

Peter and Mary. A Chapter of Marist Spirituality

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The 9th of March 1822 is the date mentioned in what we call our ‘*Decretum Laudationis*’ from Pope Pius VII. I take this commemoration as a point of departure for a meditation on our Marist spirituality under the heading ‘*Peter and Mary*’.¹

9 March 1822

You find the main outlines of the history of the letter of Pius VII of 9 March 1822 in the concise *Lectures on Society of Mary History* (Rome, 1965) of Jean Coste and also in Chapter eleven of Donal Kerr’s biography of Father Colin. I sketch briefly the historical events to refresh our memories. After leaving the seminary in 1816, the Marist aspirants had been separated in different parishes in the vast archdiocese of Lyon. Jean Claude Colin was sent as a curate to his brother Pierre to Cerdon. The unflinching opposition of the Vicars General blocked the establishment of the Society at that time and the only possibility seemed to be the recourse to Rome. In 1819 two letters to Pius VII and to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars went unanswered. In January 1822 Jean Claude Colin and his brother drew up another letter dated 25th of January. It carried the signatures of Jean Claude Courveille, Pierre Colin and Jean Claude Colin. This letter received attention in Rome and on March 5th the Pope authorized a cautious but encouraging reply which was drawn up on March 9th.

The letter

While neither a Brief or a Decree of Praise in the technical sense, this Latin letter has always been regarded in the Society as the equivalent of such a decree, the first papal act towards the Society.² It marked the real beginning of the long process leading to the approbation of the priests’ branch. Actually the letter was not only important for the Marist fathers. It was instrumental in encouraging Jeanne Marie Chavoin and Marie Jotillon later that year to lay the foundations for the Marist Sisters. The arrival of the letter

¹ Note by the editor: The text presents a conference held for Italian confreres in Rome in 2004.

² *Origines Maristes*, vol. 1, doc. 74.

coincidentally marked also a positive turn in the relation of Champagnat and his growing congregation of Brothers with the diocesan authorities.

The persons

Let us also have a quick look at the persons who play a role in the events. The brothers Colin had by now been five and a half years in Cerdon. They were still young men. Pierre Colin was 35, and Jean Claude 31. Jean Claude had become increasingly aware of his vocation to promote the Marist project. He was the one who had drafted the January letter to Pius VII, although his signature came after the signature of Courveille and his brother Pierre. His brother Pierre, ordained in 1810 was parish priest of Cerdon with his newly ordained brother Jean-Claude as curate since July 1816. Jean Claude Courveille, who in 1816 at the ceremony of Fourvière was considered the leader of the enterprise, had in 1819 been appointed as supply parish priest of Epercieux, close to Feurs (Loire), some 130 kilometers from Cerdon on the other side of Lyon. He had already tried to promote the Marist project and was in contact with Colin and Champagnat. He was still stationed in Epercieux, and 34 years old, when the letter, addressed to him, as the first signatory, arrived in Cerdon. Courveille was to stay in Epercieux until May 1824, when, under the newly arrived apostolic administrator of Lyon, Mgr. De Pins, he was allowed to join Father Champagnat in the Hermitage. Pius VII was almost 80 years old, in the 22nd year of his pontificate and a year and a half before his death, when he authorized the reply to the letter of the first Marists.

The text

The text of the letter is as follows: *‘Salvation and Our Apostolic Blessing to you, our Dear Son. From what you together with your two companions, have explained to Us, we were able to learn that the goal which the Institution mentioned in your letter pursues, certainly is excellent. Therefore we cannot but strongly recommend to the Lord the plan you have in mind. However we can pass no judgment on your Institute and even less confirm it by our Authority before authentic testimonials will show that this Society is accepted by the Local Ordinaries, as you assert, and especially by the Ordinary of your Diocese. We can neither proceed before you will have submitted to Us for examination the Rules of this Society. In order to facilitate the realization of all this it might perhaps be helpful to you, or to somebody else of your companions, to contact Our Nuncio in Paris so that he [the*

Nuncio] afterwards can report to Us about the negotiations. This is what we want to write in answer to you letter of 25 January, and we bestow with fatherly love our Apostolic Blessing upon you. Given in Rome at Saint Mary Major on the 9th of March of the Year 1822, the XXIInd Year of our Pontificate. Raphael Mazio, S(anctissimi D(omin)i ab epistolis latinis.'

