

# The Spirit of the Society of Mary

I suppose most Marists, if asked where to find the essential expression of Marist spirituality, would refer to the article on The Spirit of the Society, nn. 49 and 50 of the Constitutions of 1872, which the General Chapter of 1985 inserted in the text of the new Constitutions (n. 228). They would very likely add n. 1 of the 1872 Constitutions, which the same Chapter inserted into its own n. 7. Marists surely do not err in finding in these texts a special legacy from their Founder, although we should bear in mind Jean Coste's caution that the Founder's Rule 'cannot be reduced... to a certain "spirit," whose description, however precious it may be, came only later, once everything had already been said through a multitude of details' (*Studies on the Early Ideas of Jean-Claude Colin – I.* p. 222).

## 1. Living Mary's Life, Breathing Mary's Spirit

The first number of the 1872 Constitutions – which begins 'Haec minima Congregatio, This least of congregations' – introduces article 1 on 'The Name and Purpose of the Society'. It remained essentially unchanged since its first appearance in the *Epitome of the Rules of the Society of Mary* composed in or shortly after 1836. In its general structure and much of its contents, it is clearly modelled on the opening numbers of the Jesuit Constitutions, with which Colin had recently become acquainted. Except for one sentence. That is the sentence printed as sub-paragraph 1): '(This least of congregations) is distinguished by this sweet name Society of Mary: so that all who are admitted into it, mindful of the family to which they belong, may understand that they are to emulate the virtues of this holy Mother, and indeed even to live her life, above all in humility, obedience, self-denial, mutual charity, and love of God...' (Note. This is the translation of the Latin given in the edition of the 1872 Constitutions published by order of the General Chapter of 1987. This is to be preferred to the version quoted in the 1987 Constitutions: 'understand that they are to emulate the virtues of this loving Mother *as if living her life*'.) There is no parallel to this sentence in the Ignatian text. It shows us where we are to look in order to find the dynamic centre of life and action in reference to which Marists are called to live the whole Gospel: we are to 'live Mary's life'.

Fr. Colin names five virtues that are characteristic of her: humility, obedience, self-renunciation – better than *self-denial*; this virtue was added to the text by Colin as he was preparing the 1872 Constitutions – mutual charity and love of God. He tells us to 'emulate'

these virtues, which, we might say, mirror Mary's soul. But the emphasis is placed on 'living Mary's life': we are called to nothing less than to live the life of the woman of faith and obedience to God's word, the woman of the Magnificat, the woman of whom the Founder said: 'When Jesus Christ was born, he was the object of all her thoughts and affections. After his death, her sole thought was the extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation' (*FS* 60,1).

It should be obvious from this that Fr Colin is not inviting us to find the feminine within us, for example to get in touch with our *anima*: he could not possibly have thought in these terms. He is not even asking us to develop qualities that may be thought of as feminine, to balance against more masculine traits. Is humility especially feminine? Or obedience, or self-renunciation, or love of God and the neighbour? It may be that there is a characteristically feminine way of exercising these virtues; but there is certainly a masculine way of being humble, obedient, forgetful of self and loving. Fr Colin does not ask Marists to feminize themselves – in any sense at all. With the whole of the spiritual tradition to which he belongs, he is probably thinking not so much of Mary's personality or psychology or even of her femininity, but of her part in the divine plan of salvation. She is the creature whom God made necessary to achieve his project, whose 'Yes' set it all in motion. From then on, her place is always at the side of Jesus. She was the support of the Church at its birth, seeking its unity. She could have given orders to the apostles, yet was content to remain 'hidden and unknown' among them. At the end of time she will again support the Church, preparing a people for God. This is the one whose virtues we are to emulate and whose life we are to live – and to do so as men.

