

Mary Support of the Church at its Birth

‘On July 23, 1816, at the shrine of Our Lady of Fourvière, Lyons, twelve priests and seminarians pledged themselves to found a congregation bearing the name of Mary. Those who worked for the next twenty years to carry out this promise were convinced that they were responding to a wish of the Mother of Mercy, which found expression for them in the following words: “I supported the Church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time”’ (*Constitutions of the Society of Mary*, n. 2).

1. A Colinian theme

We have here a theme that keeps coming back when the Founder speaks (cf. *FS*, p. 36). Take the four quotations collected by Fr Mayet that Jean Coste has brought together near the beginning of *A Founder Speaks*.

FS 4,1 (c. 1837): ‘The blessed Virgin said, “I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall also be at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me.”’

2 On September 25th, 1844, in reply to a remark made by Mayet: ‘Yes... “I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time” ... these words presided over the earliest days of the Society.’

3 On October 26th, 1844, he repeated these words once more, adding, ‘It is some thirty years since that was said to a priest.’

4 He repeated these same words at Puylata on December 2nd, 1847, saying ‘About thirty-six years ago.’

Notice the set form of the expression – always the same words; also the fairly precise reference to an historic moment (in both senses of the word). Fr Coste has shown beyond doubt (‘Marie dans l’église naissante et à la fin des temps’, *Acta SM*, vol. 5, pp. 262-281; 418-451; vol. 6, pp. 52-87; 178-197) that the priest in question was Jean-Claude Courveille, and the words attributed to Mary were those he had ‘heard’ on 15 August 1812 in the cathedral of Le Puy and shared with his fellow seminarians in Lyons – at least in the form that Jean-Claude Colin remembered (there are other versions). Colin continued all his life to reflect on this saying, sometimes

imagining more concretely how Mary would have supported the new-born Church, sometimes drawing consequences for the Society that bears her name.

Fairly typical is *FS* 141,18 (1847). In the preceding paragraph, Colin invokes the examples of Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Charles Borromeo, Saint Francis Regis, Saint Francis Xavier, finally the example of Our Lord himself. He continues: ‘And our heavenly mother, she was the light, the counsel, the consolation of the new-born Church. And did she create a stir? The Gospel says little about her, very little, yet it was she who drew down graces from heaven upon the earth. Let us imitate these holy models in their zeal and their humility. Let us go everywhere, let us do all the good that we can, all the while remaining unassuming and hidden.’ Colin loves to stress the paradox of Mary hidden in the midst of the Church at its birth, while being at the same time the support that the Church cannot do without. This manner of presence and action is the model for Marists.

One final introductory remark. The two parts of the saying attributed to Mary are inseparable: we are not meant to contemplate the theme of ‘Mary support of the Church at its birth’ in isolation. This first part of the saying is completed by the second part, where Mary is the ‘support of the Church at the end of time’. However, in this talk and the next, we shall look at each part in turn, beginning with the first.

Note. The expressions ‘the Church at its birth’, ‘the newborn Church’, ‘the early Church’, etc. are all ways of translating the French ‘l’Eglise naissante’ – literally, ‘the Church in the process of being born’.

2. Mary in the Church at its birth

I want to insist on this point: in the Marian saying that we have put at the head of our present Constitutions in n. 2, the reference is to the presence and action of Our Lady *in the new-born Church*, and not to her presence ‘among the apostles’ referred to in n. 3 of the Constitutions, and not to her presence at Pentecost, which is mentioned – along with her presence at Nazareth and at the end of time – in n. 228 (cf. also n. 8). ‘Mary in the Church’ is a much broader concept than ‘Mary among the Apostles’. Furthermore, when Fr Colin talks of ‘Mary in the early Church’, he is usually thinking of the period *after* Pentecost, rather than at or before the descent of the Holy Spirit. Mary supported the Church not only at the moment of its birth (Pentecost) but especially in the period after that, protecting and nurturing its new life.

