

Marist Spirituality in a Trinitarian Key.
An exploration of the theological basis of the different Marist charisms
By Alois Greiler SM

Introduction: from history to theology

In June 2009, nearly eight years ago, I had the privilege to participate in another study day of the Marist Family. It took place in the general house of the Marist Brothers in Rome and dealt with the historical origins of the different branches.¹ The Patrimony commission of the Brothers had started working on the history of the Institute to be ready for the bi-centenary. The bi-centenary has come!

Today again, it is a study day of the Marist Family. The Marist Brothers and the Marist Sisters celebrate a bi-centenary. I heartily congratulate you on the achievements over those two hundred years. I thank you for all the cooperation, for our common story, for being family with each other and for each other, and for our common historical work.

My question today is the following: Which is the spirit expressed in our histories? The Marist spirit has been interpreted along different models: Marian virtues, attitude in apostolate, for a Marian Church, specific ministries, and so on. My presentation tries to explore the theological basis behind the Marist spirituality of the different branches.²

I will look at the founding stage first and then at the modern constitutions. This distinction is necessary as there seems to be a shift probably going back to Christ and the Church as the themes of Vatican II and the modern constitutions being revised in the light of Vatican II (cf. *Perfectae caritatis* no 2³).

My main focus is my own congregation and I will be short on the other branches. Still, to present Marist spirituality in a Trinitarian key I think is fruitful as an approach for all of us.

A major superior of my congregation opened his conference for our community with something like this – to be a Marist Father means to follow Christ as Mary did. In my ears, he described the ideal of the Marist Brothers – but not our charism. I told him so and he said: why don't you elaborate this more. This paper is an attempt to do just that.

1 The Trinity as theological basis of Christian and Marist spirituality

My theological starting point is the Trinity, distinctive core of our Christian spirituality. It is no Tri-theism when I focus more on the individual persons of the one God than on the one God. I do this for the sake of argument.

To summarize my thesis right at the beginning: The Marist Fathers, and most likely the Marist Sisters, focus on the experience of grace. That is on God. The Marist Brothers and the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM) focus on Jesus Christ, true God and son of Mary. The Holy Spirit is a 'sleeping giant' in Marist spirituality because of our emphasis on Mary.

¹ André Lanfrey FMS – Alois Greiler SM, *Synthesis of the Inter-Marist Day, 24 June 2009*, in *Marist Notebooks* 20, 28 (2010) 95 – 98; Alois Greiler SM, *The Society of Mary and the wider Marist Family: Two Models of the Origins*, in *Marist Notebooks* 20, 28 (2010) 101 - 113.

² One inspiration was the question of New Zealander superior general, Bernard Ryan: 'Is Marist spirituality theologically sound?' Cf. *Mary's Work and Theology - Œuvre de Marie et théologie*, Rome, private copies, 1983.

³ The impact of this single number: Alois Greiler sm, *Reception of Renewal or Struggle for Survival? Perfectae caritatis 2 and the Society of Mary*, in Gilles Routhier (ed.), *Réceptions de Vatican II. Le Concile au risque de l'histoire et des espaces humains*, Leuven- Dudley MA, 2004, 131 - 151.

2 Mary – person of the Trinity, model of reception

In order to understand some of the statements of Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) and as a first element of his topical insights, let me begin with a word about Mary and the Marists.

There is no need to repeat her general importance of Marian virtues and devotions, and so on for all Marists.⁴

Colin was not primarily an academic theologian or abstract thinker. He was a spiritual teacher, a writer, a leader, and very much a man orientated towards pastoral work – communicate the faith to people in a way they can welcome it. The modern term for this is reception. How do people receive what the Church teaches? What does it mean to them? In Marian terms it is about her response to the Trinity as model for our response.

Colin did not develop a theological tract on the Trinity. He spoke about the experience of God and how this transforms a person and how this bears fruit. The example par excellence is of course Mary. She experienced the grace of God, a grace that transformed her. She acclaims it in the *Magnificat*.⁵ She conceives the word, the son of God, and gives him to the world. She is full of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles present Mary as the person par excellence to draw the spirit onto the community of believers.