At this point let us take up n. 49 on The Spirit of the Society. This number entered the history of the Constitutions quite late, its earliest form being found in the Sisters' Constitutions of 1856. We all remember how it goes: 'Let them always keep in mind that they belong by gracious choice to the family of blessed Mary, Mother of God, from whose name they are called Marists, and whom they have chosen from the beginning as their model and their first and perpetual superior. If therefore they are and wish to be true sons of this dear Mother, let them continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial (or self-renunciation), intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of the neighbour; and so they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things, otherwise they will be unworthy and degenerate sons.'

Certain things are to be found in both n. 1 and n. 49: belonging to the family of Mary and bearing her name; Mary's virtues, though the lists are slightly different – obedience is not

mentioned a second time, and mutual charity and love of God have become the much stronger ‘intimate union with God and the most ardent love of the neighbour’. One sentence has a history that post-dates the General Chapter of 1872. The Roman reviser seems to have found ‘they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary’ too daring; he changed it to the text that Marists of my generation and above learnt (in Latin) in the novitiate: ‘and so let them strive to imitate Mary in thinking, Mary in speaking, Mary in all things.’ This change is not simply cosmetic; it alters Colin’s thought fundamentally and substitutes a spirituality of imitation and of effort; in other words, it reinterprets Colinian spirituality as ascetical: we strive to imitate Mary.

What Colin had in mind was quite different and implies a mystical spirituality: we have Mary’s spirit – we ‘breathe it in and out’, which is the natural translation of the Latin *spiritum haurire atque spirare* – and so we can, we must, we will think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary. This is the text approved by the Chapter of 1872, which we now have once again. It complements n. 1: because we have Mary’s spirit, we live Mary’s life and so we reproduce her inward and outward acts – and of course, her virtues. And we do this, not only in moments of prayer and recollection but also in our apostolate, where we will be ‘instruments of the divine mercies’.

How can we do this? How are we to understand such language? What did Fr Colin have in mind? (Here, incidentally, I have to part company with Jean Coste; see my article in *FN* 5,4, 2001, pp. 427-429.)

## 2. François Guilloché

I think that an answer is suggested by certain writings of another author whom Fr Colin had read, François Guilloché (1615-1684), also a ‘mystical Jesuit’, though not a disciple of Louis Lallemant; he is in fact much closer to Pierre de Bérulle. I will quote two passages from one of his works called *Maximes spirituelles*. Unfortunately we do not know for sure if Jean-Claude Colin ever read this particular book by Guilloché, but in any case there are striking parallels: Colin seems to be thinking along the same lines as Guilloché, whether or not there is a direct literary influence.

The first passage is headed ‘The difference there is between imitating our Lord and clothing ourselves in our Lord’ (tome I, livre III, maxime xii, §1):

‘We must note ... that imitating our Lord is not the same thing as clothing ourselves in our Lord. We imitate our Lord when we do our action, by resemblance to those that he

worked; and when by our own operation we express in ourselves what he has done interiorly or exteriorly: in such a way that our operation is, properly speaking, an expression and an image of his.’ This corresponds to what I have called the ‘ascetical life.’

‘But to clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ is nothing else than an appropriation and an application of his actions; so that, it is not so much I who act, but that I apply to myself the actions of Jesus; and so the only thing that remains for the soul is to offer to the Eternal Father these same adorable actions, to supplement one’s own.’

This passage – in which Guilloché makes use of a well-known Pauline expression (cf. Rom 13:14) – illustrates the difference I referred to a moment ago between a likeness to Jesus (or Mary) acquired by imitation and a likeness whose source is mystical. Jean-Claude Colin does in fact tell us at times to ‘imitate Mary’; but I don’t think such expressions are to be interpreted so strictly as to exclude the mystical interpretation. Very interesting in this context is a quotation in Mayet that brings together both the language of imitation and that of ‘clothing oneself’:

‘Then reverend father spoke of how fortunate we were to bear the name of Mary, and of the zeal with which we should imitate her. “... There is our model. Let us clothe ourselves in her spirit”’ (*FS* 182,60).