In the talks that he gave during a retreat at Valpré in France in 1988, Jean Coste was critical of the place being given to Pentecost in Marist spirituality in recent years, for example in the declarations and decisions of the 1969-70 General Chapter (n. 128): ‘Why is Pentecost mentioned there? Because people suppose that, if Colin speaks of Mary in the midst of the apostles, he must be referring to the only text in the New Testament which shows us Mary with the apostles, namely the Pentecost scene.’ Coste refers to Acts 1:14, only to remind us once again that, when Colin speaks of Mary in the Church coming to birth, he is not simply thinking of the scene depicted there, but rather of the much more detailed picture drawn by Mary of Agreda, a Spanish Franciscan nun of the 17th century, in her book *The Mystical City of God*, which our Founder, like many others, valued highly. (*A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean-Claude Colin*, pp. 362-364; see also G. Lessard, ‘Marists and Pentecost’, *Forum Novum=FN* 5,1 (2000) 53-68).

Fr. Mayet collected several passages in which Fr. Colin took inspiration from Mary of Agreda in order to imagine the Blessed Virgin in her role as support of the Church at its birth. I shall quote two. First *FS* 116,7: ‘... That our Lord left the Blessed Virgin behind on earth after his Ascension is without doubt a great mystery. The apostles needed her to guide them, and to be in a sense the foundress of the Church. At the end of time her protection will shine forth in an even greater way...’ As a matter of interest, there is one detail here in which Fr. Colin does not follow Mary of Agreda. In her scheme of things, the Blessed Virgin did indeed go up to heaven with her Son at the Ascension, but decided to return to earth to be the support of the new-born Church – it was her descent that John describes in Apoc 21:2 as ‘the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God’ (cf. the title of her book, *The Mystical City of God*). By contrast, our Founder seems to adopt the usual scenario, according to which Mary remained in the midst of the early Church until her Dormition and Assumption.

The second example is *FS* 133,2: ‘I recommend the superior very strongly to take care to call his council together whenever he has some business to deal with (for three reasons): 3. To imitate the blessed Virgin after the ascension of her divine Son. Although she held the first place when the apostles met to consider the interests of the Church, she often said nothing, she who read all in the heart of her divine Son. And when finally the apostles turned to her, Mary, always the last to speak, would say to them, “My lords and masters, it seems to me that one could do such and such. This

would be in accord with the spirit of my Son.” Coste has shown that these words of Colin paraphrase Mary of Agreda, *The Mystical City of God*, III, pp. 105-107. The text is reproduced in *ActaSM*, vol. 8, pp. 167-169.

On the other hand, as Jean Coste points out, Colin cites explicitly Acts 1:14 only a few times (cf. *FS* 141,20; 160,6; 188,19), ‘and each time it was in connection with special moments of deliberation and intense prayer’. In *FS* 140,13, Colin says to the novices: ‘Come, let us take courage! Look upon yourselves as the apostles, gathered together with the blessed Virgin in the cenacle. Make good use of this time. Warm yourselves at the fire of God’s love. Have courage!’ Coste concludes: ‘The upstairs room, then, is a model for certain special moments in Marist life; it is not the place in which Mary’s presence in the Church becomes the symbol of a whole mode of existence.’ (‘Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time: Analysis of Data in Jean-Claude Colin’, *FN* 3,3 (1996) 245-263, p. 249).

I am in complete agreement with Fr. Coste in protesting against the way in which, for many Marists, ‘Mary in the new-born Church’ has become simply ‘Mary at Pentecost’. On the other hand, *pace* Jean Coste, we are going to spend some time on Acts 1:12-14, for three reasons: first, because one shouldn’t dismiss too lightly a passage of the Scriptures; second, what Mary of Agreda has to say about the blessed Virgin in the Church at its birth belongs, I believe, to a literary tradition going back to the Church of the first centuries which does have something to do with the Acts of the Apostles; finally, by looking closely at these verses of Acts, we can make our own what Mary is believed to have said at Le Puy, without necessarily having to depend solely on Colin’s own interpretations. For in fact those words ‘I was the support of the Church at its birth, etc.’ do not really come to us from Jean-Claude Colin but from Jean-Claude Courveille, and ultimately from the Blessed Virgin herself.