Remember that in Church teaching, Mary stands for what is promised to all human beings. Mary stands for reception of the faith and Colin meditated this especially in terms of transforming grace.⁶ Colin says to the Marists and the Church: Look at her! Be like her! Allow God's grace to transform you! Follow her Son! Pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit!

3 Marist Fathers and Brothers: Like Mary open for God's grace

Colin lists Mary's virtues, her attitude, her spirit, her work – everything is to say: to be like Mary is to be another Mary today, another person available through whom God can do great things, another person through whom God's grace can be at work. And what such a person does in this attitude of Mary God will bless and it will bear fruit. A careful listener will discern different key phrases of Colin in this paragraph: like Mary, her spirit, grace, work of God, do great things⁷...

Another person for Colin to illustrate the same conviction is Saint Paul. Pope Benedict XVI had declared a Pauline year and I took this up by identifying the quotations in our resources on Colin.⁸ Colin does not focus so much on the teaching of Paul. Rather, Colin points to the experience of transforming grace that Paul underwent:

“By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain (1 Cor 15:10)”.

Like Mary, Saint Paul is an example for Marists to focus on the experience of grace, the grace of God the Father, asking us to be available and full of faith and trust as Mary and Paul

⁴ For the priests: Alois Greiler SM, *Colin and Mary and Marists Today*, in FN 18 (2016) 98-102.

⁵ See my earlier meditations: Alois Greiler SM, *Transforming Grace: Marists, Mary and the Magnificat*, in Forum Novum [FN] 10, 2 (2008) 397- 399 = Id., *Une grace qui transforme. Les Maristes, Marie et le Magnificat*, 400-403. Some ideas I used for the retreats I was invited to preach for the US province in 2010 and 2016.

⁶ I got the phrase ‘transforming grace’ Colin’s reading of St. Paul. Only recently I came across Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace. Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, s.d., about the feminist approach as a grace to make traditional Christian faith meaningful to women.

⁷ Alois Greiler SM, *Do Great Things for God like Mary*, in FN 12 (2010) 100-105. See the new constitutions number 136: ‘The Society of Mary is constituted in the Church as an apostolic religious community. The phrase “unknown and even hidden in this world” indicates the manner in which Marists engage in the apostolate and it does not hinder them from doing great things for God’; also no. 220.

⁸ Alois Greiler SM, *God’s grace towards me was not in vain’. A Reflection on the Pauline Dimension of Marist Spirituality*, in FN 13 (2011) 78-101. The Pauline year took place from 2008 to 2009.

were in their time. Colin employs many blessings from the Pauline letters to say: a mission begun in such a spirit, with the spirit of trust in God alone, will bear fruit because God will bless it. Success is not a word with God as Martin Buber says. Blessing is.

Colin cites the Pauline blessings in his letters to the missionaries departing for Oceania and New Zealand. This brings us to the second person of the Trinity, Jesus the Christ. While Colin lays the emphasis on the experience of God's grace, he speaks about Christ mainly in certain contexts:⁹ When it comes to the field of education and to foreign missions. Here, Colin is more christocentric. In Christian education, the ideal is to direct youth towards Jesus Christ, to encourage young people to be good Christians and followers of the Lord.¹⁰ In foreign missions, it is a follow up of the command of the risen Lord, go and preach the Good News to all peoples. Missionaries went to proclaim Jesus Christ and to baptize in the name of the Trinity. Patrick Bearsley showed Colinian Christology as kenotic Christology.¹¹

In 1849, Colin seems to replace his references to Jesus with references to Mary. And in a way, yes, that is what he wants. Marists are to be so full of the spirit of Mary which is the spirit of her Son that Colin can say (FS, doc. 176, 3; 1849; cf FS, doc. 107, 2; 1845):

"On the one hand it is the Son who sends, on the other, the Mother, and is not the spirit of the Mother that of the son? It was she who called you, it is she who sends you out, she who promises and gives you her spirit."