That brings us to the second passage from Guilloché, which is headed ‘Every Christian has the obligation of being animated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ in all his actions’, (tome I, livre III, maxime xiii ch. 1, §1):

‘This is the end of Christianity, as that of Jesus, which has been to animate us with his Spirit and to make that alone our life. All that we do of holy acts for the neighbour or for ourselves ... is not ... the last end that Jesus had, but it is to live his divine life; without that, with all the rest, we are inanimate corpses, and with that, without all the rest, we are in some way divinized...

‘If then we are true members of Jesus our head, as St Paul assures us ... we must be everywhere uniquely animated by his spirit. This divine spirit must so live in us in the smallest things, that he animate even our words, our views, our ways of behaving, our attitudes, and that it can be said of us that we behave as Jesus, that we speak as Jesus, that we see and that we act as Jesus; and so that our life is the same as the life of this admirable Saviour.’

### 3. A 'Marian Transposition'

Now listen again to Jean-Claude Colin in n. 49 of the 1872 Constitutions:

'... If therefore they are and wish to be true sons of this dear Mother, let them continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it...; and so they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things...'

The parallels of language and of thought are striking. It really seems that Colin had only to make what I would call a 'Marian transposition' of the language used by Guilloché about Jesus, to arrive at the well-known formulae in his Constitutions: living Mary's life, breathing her spirit, thinking, judging, feeling and acting like her. Such a Marian transposition is, of course, already implicit in the very name Society of Mary.

But that immediately raises a difficulty. Is such a 'Marian transposition' legitimate? Is it really acceptable to transpose 'live Jesus' life' into 'live Mary's life', 'be animated by Jesus' spirit' into 'breathe Mary's spirit', 'behave, speak, see and act as Jesus' into 'think, judge, feel and act as Mary'? After all, as Paul reminds us (Gal 3:27): '... every one of you that has been baptised has been clothed in Christ.' Our Christ-identity comes first and fundamentally from our baptism: the whole Christian life, including its mystical flowering, is a development of baptismal grace. Baptism does not 'clothe us in Mary'. We do not receive Mary's life or identity in baptism.

Colin never deals with this problem, and I don't know if Bérulle or Guilloché do either. They might have answered in this way. If baptism establishes in us a likeness to Christ, it thereby – in a secondary and derived way, of course – establishes in us a likeness to Mary, who most perfectly resembles Christ. In the last analysis, the spirit of Mary is the spirit of Jesus, that is the Spirit of God. And so to 'breathe Mary's spirit' is to be 'animated by Jesus' spirit'. In fact, Fr Colin tells us in so many words that Mary's spirit is the spirit of Jesus (*FS* 176,3; cf. 188,17). In any case, we can be sure that he does not intend to substitute Mary for Jesus. This can be seen from his own words. Thanks to Mayet we have passages in which Colin uses similar language of Jesus alone and also of both Jesus and Mary. They all date from 1842.

In the first (*FS* 45,1), the Founder is speaking to Fr. Eymard: 'You must clothe yourself in our Lord. Do everything through him, as if you were body of his body, soul of his soul.' The second (*FS* 55) is part of his exhortation to the General Chapter: 'We must love all that Jesus Christ loved, abhor all that he abhorred. This conformity with the sentiments and life of Jesus Christ must be the subject of our meditations throughout our life: *mihi mundus*

*crucifixus est et ego mundo* (cf. Gal 6:14)'. It is clear that Fr Colin is well used to speaking of a conformity with the sentiments and life of Jesus similar to that advocated by Guillore and which implies a similarly mystical spirituality: to be body of his body, soul of his soul, loving and abhorring all that he loved and abhorred. In other words, we are to live Jesus' life, be animated by his Spirit, love as he loves.