If today’s Marists – despite Coste’s protestations – have opted for the image of ‘Mary at Pentecost’ as the icon of the Society of Mary, it is no doubt because it seems to offer a symbol of Mission, to put alongside that of ‘Mary at Nazareth’ as a symbol of the hidden life. After all, wasn’t it at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles with the result that they went ‘to the ends of the earth’ (cf. Acts 1:8)? As Jan Hulshof – I mean the author, not the Superior General – reads the history of the Society of Mary: ‘The paradigm of the missionary community of the apostles at Pentecost retreated more and more before the paradigm of the hidden family of Nazareth’ (*Constitutions, New and Old*, p. 75). In that case, wouldn’t we agree that

today's Marists have at long last recovered the first model as better adapted to their renewed idea of the Society?

Coste, at any rate, would insist that this is not really what Colin had in mind. I would add that it draws on a reading of Acts that is conventional but rather superficial. No doubt the visual power of the image of Mary among the apostles at Pentecost has exercised a considerable impact in concentrating these diverse themes in one simple scene. It is our job right now to unscramble them and examine them one by one: first, Mary in the Church at its birth; then, Mary in the midst of the Apostles – neither can be reduced simply to 'Mary at Pentecost'. Later we shall also see that 'the new-born Church' is not really a symbol of Mission and in fact was easily interchanged in Fr Colin's mind with 'Nazareth'.

3. Acts 1:14

In Acts 1:12-14 Luke depicts the scene in the Upper Room after the Ascension. He names the Eleven disciples – Judas, of course, is missing and has not yet been replaced by Matthias. He continues: 'With one heart all these (the Eleven disciples) joined constantly in prayer, together with some women, including Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brothers' (NJB). This single verse is on the face of it disappointingly little on which to base everything that has been said or written down through the ages on the role of Mary in the Church at its birth – and in particular by Fr. Colin. All the same, it is a text that attracts our attention and calls for reflection and meditation (see 'Biblical Approaches', *FN* 3,4 (1996) 521-537).

For one thing, there is the fact that this text exists. It is the sole mention of Mary in the Acts of the Apostles, and indeed the sole mention of her outside the Gospels, except for Gal 4:4 (and, probably, the Woman of Apocalypse 12). This verse has nourished the contemplation of those who wanted to know more about the role of Mary in the Church at its birth. As Fr. Coste remarks: 'In testifying to Mary's presence in the first little group of Apostles after the Ascension, St Luke removes from Christian tradition the right to limit its thinking to the fact of the divine maternity and to the Blessed Virgin's activity during the earthly life of her Son' (*ActaSM*, vol. 5, p. 450; cf. 418).

Luke draws our attention to Mary's presence in the post-Paschal Church and at the same time tantalizes us by telling us next-to-nothing about her. Next-to-nothing,

but not quite nothing. The mention of Mary's presence among those who were waiting for the Holy Spirit to 'come upon' them and to be filled with 'power' (Acts 1:8) recalls the scene of the Annunciation, when the angel told Mary: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will rest upon you' (Luke 1:35). We are encouraged to think that the Church, which is about to come to birth, is to continue the earthly existence of Mary's child. In his 'Infancy Gospel' Luke shows us Mary taking care of her newborn baby and looking after him throughout his childhood. In Acts 1:14 he seems to invite us to suppose that Mary nurtured the newborn Church as well.

How did Mary support the Church at its birth? Luke gives us a valuable hint in the way he constructs v. 14. Let us hear it once again, in a slightly more literal translation: 'All these persevered unanimously in prayer, together with some women *and* Mary the Mother of Jesus *and* his brothers.'

