

Marist Ethos in Our Schools Then and Now

Alois Greiler sm

1 A study case: Colin heals kleptomania FA, doc. 331, 4 (1845)

“Colin cured a small boy of kleptomania, by summoning him to his room. He had heard from the spiritual director of a number of misdeeds committed by this child, but gave no sign of knowing and made a great show of trust in everything the child told him. During a quiet talk, he gradually brought him round to admit his bad impulses and the thefts he had committed. “Is it not true, my little friend, that there are often lots of little things which stand in the way of our loving God with all our heart? Well, then, what prevents you most from loving the good Lord?” – “Monsieur, it is such and such a thing.” – “Is there nothing else, my son?” – “Ah, there is my other habit of taking things.” – “Oh, my little friend, what pleasure you give me in mentioning that to me! I esteem you all the more for it.” He then became very friendly, saying, “Would you like to know the way to cure your bad habit?” – “Oh, yes, Monsieur.” – “Well, just promise you will follow it. The cure is to come along and tell me every time you feel the urge to steal and every time you have done something wrong.” The child came several times, perhaps not always, but the cure proved such a success that at the end of the year he had stolen only a couple of pins and by the following year he had broken the habit completely.”

What does this little story tell us about our topic, Marist ethos in schools then and now?

The main actor is Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875), founder, first superior general, spiritual leader and educator. He is the point of reference in the tradition of schools founded by Marist priests. Belley College was a minor seminary for the diocese, but also the only secondary school in town. The staff was mixed: priests and lay staff. And so were the pupils. Not all aspired to become priests. A school like this was not uncommon for France at the time.¹ As it was not simply a minor seminary, we can refer to it for our schools today. Colin

¹ Marcel Launay, *Le bon prêtre. Le clergé rural aux XIX^e siècle* (Collection historique), Aubiert, 1986, p. 11-27. Colin was also involved in a school run by lay people, see Charles Girard sm, *Les messieurs de la Favorite et les Vierges chrétiennes*, in *Rendre l'univers mariste. Exposés présentés lors des journées d'étude des 8 – 10 août 2005 pour les laïcs maristes*, Saint-Augustin, 2006, 75 – 85. That is to say, the modern context of lay schools in Marist tradition was not alien to him.

obviously knew the pupils and the pupils felt free to contact him. The ratio teacher – pupil was 1 to 7 in a Marist school during his time as general (1836-1854). This ratio is for example not too different for the Maristenymnasium Fürstzell: 75 teachers for 1000 pupils. However, due to a different teaching system, the relationship cannot be the same. Colin was faced with a tricky problem: the well-being of the school was at stake: theft cannot be tolerated. And the well-being of one pupil was at stake. How can he help the boy? The thief spoke to him – which speaks volumes! The atmosphere of trust must have been such, that he could entrust himself with his problem to Colin. The pupil knew two things clearly: stealing is wrong. Certainly the staff would insist on such values. He also knew: They are willing to help me. And this is exactly what Colin did: Fighting sin, theft in this case, and helping the sinner, the boy.

Is this a miracle story of our pious founder? I do not think so. I re-told you a true story, a story that could work because of a whole network of factors. This very network we call ‘Marist ethos in a school’.

Stories, anecdotes are one method to approach a practical topic. Father Colin often used this method to familiarize the first Marists with the Marist way of doing things. And from your daily routine in school you know that in fact it is an oral culture: How did it go in your class? What is your experience with this and that pupil? And the answers are stories, examples, and conclusions drawn from experience.

Starting from history, the Marist patrimony, I do not propose to copy what the first Marists did. However, we need elements of continuity which guarantee continuity in the same tradition, to keep Marist identity.² From these elements I will at the end look towards the second part of the theme: relevance of the Marist charism for our society today.

2 Marist ethos: elements from tradition

Marists – a response to a need

² See the discussion in Jean Coste sm, *Talk to the Marist Sisters' 1994 General Chapter. Points of Continuity between our Founders and Us*, Rome, Marist Fathers, 1994. Compare with SM Constitutions, numbers 8 and 12.

There are different models to understand religious life. Norbert Lohfink called religious God's therapy for Church and world.³ This model offers a basic method for our topic: Marists can be a sign of hope by responding to present needs.

Many religious congregations, especially active groups like the Marists, can be understood as God's response to a need in Church and/or world, on the human, spiritual or material level. A Church grown rich in the Middle Ages saw the rise of the Franciscan movement. In post-Revolutionary France, the Marists came to respect the desire for freedom and tried to act accordingly in their pastoral approach. The post-revolution years left the country side barren in the field of education. During the Restoration, groups like the Marists tried to re-introduce Christian values and leadership in society, mainly by accepting or even founding secondary schools as houses of formation for future leaders.