And now listen to another passage addressed to the same General Chapter of 1842; this is in Mayet (1.722) but not in *A Founder Speaks*:

'We are obliged by state and by duty to follow Jesus Christ and his divine Mother. May all our thoughts, all the movements of our heart, all our steps be worthy of our august models. Let us live their life, think as they thought, judge things as they judged them; let our union with them by prayer be such that we may never lose sight of them, and that the world with its false glory may be what it was for the great apostle: *mihi mundus crucifixus est, et ego mundo*. It's only through this, my most honoured confreres, that we will do God's work, that we will become in his hands the instruments of his divine mercy in favour of others, and that we will ourselves carry out the great work of our perfection.' Here, if anywhere, we have a synthesis of Colin's apostolic spirituality. It would not be out of place on the lips of Bérulle or one of his avowed disciples.

In the light of these texts, the 'Marian transposition' from Guillore to the Colinian Constitutions seems less abrupt. We see that Fr Colin can tell Marists at different moments to live the life of Jesus, to live the life of Jesus and Mary, or to live the life of Mary. He can say we are to feel, judge, act like Jesus, like Jesus and Mary, or like Mary. Nothing could more vividly illustrate Bérulle's principle: 'Speaking of you, Mary, we speak of Jesus.' Even if we may have some difficulty in making for ourselves such a transposition, there is no doubt that the spirituality of Jean-Claude Colin is centred and rooted in Christ. Put another way, his Marian spirituality is Christocentric.

Still, it remains true that, in his final legacy to the Society, Colin speaks in terms of living Mary's life, breathing her spirit, reproducing her virtues, thinking, judging, feeling and acting as Mary. Here he clearly indicates where Marists are to find the dynamic centre of life and action in reference to which they are called to live the whole Gospel. At the same time, it is only after we have recognised the 'Marian transposition' that we are able to understand our Founder's words in reference to the tradition stemming from Pierre de Bérulle, which sees the spiritual life as an ever-closer union with Jesus Christ and so resemblance to him. For Marists this translates as an ever-closer union with Mary – and so with Jesus – to the point that we have the same interior attitudes expressed in similar exterior actions. As Craig Larkin

has put it, the Marist shares in Mary's relationship with God, with the world, with other people and notably with the Church.

#### 4. Clothing ourselves in Jesus Christ

Jean Coste regretted that he did not write an article on Jesus in Colnian spirituality: he seemed to fear that many Marists wanted to bring everything back exclusively to Mary – precisely the sort of substitution for Jesus that other Marists mistrust, sometimes to the point of avoiding reference to Mary. In fact the Founder frequently tells Marists to unite themselves with Jesus and to clothe themselves in him, especially in the exercise of the priestly ministry.

A moment ago we heard him tell Fr Eymard (*FS* 45,1): 'You must clothe yourself in our Lord. Do everything through him, as if you were body of his body, soul of his soul.' He goes on to say (*FS* 45,2): 'Since your life is one of action, in putting on our Lord you will always be at peace and your soul, indeed, will always be caught up as in the fondest prayer. You cannot undertake many spiritual exercises, but if you keep in close union with our Lord, that will serve as everything for you. You will see everything in him, your pupils, your work, yourself – and that is very important.' Here we have in summary a profound spirituality of the apostolate, in which union with Jesus Christ is the central point.

Listen again to the Founder encouraging the members of the General Chapter of 1842 (*FS* 56,4):

'But when we know the one who is calling us, when we know that God is everywhere with us – *Ego ero tecum* (Ex 3:12 or Deut 31:23) – what, then, should we fear? Is not that the most worthy object of our desires, that life which gives us a share in the mission of the Incarnate Word? Let us then put on Jesus Christ, to that end working with all our heart so that Jesus Christ will work with us. We must put the man in us aside, and so ask ourselves when we are in the pulpit, Who am I to announce to these souls the good news, to distribute among them the bread of the word of God? Why have I entered this pulpit? It is to beget them for Jesus Christ. To obtain God's blessing on our ministry, let us pray the blessed Virgin to guide us in all things. Let us say to her, "Blessed Virgin, show me the will of your divine Son." Having done that, let us have no more fear...' Here we have the expected reference to Mary, but as the one who shows us the will of her Son: we recall her last recorded words in John 2:5, 'Do whatever he tells you.' It is in his mission that we share; we identify ourselves with him.

