National Network of Marist Schools in New Zealand*, which came, ultimately, out of the International Forum on Marist Education in Rome in 2004, we have developed four programmes (among many other initiatives) that have grown directly from four specific images of Mary in the Gospels. These are the programmes, a little about them, and the images of Mary:

1. *Marist Youth Educator:*

- for Staff and Boards;
 - dwelling on what it means to be a Marist teacher;
 - a flexible and growing programme;
 - offering history, spirituality and praxis;
 - adaptable to large or small groups;
- built on the image of Mary and Joseph finding Jesus in the Temple.

2. *Marist Youth Leader:*

- for students approaching their last year at high school;
- Christian leadership in the context of a Marist school;
- personal challenge, individual and group leadership;
- a way for young people to live the Gospel;
- developing the notion of Servant-Leadership;
- up to 100 students per programme;

built on the image of Mary prodding Jesus into action at Cana.

3. *Young Marist Neighbours:*

- for students in the second-to-last year at high school;
- a social justice service project;
- for 10-12 students at a time;
- ten programmes per year;
- based on Catholic Social Teaching;
- living the Gospel right outside the comfort zone;
- taking the experience home;

built on the image of Mary going “in haste to the hill country.”

4. *Marist Young Adult:*

- for students finishing university and entering work-force;
 - building on the notion of Servant-Leadership;
 - social justice as a way of life;
 - a challenging but practical spirituality for daily life;
- celebrating being young and Marist by the way we live, built on the image of Mary at Pentecost pushing the apostles out the door to do their preaching.

There are other programmes and activities that we offer through the Network, but I mention these because they came out of a particular philosophy, and in that philosophy there are two non-negotiables: first, even in something as steady and regulated as education, we have to adopt the attitude of being missionary. We have to go out to where the young people are, to listen to what they are telling us, to understand their point of view, to accept that because of the generational difference their point of view differs from ours, to accept the validity of their having a point of view, and to respond to it. Young people are no longer coming to Church; our challenge now, just as it was for the apostles, just as it was for the first Marists, is to take the Church to them. I think that in education we forgot the need to do that. We built good schools, we made them strong, then we spent the best part of one hundred years standing back and admiring our handiwork.

Secondly, we have to be innovative. The generations are changing so quickly, and so are the needs. If a Catholic school exists because it is a Catholic school, and I am making that assumption, then at its heart must be the Gospel. Traditional ways of communicating the Gospel are not working with the young. We have already discussed that. So we need new ways. We have to tap into the generational needs: do we know, for

example, that as a generation these kids are highly motivated, they are desperate for relationship and connectivity, they show a deep yearning for the spiritual, and they are desperate to work alongside us and be given responsibility.

These programmes reach out and take the Church to young people. They meet them in events, they challenge them to take the responsibility of leadership, they prompt them to learn by showing and teaching others, all steeped in our reflections on Mary in the Gospels.

I hope I have not exceeded my brief here. In conclusion I want to offer a brief reflection on the moment in Mary's life when she had to respond to the momentous news brought to her by the Angel. We know it as the Visitation: "she went in haste to the hill country..."

The Visitation (For two voices)

"Let it be done to me according
to your word." Brave words
that would resound through
the ages, but not now - only
an echo, half-grasped words barely
understood in the dim light of a
Nazareth house.

And in the late afternoon, before the men
came in from work, the echo of other
words: "Your cousin Elizabeth.....in her old
age.....in her sixth month....for nothing
is impossible to God." Nothing is impossible.
Nothing.....is impossible...

And Mary set out as quickly as she could,
some fear in the backward glance over
her shoulder, fear to make haste unseen.
The telling will wait, stories of angels
and strange messages of God's
uncomfortable favour. Only the fear,
the deep disturbance of spirit, the
anticipation of Joseph's puzzlement,
"before they came together."

The months since seeing old Elizabeth are
witness to the hill country: dark in the

twilight, shadows on shadows, real and imagined, a mirror of even deeper fears and mysteries that speak of barren women and virgins bearing children, of the Spirit and the Most High. How can it come about?

“Mary, do not be afraid...do not be afraid...do not be afraid...” are the echoes that bounce from hillside to hillside in the dark valleys and winding ways of the hill country. No light shines here, even in the distance where the warmth of kinship might promise some relief. There is only the recent memory, and the dark menace of the hill country.

But in the cool light before dawn as old Elizabeth makes her way to the well before the amused and prying eyes of the town arise, she is shocked to see a rider, a slight young thing she looks, and Elizabeth withdraws until she might pass. But hurried, urgent footsteps, a soft call: “Elizabeth, Elizabeth, is it true?”

And Elizabeth’s shock becomes her child’s shock as he leaps in recognition of the secret that only they have heard. The would-be crone and the once-was-a-virgin share the tears of histories that are unknown and unchosen, histories yet to be, histories secret to two women.

Mary clutches her second self, from whom comes no request for explanation, no juridical judgment. There are only the healing hands that hold her, the recognition of struggles and stumbling, the open arms of a home for her when there seems to be no other.

Against all wisdom but her own, old

Elizabeth contravenes the social language. Acceptance becomes a vision that will be its own reward. Pregnant and unmarried, Mary's goodness is unquestioned, never challenged. She is not warped or shaped or wrenched to be any other than she is.

There are words of joy and prophecy,
words that drip with knowing and unknowing,
telling of the fruit of the womb, stories ripe
with promise and final belief. Mary and
Elizabeth join in the comfort and amazement
of ancient hymns in which abound the stories
of God who favours the humbled.

The hill country hears the strains of
such songs, and sees the former
promises now come to pass. The lowly are
raised up and the hungry are fed, and
the proud and the powerful and the rich
... well the rich don't usually come to the
hill country, and so they go away, they
go away empty. And Mary stayed with
Elizabeth until she was no longer needed.

I believe that 2007 is a time in Marist Education when we are being challenged to go "to the hill country." It's a missionary move, a kind of mobile hospitality that promises dangers and risks and deep unknowns. In essence, it's what the first Marists encountered, and they survived because they were immersed in the Gospel. I wonder if we will go away from here in a few days time, filled with the spirit of good will and bonhomie, secure and comfortable in our Marist fellowship, telling ourselves what a wonderful initiative this gathering has been, and having picked up some wonderful resources; or will we leave determined to "go in haste to the hill country?"