Colin is very much theocentric in his discourse on God at work in the world. A typical line would be (FS, doc. 161, 2; 1848):

"It is God, God alone, who changes them by his grace. We, by putting ourselves into the picture, we can only be an obstacle to the working of that grace."

A specific richness of Colin is his emphasis on the Holy Spirit, in Western European theology often the neglected person of the Trinity. Not so with Colin; because of Mary. I believe this is a specific Marist contribution to the wider Church, the link Mary – Spirit.

On the one hand this link is totally obvious for everybody familiar with the New Testament. On the other hand, I did not find this link in many of the modern German theology books on Mariology, Pneumatology, or ecclesiology. For some reason Mary is marginalized as is the Holy Spirit. Colin brings both to the fore and recalls the connection.

Let me use an example from prayer. Colin recurred to a Marian prayer and a prayer to the Holy Spirit for gatherings. This was no formality. Here is a liturgical expression of the Marist spirit. Like Mary and the early church in the upper room Marists are gathered together. This is a reference to a key biblical image in Colinian spirituality, the first four chapters in the Acts of the Apostles, in particular Acts 1:14. The disciples pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And who could more draw the Holy Spirit than Mary – at least according to Luke and Acts? What seems a very general way of praying in fact reveals its deeper meaning as core elements of the Marist charism: the early church and the guidance by the Holy Spirit.

Towards the end of his life, after a general chapter, Colin said (FA, doc. 396, 3; 1873):

"I am leaving you, no doubt for ever in this world... even now I am no longer of it, this world: my age, my infirmities! But you, Messieurs, are in it and that is enough for me. You will carry on the work of the blessed Virgin. I am content to say how happy, how consoled the good spirit animating you

⁹ In find surprisingly little in view of priesthood – speaking to a clerical congregation.

¹⁰ From his Instructions to the staff at Belley College: Colin states (§2) that the principal duties of educators are to make of their pupils 'Christians, upright gentlemen (*hommes honnêtes et polis*), and lastly men of learning (*savants*)'. He goes on to expand on each objective in turn (Source: Taylor, *Colin*, ms).

¹¹ Patrick Bearsley SM, *From Asceticism to Kenosis. The Evolution in Marist Understanding of the "Unknown and hidden"*, in FN 5, 1 (2000) 69-94.

makes me. I have seen the Holy Spirit in the midst of your deliberations, in your midst the blessed Virgin, the one who is to guide you into the harbour of salvation.”

For the Marist Fathers, the founder is very much theocentric, on the experience of grace. The modern constitutions of 1987, however, focus on reception – a Marian Church.

4 Trinitarian spirituality in the other Marist Branches

With Colnian sources I feel myself on somewhat sure ground although I am open for correction. I am not on sure ground when it comes to the sources of the other Marist branches. Therefore I focus mainly on the respective modern constitutions as official text.

For the **Marist Sisters** we know that Colin and Chavoin (1786-1858) worked together closely in the early years and the Sisters still name Colin as co-founder. Their spirit of prayer following the example of Mary drew quite a compliment from Colin (FS, doc. 57, 1; 1842):

“You know, I think a lot of the Marist Sisters: they are indeed hidden; no one talks about them. They have the spirit of prayer and there are several of them for whom I have a profound reverence, on account of the workings of the Holy Spirit in them”.

Following my two-step presentation I would highlight with Myra Niland:¹²

“She [Chavoin] begins her Rule of Life with an invocation to the Holy Trinity, thus, reinforcing her desire to belong completely to God. Contemporary Mariology enables us to interpret Jeanne-Marie’s desire in Marian terms. In Mary we see a true daughter of the Father, totally dedicated to the Son, open to, and graced by, the Holy Spirit. In our exploration of the life of Jeanne-Marie so far, we have traced, albeit ever so indirectly, the Trinitarian lines of her discipleship. In her present role as trustee of Mary’s family, she is seeking direction from her ‘good Mother’ who is also the model of true discipleship.”