Similarly – this time for the Sacrament of Reconciliation (*FS* 102,27):

‘In the confessional we need to put aside our human nature. In one phrase which says everything, we must put on Jesus Christ. We are not there in the capacity of a mere man. Who, as a man, has the right to probe into the secrets of the heart? Who has the power to forgive sins? God, and he alone. We must therefore be close to God, with one ear to our penitent and the other to Jesus Christ. It is he who is listening through us. Let us put on Christ’s feeling for sinners, for the Samaritan woman, for Mary Magdalene. Jesus Christ is my model, Christ is to speak with my lips.’

On another occasion Fr Colin speaks of union with Christ in terms suggested by John 15:1-6 (*FS* 134,1):

‘Missioners, all Marists, must be men who are grafted into Christ, and follow no will but his, just as the shoot springing from the main branch has no life of its own, other than the sap which comes to it from the vine. If it is cut off from that sap, from that vine it dies, and so it is the same with us.’ He might have added: ‘The one who remains in Christ, with Christ in him, brings forth abundant fruit.’

And finally this beautiful text (*FS* 160,6), which recapitulates much that we have been seeing:

‘I repeat: never will any other means than those which Jesus Christ taught to his disciples succeed in changing the world. Meditate, therefore on those means during this precious retreat; do not emerge from this cenacle except as men dead to themselves, living the life of Jesus Christ, the life of the apostles, the life of renunciation, and of the cross. It was for this that you became missionaries.’

These quotations suffice to show that Colinian spirituality is not *exclusively* Marian. Living Mary’s life, breathing her spirit, emulating her virtues: there is the dynamic centre of life and action in reference to which Marists are called to live the whole Gospel. At the same time, the whole Gospel is not reduced to that essential and characteristic reference: Mary does not replace Jesus.

## 5. Unknown and Hidden

If we were looking for the quintessence of Fr Colin’s spiritual teaching, we would, I think, go to the conclusion of the second-to-last sentence of the article on The Spirit of the Society: ‘... unknown and even hidden in this world’ (For the most recent reflections on this expression, see P.J. Bearsley, “From Asceticism to Kenosis. The Evolution in Marist



Understanding of the ‘Unknown and Hidden’, *FN* 5,1, 2000, pp. 69-94.). This expression constantly recurs in the Founder’s speech and writing, either in this full form or, more frequently, in the short form, ‘unknown and hidden’ (sometimes ‘hidden and unknown’, which goes better in English); in the Latin of the Constitutions the two adjectives are in the plural – *Ignoti et occulti*, referring to all Marists – but more often than not they are in the singular in Colin’s French.

I mentioned in a previous talk that I came across ‘unknown and hidden’ in a passage quoted from Surin. Here it is:

‘Contemplation is an operation by which the soul looks at universal truth. It is proper to this operation to be very simple, very indistinct, but to rest peacefully in something that is more *unknown and hidden* than uncovered and known. The higher it is, the more it is confused; and even when by supernatural notions the soul knows things that are distinct and clearly manifested, there remains something *unknown and hidden*, which it prizes more highly and which is the best object of that which touches it’ (*Catéchisme spirituel, contenant les principaux moyens d’arriver à la perfection*, t. I, p. 107 (II; II), quoted by Bremond, t. 5, p. 292).