Notice that Mary is not situated 'in the midst of the apostles', as is so often said – nor is this the scene of Pentecost, which does not occur for a page or so of the Book of Acts. Rather, Mary is 'in the midst of the community', of which the Eleven disciples form part, and if she is 'in the midst' of any particular group it is that of the women. Luke, it seems, in composing this scene, is not simply portraying the apostles awaiting the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. He intends to depict the earliest Church itself as a community. Further, this community is complex, made up of several groups and tendencies, and it finds its centre of unity in Mary.

Let's look at the scene more closely. Observe the twofold 'and' before and after the mention of Mary. The first 'and' links her with the disciples and the women (these will be the women who accompanied the apostolic group, cf. Luke 8:1-3); the second 'and' links her with the brothers of Jesus (these are his 'folk', his clan, led by James called 'the Lord's brother', who is not named here). Now these two extremes – disciples and believing women on the one hand, and Jesus' brothers on the other – are far from being unanimous in the gospels, even if Luke does not emphasize their opposition as strongly as do Mark (3:21) and John (7:5). In our passage from Acts, the very structure of the sentence (1:14) gives Mary a mediating role between these extremes. The third gospel has already prepared the ground for this mediating role. There, it is clear, Mary belongs to both groups. By blood, of course, she belongs to Jesus' natural family, along with his 'brothers'. By faith, she belongs to his new

family consisting of those who hear God's word and put it into practice (Luke 8:19-21; cf. Mark 3:31-35).

The presence of Jesus' brothers in the upper room tells us that they have learnt to believe in him (the same is implied by the apparition of the risen Jesus to James, cf. 1 Cor 15:7). But, even though they are now believers, they have not become his disciples: when Peter, freed from Herod's prison, rejoins the community that is praying for him, James and the brothers are not there (cf. Acts 12:17). If Jesus' disciples and his brothers are found together after the Ascension – at least as Luke paints the scene – they still remain two distinct groups. The way that Mary is mentioned between them suggests that it is she who has brought them together. Luke seems to imply that, if their potential rivalry has been settled peacefully, it is thanks to Mary, who occupied the middle ground between both parties and knew how to use it in order to keep the peace.

In fact Mary may have fulfilled a specific role of mediation in the new-born Church that was of the highest importance for the future, namely by preventing a schism that could well have broken out between the disciples and the brothers of Jesus concerning his succession. (Cf. Lucien Legrand *L'annonce à Marie (Lc 1,26-28). Une apocalypse aux origines de l'Évangile*, Paris, Cerf (Lectio Divina 106), 1981, pp. 339-341.) Who will take over the leadership after the Founder or Prophet has left the scene: one of his former companions or one of his close relations? This has been a problem for more than one religion. It is the basis of the schism that divides the Muslim world between the Sunni, who accept the succession of Kalifs since Uthman, the first who did not belong to Muhammad's family, and the Shi'a, who recognize only his son-in-law Ali and his descendants. A similar quarrel divides the Mormons. It could have been the case with the Christians as well. The New Testament bears traces of a kind of balancing act between Peter, chief of the disciples, and James, brother of Jesus. According to Acts, Peter quits Jerusalem and leaves the field free for James. In fact, right into the 2nd century the family of Jesus and their descendants were at the head of the believers in Jerusalem, who were all observant, practising Jews. The mother of Jesus might have upheld the rights of his brothers, as the mother of the sons of Zebedee had promoted theirs (cf. Mt 20:20). On the contrary, Mary renounced for herself any power in the Church that she might have had as mother of Jesus. We can infer that from the New Testament and Church history. Mary of Agreda

conveys the same by showing us the Blessed Virgin always respectful and obedient to the apostles.

Acts 1:14 supports the tradition that after the Ascension Mary lived in Jerusalem with the apostles and disciples. One of the apocryphal writings even names them: Evodius, Peter and Andrew, Alexander and Rufus, Salome and Joanna and other virgins. On the other hand, once the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' had been identified as John, writer of the Fourth Gospel and of the Apocalypse, then the text of John 19:27, where Jesus on the cross gave his mother to the beloved disciple who 'from that hour took her to his own', was taken to mean that Mary lived in the house of John, and even that she went with him to Ephesus.

