

Transformation of Fr. Colin by Tasting God in Cerdon *Friedrich Arnold sm*

In her famous book *The Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila uses the image of a silk-worm, who makes a little cocoon and buries himself in it and so he gets transformed into a wonderful butterfly. For Teresa this image shows how God can transform our human existence. The soul does no longer find admiration in the great things the saints experienced, because she has experienced how much God helps and transforms the soul.¹

Something like Teresa describes in the fifth mansion of the *Interior Castle* has happened to Colin in Cerdon. He did not lose his admiration for the saints, but without doubt he has experienced the power of the grace of God.

After his ordination in 1816, Colin became assistant parish priest to his brother Pierre in the mountain village of Cerdon. Here Colin changed from a quiet, shy young man, still very dependent on his confessor to a man, who knows what he wants and accepts to be a founder. He began to write the Constitutions without ever having seen the text of another religious order. He felt an irresistible urge to do so. He was deeply convinced that what he wrote did not come from him, but was given to him from above. He regarded himself as a mere instrument, as a pen.² Often he spent the greatest part of the night in his little room, praying and writing. Colin also took initiatives. In 1833, he wrote a letter to the Pope, he asked for a meeting with the nuncio in Paris and with the Bishop of Belley. An interior and almost irresistible impulse inside himself moved him. He had tasted God. He experienced a long period of sensible consolation. The conviction grew, that the plan for a ‘Society of Mary’ was God’s will and would succeed. Colin did not hesitate to refer to the supernatural character of the intuitions given to him. He spoke of the years in Cerdon as years of “overflowing joy and consolation”,³ as years of extreme sweetness”.⁴

Tasting God

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* 5,2,1.

² Cf. OM, doc. 819, §164. See Jean Coste, *Lectures on the Society of Mary-history*, Rome, 1965, 44-46.

³ OM, doc. 827, § 6.

⁴ OM, doc. 447.

The years in Cerdon were for Colin years of tasting God. The experience of La Coria could be mentioned, when he was overwhelmed by a deep depression on his way to the bishop of Belley and where he suddenly was lifted up by God and Mary.⁵ One could also think of the insights he received in the nights of prayer, working on the Rule. I do not want to fix the transformation on one particular experience alone. I simply want to acknowledge the change in Colin. An anxious young priest has grown into a self-conscious founder, willing to do great things for God. Some years later he prayed: “Lord, do great things through me. Some may say, but that is pride, but I on the contrary say it is humility. For am nothing and God has made the world from nothing. I acknowledge my nothingness and the almighty power of God“.⁶

Greater clarity about the Marist mission

Through these inner experiences he got a greater clarity about the specific Marist mission, especially about the importance of the attitude of being hidden and unknown in the world and about the importance of mercy.

Hidden and unknown

Already in the first draft of his rule we find the formula ‘hidden and unknown’,⁷ which according to him was given by God: “When God speaks to a soul, he says many things with a few words, i.e. hidden and unknown“.⁸ In these few words Colin saw expressed the Marist style of acting.

After the death of his parents, when still a child Colin was first attracted to withdraw in the forest, in order to be alone with God. This was an immature way of living the ‘hidden and unknown’. This has changed in Cerdon. Here he discovered the fruitfulness of the hidden approach. The more we live this attitude, the more our works will be fruitful. Looking at his time Colin said: ‘Hidden and unknown is the only way to do good, because our time rejects everything which does not appreciate human freedom sufficiently. To have respect for the freedom of others is a tremendous help in the apostolate’.⁹

⁵ OM, doc. 425, § 10, and Donal Kerr, *Jean Claude Colin- a founder in an era of revolution and restauration*, Dublin, 2000, p. 186.

⁶ FS, doc. 132, § 28.

⁷ Cf. OM, doc. 819, § 122.

⁸ OM, doc. 839, § 47.

⁹ See FS, doc. 18, § 2.

I do not want to repeat everything which could be said on this theme.¹⁰ Perhaps only one thing, ‘hidden and unknown’ is not a sophisticated apostolic method. It is God’s way of being present in the world. God has a great respect for human freedom. This respect is so big that he even allows people to do wrong. But God remains close to them. If we act as it were hidden and unknown we make this respect for human freedom our own and try to win people from within.

Merciful to people

Through his inner experiences in Cerdon Colin learned to be merciful to people. His time was marked by a rather juridical and rigorist practice in confession. Very early Colin grew beyond this legalistic approach: “In the confessional we need to put aside our human nature. We have to put on Jesus Christ. We must be close to God with one ear to our penitent and with the other to Jesus Christ. Let us put on Christ’s feeling for sinners, for the Samaritan women, for Mary Magdalene. Christ wants to speak through our lips”.¹¹

Colin had a wonderful understanding for the abyss of the human heart, the depth of the soul, but even more for the power of the grace of God: “When the grace of God has started to work in a human heart, it does it powerfully.”¹² And on another occasion he said: “If I cannot save someone with the law, I shall try to save him without it.”¹³ And finally he presents the motto: “In the Society we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God, on account of the great weakness of poor human nature without however falling into a laxist theology.”¹⁴

Tasting God - an important element of religious life

Colin has tasted God during his years in Cerdon. And for him, it was most important, that his confreres would also learn to taste God. If he was to be in charge of the novices, he said, he would try to bring them to a spirit of prayer: “Once a novice tasted God, he will turn to him again and again. It is a treasure in his soul, something to which he is

¹⁰ Jean Coste, *A Marian vision of the church: Jean Claude Colin*, Rome, 1998, p. 450-476; Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary*, Rome, 1988, p. 73-98.