In this text, that which is ‘unknown and hidden’ is, of course, God: the ‘hidden God (*Deus absconditus*; cf. Isa 45:15)’ is a frequent theme of mystical writing. I was moved to realise that Surin’s description of God as ‘unknown and hidden’ to the pray-er converges with the final word on the subject of Jean Coste, who appears, however, not to have known the origin of the expression *ignoti et occulti*. In his last lecture in the retreat given at Valpré, in August 1988, he said (*Une vision mariale de l’église*, p. 470f.):

‘Personally, I see that the Marist vocation is summarized whole and entire along the lines of “unknown and hidden” [plural], in an understanding of the mystery of the hidden God in all its dimensions, and in an acceptance of that two-fold aspect of the hidden God: it entails comprehending from within the phenomenon of secularization, it entails full solidarity with those people for whom God is hidden (largely because of us), and at the same time, it entails keeping faith in the hidden God of the mystics, a sufficiently real faith so that other people might come and quench their thirst therein.’

As it happens, Surin uses the expression ‘unknown and hidden’ more than once in his writings. Not only are these three words applied to other realities besides that of the ‘hidden God’ of the mystics; we also find them in connection with phrases that both recall and also form a contrast with the second part of the Colinian expression, ‘in this world’.

We are not surprised to find them used of the life of Jesus at Nazareth:

‘After which he entered into a life *hidden from and unknown to the earth*, until a certain time when he began from then on to appear’ (I,II,3 §1).

Other persons (Christians) can also be ‘unknown and hidden’:

‘ ... and we notice that, having been raised to contemplation, that is to this simple regard and this heavenly taste, they have been thereby buried in God, and *hidden from the world*, thus verifying what the Apostle says: *Mortui estis, et vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo in Deo* [Col 3:3]...’ (I,III,6).

The originality of Colin is well illustrated by comparing these expressions with that of the Founder, for whom Marists are to be hidden not from the world but *in* this world – where, we might add, God is hidden. At the same time, our understanding of the *Ignoti et occulti* is enhanced by seeing the richness of its context in Surin (and other authors). It is not simply a strategy for the apostolate; or rather, it is that, precisely because it is a key to union with God, who is hidden and unknown in contemplation, and to identity with Jesus and Mary hidden and unknown at Nazareth. In its context in n. 50 of the 1872 Constitutions, it expresses what Colin means by ‘contemplative in action’: ‘... so combining a love of solitude and silence and the practice of hidden virtues with works of zeal, that, even though they must undertake the various ministries helpful to the salvation of souls, they seem to be unknown and indeed even hidden in this world.’

## 6. The Practice of Marist Spirituality

At the conclusion of this long answer to the question, What is Marist Spirituality? you may well be asking: ‘Fine and good, but just how does one *do* Marist Spirituality? What is it in practice and how is it learnt?’ The spirituality we have been surveying contains several strands; among them we have identified Ignatius of Loyola, Pierre de Bérulle, Louis Lallemant, Jean-Joseph Surin and François Guilloché. These and other strands were woven into a single fabric by the prayer, reflection and life-experience of Jean-Claude Colin. How did he intend to pass this spiritual fabric on to Marists?

Ignatius left his followers the *Spiritual Exercises*; other founders, such as Fr Chaminade for the Marianists, have left substantial spiritual treatises. Our Founder left no synthesis, treatise or manual, and it would be a bold Marist who would undertake to provide one. He has not, however, left us without guidance. For he left us a Rule. This was to be much more than simply a set of regulations but, like the Rule of St Benedict, was to be a rule of life, which should lead us into holiness.

Fr Colin's Rule subsists in a certain number of texts, culminating in the Constitutions of 1872. It is also expressed in many remarks collected by Mayet, where he would say: 'This is in the Rule', or 'This will be in the Rule'. Even where there is no such indication, when the Founder speaks, he is frequently commenting on the Rule. For it was never confined to a written text but remained a living word. I believe that this word is still addressed to us and has the potential to lead us into holiness by teaching us how to be Marists. So our final talk will deal with the challenge of Fr Colin's Rule. There we will see that, as Coste puts it in the quotation with which I began this talk, the Founder's Rule 'cannot be reduced... to a certain "spirit," whose description, however precious it may be, came only later, once everything had already been said through a multitude of details'. Quite the contrary: Marist spirituality, like God, 'dwells in the details' (remark attributed to the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe).