

Mary Support of the Church at the End of Time

1. A Colinian theme

As we have already seen, the Blessed Virgin's message at Le Puy – at least in the form that Fr. Colin passed on – has two parts. In the first, Mary says that she was the support of the Church at its birth; but that's not all. Immediately, we are projected into the future, where the true emphasis of the saying lies. So, to return to a text that we have already seen, *FS* 4,1: 'The blessed Virgin said, "I was the support of the newborn Church; I shall also be at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me."'

And there's the point of the whole saying. Now, if 'these words presided over the earliest days of the Society' (cf. *FS* 4,2), it's not so much in order to recall the first moments of the faith, but rather to prepare us to welcome an intervention of Mary in the future and to co-operate with it. Thus also Colin in another text we have already seen, *FS* 116,7: 'Messieurs, 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. The apostles had their reasons for not making it known to the world, but she will make her presence felt even more than in the beginning.'

Mary will do still 'more' at the end than at the beginning, because the need will be still greater. I quote *FS* 117,3 (1846): 'And the blessed Virgin, who did such great things then, will do even greater ones at the end of time, because the human race will be even more ill.' In fact the human race is already ill: *FS* 152,1 'We must admit that we are living in very bad times; mankind is really sick. At the end of time it will need a great deal of help, and the blessed Virgin will be the one to give it.' 'We are living in very bad times' – more literally, 'The times are evil': Colin is quoting – no doubt fully aware – Eph 5:16. We are in the year 1848, and contemporary events – the outbreak of revolution in France and elsewhere – seem to justify the quotation. But the Founder has always lived with the feeling that the times are bad, so bad in fact that the end could well be near. Notice, all the same, that with Colin there is a certain

space, expressed in the tense of the verbs he uses, between the present times – bad as they are – and the end, which is still to come: ‘mankind *is* really sick. At the end of time it *will need* a great deal of help.’

It is likely enough that Jean-Claude Colin believed in his heart of hearts that the end of time was already very near. On 25 September, 1844, Mayet said to him (*FS* 4,2): ‘The great number of wonders the blessed Virgin is working seem to herald the end of the world, for devotion to Mary is usually the last resort of Providence to bring back a sinner.’ We have seen Colin’s reply: ‘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.’ All the same, when speaking to the Marists he was his usual prudent self:

FS 160,7: ‘Times are bad (1848), but Mary who consoled, protected and saved the new-born Church will save it in the last days. I am not saying that Judgement Day is almost upon us, but still, it will be soon enough when it does come. When you have meditated on these words: “Do you think that when the Son of Man comes, he will find faith still on earth” [Lk 18:8] you cannot but be afraid, for there is so little of it to be seen in these days.’

In other words, when he contemplates the present situation, the Founder thinks spontaneously of the phrase from Ephesians that we have seen, and also of sayings of Christ such that in Luke 18:8 and he draws the conclusion that we are already entering the last times. However, he does not want to ‘say that Judgement Day is almost upon us’, even if it will come ‘soon enough’. In any case, his purpose is not to announce the end of the world but rather to declare what will be Mary’s role at the end, Mary’s role and also that of the Marists who will be her instruments. Fr. Colin continues in the same number of *FS*:

‘Mary will make use of us, her sons. Let us make ourselves worthy of that trust. Through us she will struggle with the devil and the world, and through us she will overcome it, if by the purity of our lives and innocence of heart we put ourselves in the way of deserving her favour and graces.’

Jean Coste comments more than once on these statements of Colin, notably in ‘Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time: Analysis of Data in Jean-Claude Colin’, *FN* 3,3 (1996) 245-263. According to him (p. 254), Colin’s thinking about the Church at its birth or at the end of time ‘does not seem to be systematically and exclusively dependent’ on the set expression ‘I was the support... etc.’; again, pp.

262-263: 'While the set expression came from Courveille, Colin furnished its content, and the latter coincides with what is best in his apostolic insights.' Coste sums up Colin's ideas about the end of time in five points.

1. The role of Mary (pp. 254-255): the conviction that Mary 'will save the Church in the last times' (*FS* 160,7), even that she will do 'more' at the end than at the beginning (thus *FS* 116,7), because the need will be greater.

2. The role of the Society of Mary (p. 255): 'To this conviction another is added immediately, namely that the special role which Mary is to play at the end of time is also foreseen for the Society which she has chosen and which bears her name' (thus *FS* 143,2; 160,7).

3. What does Colin mean by 'end of time'?

One set of statements by Colin presents the end as a reality still to come, but already near. The basis of this conviction is very clearly shown. It is a confrontation between what the Founder can see with his own eyes and two Gospel texts that speak of the end: Luke 18:8 ('little faith'), and Matthew 24:24 (the false Messiahs and false prophets who will show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect) (pp. 257-258).

On the other hand, Fr. Colin does not calculate the days until the end. Coste cites Fr. David (*OM* 886,2): 'As for whether the time for these great events [the end of time] was near or far, I have never understood that he had received any special enlightenment.' Coste notes Colin's feelings of repugnance for the 'secret' of La Salette concerning the end of the world and concludes: 'Thus, Colin spoke very freely according to the occasion, without reference to any fixed calculation' (p. 258).