Applying this model to the Marists is not imposed. In fact we know that Colin had a similar understanding. In FS, doc. 5 (c. 1837, Colin still at school!) we read:

"In Rome, a religious spoke to him at length against new Orders, saying that people should join the older ones. When he had said his piece, Father Colin said, 'Forgive me, Monsieur, if I do not share your opinion. Each age has seen new Orders come to birth. God has brought them to birth to meet current needs. Each Order has its vocation, its mission, its time. When we read the history of the Church we see that some have appeared in every age. Strictly speaking there is only one body which must always continue in existence: the Church, which has Jesus Christ as its head. The others acknowledge men as their founders, and do not have to endure, but fall when the need for which God created them has been met. If they do endure afterwards, they no longer thrive with the dash and prosperity which blessed their early days. They fall back into the common run when their mission is ended.'"

Jean Coste (1926-1994), historian of the congregation, also presented the Marist mission according to this model. In 1965 he wrote:⁴

"...Fr Founder ...realized that a new civilization was being born and its assumptions were not those of the faith. Faced with this new problem, he

³ Norbert Lohfink SJ, *Religious Orders: God's Therapy for the Church*, in *Theology Digest* 33 (1986) 203-212. We can apply it to lay people in a school.

⁴ Jean Coste sm, *Lectures on Society of Mary History*, Rome, 1965, p. 157.

must revise the apostolic methods of Christianity for his time. The men of the 19th century, victims of materialism, indifference and disbelief, could be converted only by adopting the apostles' methods, well adapted to the difficult times when the Church could no longer rely on her power and authority but only on the power of God and the Gospel message. Fr Founder showed how full he understood the spiritual needs of his time in the advice he gave his sons concerning the apostolate.”

Marist ethos – a religious ethos

Colin saw a spiritual cause behind the crisis of his time and looked for a spiritual response. As the soul is the core of the human person the spiritual crisis also affects the mind and behavior and therefore improving the soul will improve the whole person.

During his time, Marists heavily engaged in education, education on the secondary and tertiary level.⁵ Colin's educational background evolved with his different ministries: from teaching catechism in parishes and during home missions to becoming director of a secondary school. He wrote an essay for the staff of the school, initiated conferences on education for the young priest-teachers, and discussed school issues in the main written genre of his time, personal letters. His expertise included negotiations with bishops and town councils about opening and administering a school.

Gradually the Marists staffed their own four formation houses and two minor as well as three major seminaries for different dioceses in France. Concerning secondary education, they worked in seven colleges: Belley (1829-1845), Valbenoîte (1845 to 1850), Langogne (1847 to 1855), La Seyne (1849), Saint-Chamond (1850), Brioude (1853 to 1856), Montluçon (1853). In all, this required a high number of highly qualified men.

The Marists started before the Falloux-Laws of 1850 which made it much easier for religious in France to work in schools.

They addressed different tasks: Teaching, spiritual formation, discipline, vocations for the priesthood and religious life, support for the foreign missions. In the case of Belley, Langogne and Brioude, they

⁵ Coste, *Lectures*, p. 202. Philip Graystone, *A Short History of the Society of Mary 1854 to 1993*, Rome, Marist Fathers, 1998, continues the story. It may be noted that the Marists usually started schools in situations marginal for Catholic or people in general: the diaspora and immigrant population of New Zealand and the early USA, the poorer people in Peru, Senegal and other places, and the French minorities in other countries (Mexico).

took over a run-down school and improved it materially, intellectually, and in discipline. All three were handed over to others later.

How did they try to accomplish their mission? They focused on a sound discipline and a strong spiritual emphasis from the beginning for both, staff and pupils. And so, Colin brought in a high number of priests as staff. Coste summarizes:⁶ “We can say then that during Father Colin’s generalate there was an average of one father for six or seven pupils, whereas today [1962] in the province of Paris there is one father for 40 pupils.”