We will stay with the version of the tradition according to which the apostles remained in Jerusalem during Mary's lifetime and only dispersed on their various missions after her Dormition and Assumption. The tradition that Mary lived with the apostles after the Ascension is closely associated with the role that patristic and medieval writers – up to and including Mary of Agreda – assigned to the Blessed Virgin in the newborn Church. This was predominantly a teaching role. Mary as teacher of the apostles, *magistra magistrorum*, is a very ancient theme, being found at least as far back as St Ambrose in the 4th century, and may well be solidly founded. The tradition that the evangelists, especially Luke and John, derived information concerning Mary and the infancy of Jesus from the Blessed Virgin herself, has been taken seriously by some modern exegetes (Harnack, Lagrange, Laurentin, Benoit). Some writers also attributed to Mary a role as counsellor and comforter of the apostles, which brings us closer once again to Mary of Agreda and Fr. Colin. This theme can be regarded as a development of the general theme of Mary's maternal role in the newborn Church.

It seems then that the Church kept the memory of Mary after the Ascension among the apostles and first believers, remembering her as uniting, caring for, and even instructing the newborn Church. The first and most authentic expression of this memory is to be found in the New Testament. Later tradition continued to express it, often with considerable embellishments, not all of which are of equal value. It could be, however, that certain elements that are found in the later tradition but not in Scripture, such as Mary teaching the apostles, are authentic. In any case, it was the living memory of Mary in the community that prompted Christians of a later age to

find in the brief words of Acts 1:14 a witness to their own belief in the supportive role of Mary in the Church at its birth.

We are entitled to infer from those words that, for Luke, Mary has, even more generally, a role that is central and mediating in the new-born Church, a body that he knew was made up of several *blocs* that were different and liable to disagree, even violently. That is, of course, the basic meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia* that we translate as ‘Church’: it is an ‘assembly’, which brings together distinct groups or parties. By exercising this role of mediation or even reconciliation, Mary ‘supports’ the newborn Church. This is the scripturally based paradigm of the ‘work of Mary’, in which Marists are called to take part – our Mission.

4. Mary in the midst of the apostles

It is already clear that the theme of ‘Mary support of the Church at its birth’ is wider than that of ‘Mary in the midst of the apostles’ and cannot be reduced to it. It is essential to the first theme that the apostles are only one of the elements forming the new-born Church. Still, according to the Constitutions, n. 3: ‘(The Society) would learn from Mary’s presence among the apostles how to be present in the Church in such a way that the more hidden it was the more effective it would be.’ In fact, Fr. Colin has a lot to say about Mary in the midst of the apostles. For the most part it could be summed up in this way: *Mary Queen of the apostles, hidden but effective.*

One classic expression of this theme is *FS* 85,2 (1844): ‘Indeed, Messieurs, the blessed Virgin (as the Church tells us) is the channel of graces, the Queen of Apostles, and what great good she did for souls. Yet in this world she was hidden and as it were unknown.’

Four years later, in 1848, Colin comments (*FS* 161,5): ‘Nowadays, faith and prayer alone can convince people’s minds, enlighten their intellect and touch their hearts. Let us set to, therefore, to have this spirit of faith and of union with our good Lord. Let there be no love of show among us, no seeking after reputations... Let us imitate her who is our Queen, what a model Mary is for us! She bears the title *regina apostolorum* and rightly, and yet she is more hidden than any of the apostles.’ Mary the hidden Queen of the apostles is presented here as our ‘model’, but nothing is said – at least explicitly – about anything she *did*. At the moment when Fr. Colin was

speaking – at a time of republican and anticlerical revolution in France and elsewhere in Europe – there was in fact nothing to do except to keep a low profile.