The arrival of the letter

The letter, Kerr says, was addressed to Courveille but since the address on it was Cerdon, the letter was delivered at the presbytery there. One can only guess the excitement of the Colins and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn when the papal letter arrived. Repressing their eagerness, however, they first went to the church to pray. Only then did they open it. The letter did not contain the full papal approval they hoped for. It was nonetheless a public and positive acknowledgment by Rome of the existence of the group calling itself the Society of Mary. It gave them all new heart. It was to lead to new developments.³

Marists and the Pope: from Vatican I to Vatican II

Colin was an enthusiastic adherent of the pope and of the theology that defended the role of the pope. This was part of his post- and anti-revolutionary heritage. Donal Kerr in his biography gives attention to the visits of Pius VII to Lyon on his journey to and back from Paris, first on the 19th of November 1804 and then on the 17th of April 1805. The papal visit, Kerr says, marked an important stage in the manner in which the Lyon clergy saw the role of the pope in the Church. The Church of France, Gallican in outlook, had for long played down this role of the pope. After the revolution and the Napoleonic wars the tide was turning. A few years after the visits of Pius VII, even the vicar general Courbon, a close friend of Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon's uncle, warned the Cardinal against pressure being brought to bear on Pius VII.⁴ Kerr adds: '*Colin would have shared in that enthusiasm for Pius VII.*'

³ D. Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist*, Dublin, Columba Press, 2000, p. 181

⁴ 'The French clergy, especially those of Lyon, love the pope so tenderly and have such faith in him, that it would feel profoundly afflicted and indignant that one could suggest a plan to extort by threats from his Holiness what his conscience rejects'. Quoted by Kerr, *Colin*, p. 73.

Colin: Roman

Effectively, it is difficult to discover in Colin's writings or sayings anything which aims at criticizing the pope. Quite the reverse, it is easy to list a number of statements which witness to Colin's profound attachment to the Holy See as the entry '*Holy See*' in the register of '*A Founder Speaks*' proves. Fidelity to the Holy See is a source of salvation and sanctification. The fidelity to the Holy See is the glory of religious societies. It is one of the ends of the S.M. Marists should think and judge only as Rome does. Marists should group themselves round and bind themselves to the Holy See. They should submit to decisions of the Holy See and not try to explain everything. Marists should teach ultramontaniam. Colin defends the authority of the Pope with all his might. Finally, Colin is '*Roman*', that is, he follows moral principles of Rome like the primacy of salvation of souls over the law. All this, as we know, leads to the famous no 9 of the constitutions of 1872, which formulates the third end of the Society and is a very strong expression of attachment to the Holy See and of utmost submission to the Pope. This no 9 is followed by no 10, which deals with the question of where to have the general house, in the perspective of the 3rd aim of the Society.

Marists and the Pope today

Although they are not numerous, there are confreres who wonder whether our Society has abandoned the clear orientation it has received from Father Colin. They consider no.16 of our new constitutions as a watering down of no. 9 of the old constitutions. They feel that the problems of our Society over the past decades have, to a large extent, been caused by a slow but gradual moving away from the ultramontanist position of Colin, as it is reflected in our old constitutions. For them the ultimate and overpowering touchstone of ecclesial spirit is the strictest obedience to the Holy See. Other confreres place themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum. They find it difficult to see a link between the Holy See, as it often manifests itself in its history, its claims, its style and its structures, and the Gospel of Jesus. The vast majority of Marists find themselves somewhere in between. They are truly attached to the Holy See, but many among them would welcome a reform of the Petrine ministry. They feel less at ease with the extremely forceful statements of no. 9 of the old constitutions. Are they bad Marists? To answer this question we need first to have a look at the difference between the Marists living in the

world of Vatican I and the Marists of today living in the period after Vatican II. Moreover we need to ask to what extent ultramontanist is an essential part of the spirituality of Colin.

Vatican I and Colin's Constitutions – Vatican II and our new Constitutions

Of course, we all know that there has been a considerable shift within the teaching of the Church itself on the Petrine ministry. This shift is also reflected in our constitutions. No 9 of the constitutions of Colin, which were approved three years after the bishops of the first Vatican Council (1869/70) went home, reflect not only the doctrine of the Church, but very much also the ultramontanist current that led to this council. No 16 of our new constitutions is unthinkable without the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The texts of the First Vatican Council were formulated in such a way that they are open for a less monarchist interpretation than the ultramontanists had in mind. At Vatican II the primacy of the pope was balanced with the collegiality of all the bishops, who receive their authority directly from Christ. The doctrine on primacy and infallibility of the pope was also balanced with the doctrine of the dignity of the moral conscience and the excellence of human freedom (*Gaudium et Spes*, nos 16 and 17). The famous statement of Newman made it to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 'Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.'⁵ Like every ministry, also the primacy of the Pope, is considered as a service to the people of God, not outside or above the people of God, but within the people of God. The importance of papacy has not diminished, still the perspective has changed. No 16 of the new constitutions reflects this change of perspective.

Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* and the Marian dimension of the Church

I remember that Father Coste once said: 'If you want to know how Father Colin looks at the Church, listen to what he says about Mary.' This applies also to the Second Vatican Council: 'If you want to know how the fathers of the Council look at the Church, listen to what they say about Mary.' The last chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, on Mary, offers a very important key to the reading of the whole constitution of the Church. It says that Mary is 'the type of the Church in the order of faith,

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no 1778.

charity and perfect union with Christ⁶. If we look at Mary we know what the Church is all about. Mary is the embodiment of what unites all the faithful: faith, charity and union with Christ. Teaching authority is at the service of the prophetic call of the whole people of God and not the other way around. Ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood of the people of God and not the other way around. Government is to empower the people of God and not the other way around.

Notre Dame de France and Our Lady of the Rabula Codex

The mere fact that the Council on the 29th of October 1963 placed the document on Mary within the document on the Church is significant.⁷ This was not just a matter of redaction, but an indication of how the bishops saw Mary and also how they saw the Church. A majority, led by cardinal König of Vienna saw Mary as the embodiment of the whole people of God and stressed the ecclesiology of communion. A minority, led by Cardinal Santos of Manila, focused on the exceptional privileges of Mary by which she is elevated above the people of God and stressed a theology of hierarchy. The maximalists' image of Mary reminds me of the enormous statue of Notre Dame de France, 16 meters high, that in 1860 was placed on top of the rocher Corneille far above the market place, the streets and the houses of Le Puy where people live their daily life. In the Rabula Codex of the 5th century we see a very different image of Mary. She is wrapped in her pilgrims' garb, among the apostles, in the midst of God's pilgrim people. It was this image of Mary that finally prevailed at the Second Vatican Council. Marists saw chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* as a confirmation of their call. The General Chapter of 1969-1970 felt that the Council had proclaimed in doctrinal and theological language what Colin had intuitively foreshadowed, namely that the Church by looking at Mary, comes to a deeper understanding of its own nature and mission.⁸

How Marists express their concern for the Church

As a matter of fact, when I look at the way Father Coste in his book *A Marian Vision of the Church* summarized the core of the vision of

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, no 63.

⁷ J. Hulshof, *Mary, Model of the Church. A Marian and Ecclesial Spirituality - Marie modele de l'église. Une spiritualité mariale et ecclésiale*, in FN 3, 4 (1996) 586 - 620.

⁸ *Marists and the World of Today*, no 8.

Colin, I cannot but note how close Colin's vision comes to the insights of Vatican II. Colin would think of Church and Mary together, giving to the Church the face of the mother of mercy and to Mary the dimensions of a work of salvation willed by God for all peoples and for all times.⁹ So when the question is raised how Marists express their concern for the Church, the ecclesial spirituality of Marists is *Marian* and not *Petrine*.

The centre of Marist spirituality

It is true that the fidelity to the pope is very important for Father Colin. Nevertheless it is not the centre. Coste quotes a saying of Colin: 'I bind myself to the Holy See, he said, I bind myself to the Pope. I say to myself, I shall not be a schismatic if I am one with the Holy See, with the Pope'.¹⁰ Coste notes that while this point was very important for Colin, the topic of the Holy See is never explicitly and organically associated with the broad perspectives concerning Mary and the Society bearing her name. Colin never linked his views on the Holy See to an inspiration, to an order received from above. Rather he would say: 'I have made attachment to the Holy See, to the Pope, one of the ends of the Society.' Colin's explicit reference to his own initiative is interesting, says Coste, because for the basic elements of our spirituality, Colin always underlines that they did not come from himself. In the *Summarium* of 1833 Colin only speaks of two ends of the Society, one's own perfection and the salvation of the neighbor, not of the attachment to the Holy See.¹¹

The pope Marist?

In this respect it is significant that Colin, in his famous reply to Cardinal Castracane, does not hesitate to say that even the pope would be Marist. He would be the head of the Marists. In what ever way we interpret this reply, it shows that in Colin's prophetic vision the Petrine dimension enters into the Marian/ecclesial perspective and not the other way around. Once again, Colin wants Marists to be closely united with the Holy See, but this fidelity is not the *typical Marist way* to express concern for the Church. Marists will express their concern in a Marian rather than in a Petrine perspective. The central themes are recommencement of the Church in a Marian way, final gathering of the

⁹ J. Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church. Jean-Claude Colin*, Rome, 1998, p. 92.

¹⁰ *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 96, § 13.

¹¹ Coste, *Marian Vision*, p. 28.