Young people were not easier then than they are today. That generation came out of years of revolution. ‘La jeunesse, même au séminaire, reste la jeunesse’ states M. Launay, and therefore, emphasis was on discipline and orderly behaviour: «à la chapelle, on ne crache jamais sur le parquet mais dans son mouchoir.»⁷ Montalembert wrote around 1830: “A young man at mass is as noteworthy as a Christian visitor in a mosque in the Orient. Never and nowhere a nation is regarded as officially anti-religious as France is”.⁸ Colin and his team succeeded in communicating a positive experience, at least if we can take the testimony of a former pupil and later agnostic as typical:⁹

„My stay with the Marist Fathers was very agreeable for me and I enjoyed it... We were like a family there and lived in peace as brothers, with only good example set before our eyes... In a very cheerful and friendly way, we used to go on walks, sing, and make Rosaries for the missions, and that was where I learned how to make them.”

Much attention was given to the personal growth of the pupil. Colin regarded this as a response to a time when there is so much confusion, so little faith, so many new ideas around (FS, doc. 154, 4). The Marist way addressed the whole person, spirit, body, and soul.¹⁰ Post-modernity is marked by a similar ‘new obscurity’ (‘neue

⁶ Coste, *Lectures*, p. 230.

⁷ Launay, *Le bon prêtre*, p. 42.

⁸ Quoted in François Drouilly sm, *Les Avis de Jean-Claude Colin au personnel du petit séminaire de Belley – Jean-Claude Colin’s Instructions to the Staff of the Minor Seminary of Belley* (Maristica, 3), Rome, 1990, p. 96-98.

⁹ Quoted in Drouilly, *Instructions*, p. 108 : Yves Sandre, *Marchands de participes*, Paris, Seuil, 1962 [comment in *A Founder Acts*, doc. 242].

¹⁰ P. Jean Décailly sm, *Règlement d’un collège chrétien*, Lyon, 1868. Much focus is given to a monastery-like routine in the (boarding) school as disposition for good behavior, Christian life, and successful study.

Unübersichtlichkeit', Jürgen Habermas). A response could be to offer identity and profile.

Marist ethos – fruit of a Marian vision of the Church

Education and schools have never been the only field of activity for the Marists. Why did Colin take on a work? He did so because the Church asked him to answer a need.

Bishop Devie of Belley needed to push him hard until Colin accepted to take over Belley College. Finally, Colin took it as God's will, because it would answer a need of the local church. The Marists are a Marian congregation, indicating the availability of Mary to say 'yes' to the will of God, for Colin expressed in a mandate given by the Church, be it local or universal, bishop or pope. The Marists did not start as a missionary congregation. They have become known as missionaries of the South Pacific. Again, Colin took this work on as a response to a mandate by the Church, in this case Pope Gregory XVI.

This way, the Marists took on a variety of ministries, depending on the needs of the local or universal Church. Since 1954, the number of priests teaching grew little in developed countries. On the other hand, in the Solomon Islands they opened a school recently, including doing some of the teaching, because the bishop asked them to. The same will soon happen in Senegal.

Marists moved into rural areas. Marist schools did accept pupils who were not so well-off. Access was not limited to those pupils from higher social ranks or with a wealthy background. Living standards were often very simple. On the other hand, the Marists would reduce school fees. Boys could contribute to their fees by assisting in manual labor. Although it was not easy for many, there was an opening for those who would otherwise not have enjoyed higher education. Both Marist schools in Germany, Meppen and Fürstenzell, were founded in an area with that need. The Emsland, Lower Saxony, and this part of Lower Bavaria could not offer much in terms of higher education for boys.¹¹

Education and schools were always regarded as important because future leaders in society were trained and Christian values could be presented.

¹¹ Just one example for the contribution by the Marists in the Pacific: Katherine Foi, *Cawaci 1890-2007. A Microcosm of Catholic Education in Fiji*, in *Forum Novum* 8-9 (2007) 166 – 182.

3 Practical perspectives for today

Continuity with the inspiration of the first Marists is a reference point to establish identity. Identity results in a specific profile. A Marist school wins this profile on the level of symbols: the name of the school, symbols and language used, on the level of persons: presence of Marists – be it lay or religious, and on the way of how to go about ‘school’.¹²

From identity we can move to response, a response to the needs of the present time. Taking good care of a Marist school is already a first and lasting response: good education.

The setting for a Marist ethos in schools today

De scientia – well trained and learned: Colin wanted a high standard of learning for Marists and their pupils. Learning was set in the context of a holistic view, soul, body, mind.

Marist perspective: The Marist origin of a school is a starting point. Focus is on the human person. Faith is an explicit topic. Everybody in the school is member of the same ‘family’.

Leading principle is ‘creative fidelity’. That is to say: In Marist tradition we find inspiration for analogous situations today. We do not simply copy the past.

Religious life in a school: What had a uniform expression in the past will see a pluriform expression today. Nevertheless, which shape and profile has the spiritual life of the school?