According to n. 3 of the Constitutions, the presence of Mary in the midst of the apostles is ‘more effective’ for being more hidden. There is something of the same idea in *FS* 140,4: ‘But look at our mother after the Ascension of the divine master. She is the support, the director of the newborn Church. She is called *Regina Apostolorum*. Yet she seemed to be doing nothing, although she did more by her prayers than the apostles by their preaching. Look also at Our Lord Jesus Christ in Nazareth for thirty years. These are your models.’

It is true that ‘Mary Queen of the apostles, hidden, but more effective than them’ is presented here as a model. However, two things should be noted. The first is the context in which Colin is speaking. In fact he is talking to novices, a certain number of whom would already be priests. He prefaces his remarks by recognizing that they are bored with being shut up in the novitiate with nothing to do: ‘People are bored, too, at doing nothing, for we are made for action and we feel a need for it.’ So in this precise context ‘Mary in the midst of the apostles’ and also ‘Jesus at Nazareth’ are presented as ‘models’, not for all Marists, but for the novices. (I have already quoted another paragraph 13 of the same document where Colin encourages them to regard themselves as the apostles gathered – implicitly in prayer – with Our Lady in the cenacle.)

The second factor to bear in mind when interpreting this document is that the ‘more’ that Mary was able to do, although she ‘seemed to do nothing’, was thanks to her prayers: ‘she did more by her prayers than the apostles by their preaching.’ This is not the only time that Fr. Colin expresses this idea; he returns to it when speaking to professed Marists and reinforces it with more modern parallels (*FS* 115,7): ‘The blessed Virgin made no stir but she prayed a lot. (He continues with an exhortation to pray for the missionaries in Oceania.) Without facing the same dangers or enduring the same deprivations as they suffer, we will have a share in their merits and their crown. Perhaps they will owe to us the conversion of their islands. I read somewhere that it was revealed that Saint Teresa (of Avila) converted more souls by her prayers than Saint Francis Xavier by his missionary labours’ (cf. also 132,13 ; 188,7). Fr. Colin might have been speaking to Carmelites! However, he was speaking to Marists, who, this time, were not novices. It begins rather to look as if the presence of Mary in the midst of the apostles is not for Colin simply an image of Mission!

Finally Fr. Colin manages to integrate the theme of ‘Mary hidden but achieving even more by her prayers than the apostles by their preaching’ into the spirituality of a missionary congregation. This can be seen in the address he gave at the retreat of September 1854, so after he resigned as Superior General (*FS* 190,2-3): ‘In all things let us look to Mary, let us imitate her life at Nazareth. She did more than the apostles for the newborn Church; she is Queen of the apostles, but she did it without any stir, she did it above all by her prayers... I said she did more than the apostles by her prayers. Let us therefore unite silence and prayer with action. The Society of Mary desires that we, her children, should be missionaries of action, and missionaries of prayer.’

We find the same idea at the end of n. 50 of the Constitutions of 1872: ‘... so combining a love of solitude and silence and the practice of hidden virtues with works of zeal, that while they must take up the various ministries by which the salvation of souls may be furthered, they may appear unknown, and even hidden in the world.’

There is without doubt a tension here. In fact, as we shall see in other places as well, certain aspects of Colinian spirituality on which the Founder laid great stress appear, at least at first sight, to be better suited to a contemplative community than to an active Congregation. And yet, Colin insists that the Marists are an apostolic group, who are to ‘go everywhere’ doing ‘all the good that we can’. Now I personally think that there could be a legitimate contemplative expression of Marist spirituality. On the other hand, I am perfectly clear that that is not meant to be its typical expression, which is apostolic and, for our branch of the Marist Family, priestly.

A tension, I said, between action and contemplation, which may even be experienced painfully. We have no right, in my opinion, to avoid it, for example by reducing the contemplative dimension to a personal trait of Jean-Claude Colin, a complex of psychological bent and early childhood experience. Rather, Colin challenges us to become ‘contemplatives in the midst of action’. Of that more anon.