¹¹ FS, doc. 102, § 27.

¹² FS, doc. 14, § 7.

¹³ FS, doc. 163, § 2.

¹⁴ FS, doc. 37, § 2.

constantly brought back as to his own center”.¹⁵ And when he had to make a visitation, he first of all asked the confrere if he has an inner desire to pray. If this was the case, Colin would not have any fear, even if some things in the life of this confrere were not well. This person will return to God. And God will guide him.¹⁶

Colin - an ardent reader of spiritual books

Colin was an ardent reader of spiritual and mystical books. From his remarks we learn that he liked to read the French spiritual authors Frances of Sales, Lallement and Surin, but also the classics of Christian mysticism, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.¹⁷ This is remarkable, because his time was marked by a skeptical approach towards mystical writings. In the relationship with God there was more a focus on ascetical achievement than in the power of God’s grace. Reading these mystical books Colin got a deeper insight in his own experiences: “I am very thankful to the good Lord, that he has given me a taste and appreciation of these spiritual books”.¹⁸ And he recommended several of these writings to his confreres.

Selective reading

When Colin read a book, he did it in a selective way. Once he spoke about dryness in prayer. Sometimes we may feel dry like a bone, but if we have to preach, we can do it fruitfully.¹⁹ On another occasion he spoke about the fact that everybody has to go through a dark night, where there is no consolation, but where God is at work in us.²⁰ Colin refers here without doubt to the dark night of John of the Cross, but also to the reception of Surin,²¹ for whom the phases of the dark night happen in the midst of our apostolic work. Or he uses the image of a

¹⁵ FS, doc. 63, § 2.

¹⁶ Cf. FS, doc. 132, § 6+7.

¹⁷ Cf. FS, doc. 35, § 5+6; Justin Taylor, *A Neglected Source of Colinian Spirituality: The Mystical Tradition in the Society of Jesus in France in the 17th Century*, in FN 5, 4 (2001) 405 - 442.

¹⁸ FS, doc. 35, § 5.

¹⁹ FS, doc. 9, § 3.

²⁰ FS, doc. 26, § 1.

²¹ Surin, *Catechism*, I,3,3-6.

bird which cannot fly as long as it is tied to the ground on a little cord,²² an image we find also in the writings of John of the Cross.²³

Alois Greiler has compiled various texts, where Colin refers indirectly to Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.²⁴ Without giving his source, Colin quoted from memory from what he had read to illustrate a point he wanted to make in a spiritual conference. Colin did not repeat mystical texts like a parrot. He did not simply present the fruits of his readings. He selected what fitted to his experiences and testified to them. This is especially true for the way how he used the writings of Mary of Agreda. Doubtless he was familiar with her voluminous book, *The mystical City of God*. But most of the things, which Mary of Agreda described, Colin did deliberately not mention, i.e. how Mary advises the apostle Peter where to send the other apostles for mission or how Mary visited the apostle James in Spain, because he had little success in his mission, consoled him and asked him to return to Jerusalem as soon as possible because he has the privilege to become the first martyr among the apostles.

Much of the thinking of Mary of Agreda was not used by Colin. But the few ideas he took up were very important for him. Mary has a special place in the early church according to Colin. When he speaks about Mary in the midst of the apostles he does not refer to the only text in the Acts of the Apostles, which speaks about Mary,²⁵ when Mary prays with the apostles for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Nor does he refer to the event of Pentecost, but to Mary's presence among the apostles as Mary of Agreda describes it. Mary is hidden and unknown, but most effective present. She supports the apostles by her prayers.

For Mary of Agreda, Mary is the 'mystical city of God', the 'New Jerusalem', which comes down from heaven. The doors of the New Jerusalem are according to the book of Revelation 23 open day and night, there is no night even, because God is its sun. Colin has taken up this thought, when he said, that the whole world - believers and unbelievers - should have the chance to become Marists, only heretics, those who do not want to belong to us, are excluded.²⁶ Colin had the

²² FS, doc. 9, § 3.

²³ Johannes vom Kreuz, *Aufstieg auf den Berg Karmel*, 1,11,4, edited by U. Dobhan/E. Peeters, Freiburg, 1998.

²⁴ Alois Greiler, 'The Spanish Mystics as Source of Colin's Thinking', research paper, Passau, 2012, in author's possession.

²⁵ Acts 1:14.

²⁶ FS, doc. 120, § 1.

dream that the Marist spirit should be open to everybody. And there the Third Order was to play a special role. Because of differences between his dream and the concrete realization of this vision by Fr. Eymard conflicts arose between them, conflicts which Colin tried to solve in his last conference before his resignation.²⁷ I think we can agree with Snijders that from a distance of 150 years we can better understand, what Colin had in mind, may be even better than Colin himself understood.²⁸ With Vatican II we came to a better appreciation of the laity in the Church. As Marists we are called to help the laity to take up their place in the Church which was often hindered by a clerical church.

Conclusion

In Cerdon we see a transformed Colin, transformed by the liberating encounter with God. So he was able to understand deeper the Marist mission - to act hidden and unknown and to be full of mercy with people. Through the reading of mystical authors he became able to understand better his own experiences and insights. And so he discovered his own way of thinking and acting.

²⁷ Cf. FS, doc. 189, § 2.

²⁸ Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary*, Rome, 1988, p. 104-108.