Another line of argument is ‘to do the Work of Mary’, again something Colin and Chavoin shared and Chavoin was even the first to mention it in an official document.¹³ The ‘Work of Mary’ is the work of God carried out by her congregation. Marists are to be as it were instruments for this work, in other words, instruments of grace, very much a Colnian phrase. This phrase we find back in the modern Sisters constitutions of 1984, number 6:¹⁴

“It is God who chooses the ‘instruments’ who will cooperate with him; it is God, too, who forms each of them for particular work. Mary was chosen as the vessel or instrument to give flesh to the Word. Paul, too, was chosen to be an instrument, ‘carry my name before the Gentiles.’ [Acts 9.23] The founders understood that Marists were chosen as instruments to manifest the all-embracing love and mercy of God in such a way that it would be understood by the many for whom God’s call is distant or even meaningless and irrelevant.”

The modern constitutions¹⁵ link in number 49 the Trinity with community life.¹⁶ However, otherwise they are christocentric and also about the Marian Church.

¹² Myra Niland SM, *Hidden Fruitfulness. The Life and Spirituality of Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, Foundress of the Congregation of Marist Sisters (1786-1858)*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2001; quote: page 119. Rule of Life: RMJ, doc. 97 (31 August 1833). To my knowledge Niland’s study is the most recent and complete one.

¹³ Niland, *Hidden Fruitfulness*, page 102-115; Jean Coste SM, *Société de Marie, œuvre de Marie - Society of Mary, Work of Mary*, in FN 2, 2 (1993) 224-261.

¹⁴ As cited in Niland, *Hidden Fruitfulness*, page 138.

¹⁵ *Constitutions Congregation of Mary (Marist Sisters)*, Rome, 1986.

¹⁶ Marist Sisters CS 49: “We discover in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the secret of living in a unity that goes beyond differences of age, personality, culture, nationality. ...” This is a link meditated by many. See John J. Markey OP, *Towards a Trinitarian Model of Religious life*, in *Review for Religious* 49, 1 (1990) 22-35.

The **Marist Brothers**, in my eyes, are a christocentric congregation from their founder to their modern constitutions. I already mentioned the christocentrism of Colin when it comes to education, schools, and working with youth. Marcellin Champagnat (1789-1840) was rooted in the French Spirituality of his day which was very much christocentric. He started an institute for teachers and catechists, especially for young people.

Their modern constitutions are quite faithful to Champagnat.¹⁷ For example, they convey his motto in number 3:

“The love which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts gives as a share in the charism of Marcellin Champagnat and directs all our energies to this one aim: TO FOLLOW CHRIST AS MARY DID, in His life of love for the Father and for people. We live out this ideal in community.”

The constitutions are christocentric, imbedded in a Trinitarian perspective, see number 7:

“Spirituality. ... Jesus was the whole focus of Mary’s life; He is to be the focus of ours. In whatever we do, we act as she did, with her discretion, her sensitivity, and her respect for each person.”

Simple statistics show 19 references to ‘God’, 77 to ‘Jesus Christ’, and 40 to ‘Spirit’.

The **Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary** have a long and complicated genesis. At the beginning, the influence of the Marist Fathers was strong. This is echoed in letters of the early pioneer sisters:¹⁸

“I understood what happiness it is to work for the salvation of these people, for the glory of God and our Mother, and to work for this far from the world and its applause, ignored, known only to God. This happiness is worth all that I have suffered and all that I still hope to suffer.” Sr M de la Croix (La Conception) – Fr Yardin (Lyons), 20 February 1859 OPS I 120

The modern constitutions give a clear focus in the formula ‘Missionary, Marist, Religious’ (numbers 5 and 294). The Marist element is rooted in history and in the christocentric focus of a missionary group. The constitutions say in number 2:

“Called to the honour of working to extend the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and to make Mary known to the ends of the earth”, our pioneer sisters, rejoicing in the privilege that was theirs, set out in the 19th century to be auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries in Oceania. In gratitude for the gift of our vocation, we, too, wish to respond with joy to the call of Christ to participate today in the universal mission He has confided to His church.”