The school family:

Priest and teacher – for others: Do not be a hindrance, but an instrument (‘be as it were hidden and unknown’) for the great work of education says Colin. The inspiration is Mary: personally unassuming, but full of zeal in her active presence (FS, doc. 1, 2). How can I move from doing a job to following a vocation?

Team work and unity in our approach: Marist priests as teachers worked in the context of a common vision, common prayer, meals, and social life. This is where they found their own support. In how much can lay staff be a corporate, mutually supportive body?

Personal vocation in life – student centered: Colin had a Christological focus in education: form young people into good Christians. Today we could re-phrase: help young people to discern

¹² For a detailed earlier presentation: *Characteristics of Marist Education*, Rome, 2006, with excerpts from mission statements of Marist schools worldwide.

their vocation – in a broad sense: character, talents, beliefs (‘proposer la foi’).

Climate in a school – person centered: The ratio teacher – pupils in early Marist schools was very low, 1 Marist to seven pupils. The inspiration for today could be: how do we establish continuous contact between a teacher and a group of pupils in spite of high numbers and modern teaching systems like course work?

School family – a new form of family? In some ways, schools become like a family to young people. While minor seminaries were criticized for substituting families, today some parents seem to see a ‘school family’ as opportunity.

The school and the Church

Marist spirituality is Marian and *ecclesial*. The Constitutions say, ‘support and renew the Church’ (SM Constitutions, number 10). A school can support in many ways the image of Church, liturgical life, and openness in exchange about issues.

Explicitly religious: Marist schools then were explicitly religious in language, understanding, and teaching. How can we promote religious language today?

Find your place in the Church: Colin favored unity, spoke out against division, supported the local and universal church. How is the relationship with the local bishop and church?

The school and society

School and society – Christian input: The aim is to educate Christian citizens, to form leaders with values.

The neglected and the marginalized: Marist schools have always shown openness for those who could not afford expensive education.

International solidarity: The boys of Belley College exchanged letters with their former teacher, Peter Chanel, on Futuna and sought to support Oceania. Could a school run a project of international solidarity (within the global Marist network)?

The Marist school and Europe

For many, ‘Europe’ is a distant reality and an abstract structure only. The Marist experience through school exchanges and the Network of Marist Schools allows a personal experience to create a ‘Europe of people’ who know each other. In the early 1990s, Jacques Delors (*1925), from 1985 to 1994 president of the European Commission,

talked about giving Europe a soul as an answer to a need. This call from a politician involved in Europe asks for a direct response from schools with a religious tradition. Europe as economic vision or economic progress only reduces persons to factors and creates people on the margin. To those Marists should be attentive with their broader vision of the whole person.

Conclusion

Marists in school as response to a need in society or world: This is how they came to take over schools besides other ministries. The background in France was the initiative of the bishops to ‘bring back religion to society’ after the troubles of the Revolution.

Another need answered was for the Marists themselves: this way they could establish ministries, important for them as newly founded group. And it answered Colin’s understanding of the essential of being Marist: integrity of community life, prayer and work.

Starting point for a Marist work like a school according to Colin would be the availability to respond to a need of the people or the Church, be it local, be it global. Such needs can be identified only on the local level.

The focus is on the person, more than the institution. The story at the beginning illustrated this well. Mary saw the needs of the people. Her attitude is our inspiration. In the words of a teacher of the Marist Brothers: “We do not teach subjects, we teach pupils”.¹³ This responds to the threat of anonymity in modern society.

Instead of identifying ‘the needs of Europe today’¹⁴ and asking the Marist schools to reply, I chose the option to point out the principle behind Colin’s choice of a ministry (availability to the Church or people) and the main needs he tried to answer through schools: holistic and family approach, ecclesial and social, local and global.

A last element from history is the reflection on Colin as founder. That is: He gave a body to a spirit. A beautiful spirit alone bears no fruit. This is what it is all about: to live the Marist spirit in the service of people and the Church made concrete according to the local needs. A school is an excellent place to do so.

¹³ “Wir unterrichten keine Fächer, sondern Schüler”: Johann Staudner [religion teacher], *Die Maristen-Schulbrüder und ihre Pädagogik*, in *Jahresbericht 2010/2011, Maristen-Realschule Cham*, 71 - 72.

¹⁴ See for example Mark Walls sm, *A Brief History of Marist Fathers’ Involvement in Education*, in *Forum Novum* 10, 1 (2008) 163 – 176, here p. 167.