

Epilogue

All his life Colin was firmly convinced that whatever happens is a direct intervention from on high, as long as man does not thwart the workings of Providence.¹ The way in which the Society of Mary had obtained pontifical approbation, and the missions of Oceania had been entrusted to it, had confirmed this faith. What Marists are and do is Mary's undertaking; *l'oeuvre de Marie*, we are involved on her behalf. He had not taken the initiatives. When other people put the Society on the way of becoming a missionary congregation, and pointed out that this could be the way to obtain its approbation, he still did not jump at it. He stood back to see if his young Marists would adopt the project, not so much in a spirit of democracy or communal decision making, but as an act of discernment. When they enthusiastically backed it, Colin saw Mary calling them, and he cautiously concluded that this mission was perhaps what God wanted the Society to do.²

When urged by Rome to send a second team as soon as feasible, *quam citissime*, he still did not rush but organized a campaign of prayers in the different branches of the Society: 'Let us pray the Blessed Virgin to give us ten to twelve men. She is the one who will give us them... God will hear our prayer the more we are disinterested, and the less we pray for our own benefit.'³ He will not take the initiative, he will not pick whom he considers suitable. Again, his task is discernment: knowing whom Jesus and Mary have really chosen.⁴

The Oceania mission was a very different thing from what the Society of Mary originally envisaged. Its first mission was post-Revolutionary France as Jeantin, Colin's secretary in his old age, described it:

'The Society of Mary comes on the scene in this century of pride, luxury, materialism, sensuality, human and worldly progress, religious indifference, even godlessness. She is to counteract these lamentable trends through humility, unpretentiousness, mortification, simplicity, and all the other virtues that formed the character and spirit of Mary..... Hence, in his mind, a great and high idea of the sanctity that the members of the Society should attain'.⁵

When Oceania was entrusted to the Society, Colin applied the same pattern of understanding and interpretation. Oceania too was a world of godlessness (or so Colin thought) to which Marists respond with radical self-denial and mortification. His letters to the missionaries⁶ show it and that is how the missionaries understood him; in the words of Servant: 'You wrote that you want me to be a saint'.⁷

What better way to holiness than radically to divest oneself of all bonds of the flesh and of the world and part for good to the unknown world of the Pacific? What better

¹ Cf. Colin Studies I, pp. 1 – 26.

² OM I, doc. 340 [1]: *il semble que Dieu demande de la Société ce dévouement.*

³ (CS, doc. 52 [2])

⁴ Cf. above, p. 75.

⁵ Jeantin, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de la rédaction de nos Constitutions*, 29.05.1870, p. 30 - 31, ms. APM. Quoted in full in Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary*, p. 34.

⁶ Cf. above p. 32 & 83.

⁷ Servant to Colin, 31.05.1841, LRO, doc. 97 [6]: *vous désirez que je devienne un saint...*

way than to break loose of everything human nature holds dear and dedicate oneself entirely to missionary life, possibly crowned by martyrdom!

This vision also defined his own role. It is clear that at least in the early years he saw his responsibility mainly in the spiritual formation and direction of his missionaries. It is what he expected from all the superiors in the Society, as he wrote in August 1837 to Marcellin Champagnat:

I feel obliged to advise you to suspend all projects for three months.... As a friend and a confrere I beg of you to be less occupied with external matters than with the spiritual well-being of your community: it will be better for your health and for your soul.⁸

From the beginning Colin introduced in the Oceania missions an exceptional structure of government. Against a two-century old tradition, and contrary to Roman curial praxis, he appointed the ecclesiastical superior, i.e., the vicar apostolic, Bishop Pompallier, to be the religious superior of the missionaries. It could have been a merely practical and provisional arrangement. Perhaps he hoped in this way to avoid conflicts. It soon turned into a matter of principle. When the second group left, Colin had a perfect opportunity to change; he does not seem to have even considered it. He did not ask: does this arrangement provide good governance? Does it make the work and the life of the missionaries easier? Does it further the effectiveness of their mission? The missionary vocation was foremost a call to holiness and unquestioning obedience to the bishop was a means of sanctification. History will show to what extent the men adopted his point of view.

The narrow vision of his role did not always strengthen Colin's effectiveness. He failed to see the psychological importance of simple correspondence. Twice, at crucial moments, he missed a golden opportunity to encourage his men and fan the flames of missionary zeal. Nor, it must be said, did he have much luck! The money he sent went astray and his first letters, of November 1837, took sixteen months.

That Colin put off sending a second group until he had received the first news from Valparaiso, was natural enough and Pompallier approved, even if it meant setting further action back. When he heard from Valparaiso the second group still had to be selected and nothing had been prepared, Cardinal Fransoni was disappointed. That it then took Colin another ten months to get them on the way, neither Fransoni nor Pompallier could understand.⁹

Delegating did not come easily to Colin. He sometimes kept things in his own hands for too long. The problem of finding a ship was solved in a couple of days once he got Fr. Pierre Convers on the job. Transferring money proved easy enough once Fr. Maxime Petit got his hands on it.

A thing that did worry Colin was the impact that the easy and airy fashions of Polynesia might have on the virtue of his missionaries. He need not have worried. They became used to it in no time and happily disregarded his scrupulous admonitions on not going out alone. As much as they could, they cared for sick women and men alike, and, with Chanel looking on, Nizier measured a Polynesian bride for a dress. Nothing in fact

⁸ CS, doc. 15 [2 & 3].

⁹ LRO, doc. 37 [3].

was more remarkable in the first Marist missionary contacts than the absence of culture shock. Colin was perhaps the only one to suffer of it, vicariously!

Pompallier had written extensively on the innumerable small practical things: how to pack goods and how to prepare them for shipping. Either Colin did not pass this information to the next group, or he did it in such a casual way that they took no notice. Nor did he get them to use the months waiting and travelling, to start learning English.

Writing from *Le Havre* this is how Pompallier felt about the superior general:

In the foreign missions, and especially in ours, we need talented men who are exceptionally well trained. Men of good physical constitution, good and manly characters, of good judgment. In our work piety (however essential!) is far from enough by itself. One needs energy and activity without upsetting people.¹⁰

Once in New Zealand he came back to it:

Let us try, my Reverend Father, to form our religious in a style of piety that leaves the head and the other faculties fully able to cope with exterior matters.¹¹

Colin's radical supernaturalism was perhaps suited more to make saints than to run a mission. In his usual frankness, the bishop advised Colin to get what today would be called a mission secretary or procurator.¹²

But, whatever can be said of his practical management, the selection and the spiritual formation of the missionaries were splendid. Landlubbers, the rigours of travelling for many months in the cramped conditions of small sailing ships did not get them down. They took it all with good humour and unflagging idealism. Wherever they landed, they went to meet the unknown people they found there, open-minded, non-judgmental, full of zeal and ready for anything.

¹⁰ CS, doc. 15 [2 & 3].

¹¹ LRO, doc. 33 [10].

¹² LRO, doc. 33 [9].