And again in number 189:

“As Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary we are called to follow Christ, giving ourselves unreservedly to Him in order to participate in His mission. ...”

There is an important reference to the link Mary – Holy Spirit – Trinity in number 50:

“Through meditating on Scripture and in prayer, we come to know Mary more intimately. In this personal encounter we try to absorb the spirit of her, who, completely given to God, let herself be fashioned by the Holy Spirit.”

To discuss the **Third Order of Mary or Marist laity** is too complex even for an initial approach. For one, Marist lay groups are usually linked with one of the religious branches and so their spirituality would follow the respective branch. And lay spirituality has its own

¹⁷ *Constitutions and Statutes of the Marist Brothers of the Schools or Little Brothers of Mary*, Rome, 8th December 1986, Zaragoza, Editorial Luis Vives, 1987.

¹⁸ *Constitutions Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary*, 1984, Rome, 1985. From the historical quotes on the opposite page this is quote number 4.

profile, distinct from vowed religious life, and covers such a variety of spiritual life that I prefer to avoid further thoughts.

Allow me to conclude this section with the famous remark of many a presenter: This I cannot explore further now. It is a task for future research....

5 Conclusion

The Bi-centenaries we celebrate with this study day honours our common origins and respects our differences in as much as history is concerned. My dream back in 2009 was to organize a study day on the different Marist spiritualities. Today I present the Trinitarian perspective as a model to explore what we share and where we are different.

Any spirituality needs a solid underlying theological foundation. I tried to show that the Trinity permeates the Marist spirit. This angle deepens our own charism.

There is fruitful complementarity in the light of the wider Marist family. Together the Marist family as a whole deepens our belief in and meditation of the Trinity.

The differences are illustrated also by the respective profession formula. While the Fathers (no 70), Sisters (no 73), and SMSM (no 61¹⁹) open with the invocation of the Trinity, the FMS CS (no 114) do not.

Colin's Marian spirituality is mystical but also passive. It took him a long time to discern the will of God and often he looks like a hesitant leader. Mary pondered the word of God and gave it time to mature. Marcellin Champagnat was very different as leader. Nourished by a christocentric spirituality, he took initiatives and sent out his brothers. Christ called, taught, and sent. The difference in style of leadership maybe but one resulting difference rooted in a different emphasis in the Trinitarian belief.

I highlight again the important link Mary – the Holy Spirit. The Marist charism recalls a New Testament essential and does so in a Church which often has the Holy Spirit on the margins unlike for example Orthodox Churches. This is not to say Marists are in the explicit sense charismatics. Some are with the addition of their personal charism. Still, the Holy Spirit deserves much more attention, confidence, and prayer than usually given. The Holy Spirit is the 'sleeping giant' in our Marian spirituality.

A second element on the wider theological level is the category of reception. This important category is slowly making its way to the forefront and we can enlist Colin's spiritual teaching along this category.

I am well aware that I move on the field of exploration, thesis and much more needs to be double-checked with the sources. Still, I offer this perspective as invitation to move from history to spiritual life. Our founders, I am sure, would agree to that.

And finally, this is what I would reply to the major superior who asked me about a short formula on the charism of the Marist Fathers from the perspective of the Trinity: We are gathered like the first disciples with Mary in our midst for fellowship and prayer (cf Acts 1:14). We pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, the spirit of Christ after Ascension. The Spirit descended upon Mary. She was full of the Spirit. Like Mary, so we today search an attitude of availability, not of self-interest, but open to the experience of grace. God's grace can do great things through people like Mary. Work begun in this spirit will be fruitful and will be blessed. Thank you.

¹⁹ The same for their off-shoot, the SOLN in their profession formula; *Constitutions and Directory. Sisters of Our Lady of Nazareth*, Suva, Oceania Printers Ltd, s.d. [2000].