Church under Mary's guidance, collaboration with the local Church in a Marian spirit. Coste notes that these Marian themes *co-exist*, in the thinking of the founder, with the theme of attachment to the apostolic see, but that it is important to distinguish them. Otherwise it will be difficult to understand the coherence and originality of the Marian vision which Colin had of his congregation and the Church.¹²

The Marian and the Petrine dimension

Queen of the Apostles

In his Encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* of 1988 John Paul II said that the 'Marian profile of the Church is more fundamental and characteristic than its apostolic and Petrine profile'.¹³ Through its Marian dimension the Church manifests the love of the bride for the bridegroom. The apostolic and Petrine dimension refers to the service of teaching, of administering the sacraments and of governance. All such ministry is at the service of the Marian dimension of the Church: faith and love. As a modern theologian has put it so well, said the Pope, 'Mary is Queen of the Apostles without pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers'.¹⁴ It is obvious that this statement is part of the argument against the ordination of women. Still, it is remarkable that the Petrine ministry in this statement is so clearly subordinated to the Marian dimension of the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* re-affirms these teachings of John Paul II, when it states that the Mary precedes Peter, because Mary precedes all of us in the sanctity which is the mystery of the Church, Bride without spot or wrinkle.¹⁵ I find it interesting that John Paul II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* say in terms of doctrine what Colin has said in terms of religious intuition: 'Mary did more than the apostles for the new-born Church; she is Queen of the Apostles, but she did it without any stir, she did it above all with her prayers.'¹⁶

¹² Coste, *Marian Vision*, p. 26-30

¹³ J. Hulshof, *Marists - Towards a Marian Church. Four Talks to the Assembly of the English Province*, England, 1995; *Les Maristes pour une Église Mariale* (Document S.M., 45), Paris, CDM, 1996; *I Maristi per una chiesa mariana*, in *Maria*, 1996.

¹⁴ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no 27 and footnote 55. The Pope refers to the Swiss theologian H. Urs von Balthasar.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no 773.

¹⁶ *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 190, § 2.

Ministries in a Marian Church

Much of this sounds a bit theoretical and theological. The reason why I dwell on it has to do with the challenges that our communities and our Society are faced with. The Marists I meet have in general a very loyal attitude to the Pope. Some of them believe that we need to defend the authority of the Pope with all strength. I would like to say to them that in doing so, they should not forget that the authority of the Pope is no end in itself. It is at the service of the Marian dimension of the Church, at the service of the well being of the people of God. Other Marists are disappointed by policies of popes and bishops and they like to stress that it is the call of Marists to represent the Marian and not the Petrine dimension of the Church. I would like to say to them that the Marian and the Petrine dimension of the Church should not be played off against one another. We should not turn away from the ministerial dimension of the Church, in teaching, priesthood and government. Every ministry is basically at the service of the Marian Church, the Bride of Christ, which goes the pilgrims' way of faith, hope and love. The most basic drive of the Petrine ministry in the Church is love. Jesus establishes Peter as the one to feed his lambs and to take care of his sheep. But only after he persuaded himself that Peter loved him 'more than these' (John 21: 15-17). The text shows that Petrine ministry ultimately stems from Marian ground and is the service of the Marian dimension of the Church. Marists, in their lives as priests and religious, are called to exercise their teaching ministry, their priestly ministry and their pastoral ministry in a Marian way. They will try to develop Marian attitudes which are just the basic evangelical attitudes, common to the whole people of God. Saint Paul summarizes them marvelously in his letter to the Ephesians: 'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'¹⁷

Make a difference

To have Mary as model of our faith and as model of our Church is full of implications for the way we work and for the priorities we establish in our lives and in our ministries. Many Marists show that the spirit of Mary inspires them in their daily work. They show that to be a Marist can make a difference. Let me conclude with an observation

¹⁷ Ephesians, 4:1f.

reported by Craig Larkin in his beautiful book *A Certain Way*. The observation goes back a number of years, but is still relevant: ‘In 1986 the CBS – TV team produced a series of four programs on the Church in Latin America. The series covered the work of the Church in Lima (Peru), Sao Paulo (Brazil) and in Managua (Nicaragua). These places were chosen because they showed the many challenges facing the Church in Latin America. In Peru and Brazil, the CBS followed the work of Marists working in both countries. Callao in Peru has a population of close to one million Catholics. There are few jobs available. There is massive poverty, and not much hope for economic change. The Marist parish of Saint Rose runs a food bank which provides breakfast for about 500 school children each morning. In Brazil, Marists serve in Sao Paulo, which is the largest archdiocese in the world. They work among those whose chances for economic improvement are minimal. At the end of the filming, CBS producer John Santos said: ‘What impressed me tremendously in the filming of the programs is the quiet dedication of the Marists we met along the way. On the one hand we met the great thinkers and the Church hierarchy, but on the other hand we met the profound ministry of the Marists who put all of the talk into action.’¹⁸

¹⁸ C. Larkin, *A Certain Way*, Rome 1995, p. 72.