According to other things the Founder says, we are already in the last times. As Coste comments: 'In other words, if, in one way, the end of time is yet to come, in another it is already there.' And he adds: 'At this point, we cannot help wondering what Colin found in the New Testament itself on the Kingdom of God which is to come, which is near, and which is already there' (p. 259).

4. The end of time provides a key for reading any given time (pp. 259): 'Eschatological reference, thus freed from any gratuitous calculations as to the future, is basically a key to understanding the era in which we live, an invitation not to get settled in it, but to feel all its instability. It is in this line of reference that we must situate Colin's many utterances which set up a relationship between his time and the end of time.'

5. The name of the Society of Mary has been held in reserve for the last times (cf. *FS* 118,2; pp. 241-242).

2. Jean-Claude Colin's eschatology

Colin thus finds plausible signs that the end is near in the events of his own time: the 'little faith' that there is to see on earth, also Mary's interventions in the world; but he doesn't insist on it. His intention is not to announce the imminent end of the world, even as a means of motivating conversions, but to prepare the Church of the end times. Furthermore, if Mary is to intervene at the end of time, it is not in order to protect the faithful from the effects of a universal catastrophe, but rather to 'support' the Church then as she already did at the beginning. In the last analysis, Colin puts the emotional stress not on fear but on encouragement.

I imagine that Jean-Claude Colin's eschatology has embarrassed more than one Marist, probably ever since the second generation, which didn't necessarily share the enthusiasms of the first aspirants. We may be embarrassed for any one or more of three reasons. First is the embarrassment of the modern Christian who does not want to listen to talk about the end times – unless in a theoretical or historical context that puts it at a safe distance: people believed in all that in the 1st century, but not now. Edwin Keel is one Marist author who has faced up to Colin's eschatology. He makes the apt comment that 'Our own late twentieth century ... has relegated talk of the end to the rantings of fanatics and the credulous. Yet, ironically, ours is the first age in which an imminent end of human history is no longer metaphor but concrete, demonstrable possibility' ('The Work of Mary at the End of Time', *FN* 1,4 (1991) 427-444, p. 431). Today, in fact, doomsday scenarios abound, according to which human history will end either 'with a bang' or with a 'whimper'.

In another article ('On Colin and the Telling of Time', *FN* 3,3 (1996) 338-357), Keel quotes the theologian J.-B. Metz (p. 339): '[F]ollowing Christ is not something that can be lived without the idea of the Parousia, without looking forward to the second coming... [S]urely we Christians offer the world a painful spectacle: that of people who talk about hope but really no longer look forward to anything.'

A second source of embarrassment is the role that Colin sees as Mary's at the end of time: even if you can envisage the end of the world, can you assign a special role reserved for the blessed Virgin? Jesus spoke of his coming at the end of time.

Isn't it unnecessary and a bit exaggerated to speak of a special Marian intervention? The third source of embarrassment is the idea of associating the Society of Mary in some particular way with the end times. Let's just get on with our work 'under the name of Mary' without daydreaming about the parousia!

Aware of and indeed sharing this embarrassment, I want nonetheless to take up the challenge. Let's decide to take seriously the eschatology of a Colin – and of the Bible. There *is* something more to come: a final divine intervention in the history of the world. In order to speak about it, the Bible uses symbolic language: last judgment, victory over Evil (or over the Evil One), new creation. This last idea has given rise to the disturbing images of the dismantling of creation (stars falling out of the sky, sun and moon darkened); this turns out to be the prelude to the creation of a 'new earth' and a 'new heaven'. For this reason, one can call the final catastrophe rather a 'eucatastrophe' – to use the neologism coined by J.R.R. Tolkien. This is the way – as a catastrophe that turns round unexpectedly to end well – that the New Testament invites us to think of the end of time; thus 2 Peter 2:6; Luke 21:25-33. According to the Judeo-Christian revelation, this eucatastrophe will be the crowning moment of the whole of human history. As for the second and third sources of Marist embarrassment, Edwin Keel asks this challenging question ('On Colin and the Telling of Time', p. 339): 'Could a recovery of the eschatological edge in Colin's faith make for a crucial Marist contribution to the Church of our own days? Is there an important lesson to be learned from Colin's manner of telling time?'

3. The parousia of Christ

One way of approaching this subject is to contemplate the Ascension of Christ (see 'Biblical Approaches', *FN* 3,4 (1996) 520-537). It would probably be true to say that the Ascension does not receive much attention from exegetes and theologians today. On the whole it would be regarded as simply an aspect of the Resurrection of Our Lord, a kind of coda, perhaps, to a movement whose themes have already been fully developed. It is, therefore, important to focus our attention on the episode of the Ascension in the New Testament, where we will find that it is not presented as an after-thought to the Resurrection, but as its culmination: Jesus is raised from the dead *so that* he can be exalted to the right hand of the Father.

The Ascension of Christ is a distinctively Lucan episode, although it is implicitly mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, notably in John 20:17. Saint Luke in fact tells the story of the Ascension twice over, at the end of his Gospel and at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Each time he tells it a little differently, bringing out different aspects of the meaning of the event. We are going to look closely at the narrative in Acts, where the Ascension of Jesus is essentially linked to his parousia, his return at the end of time.

Acts 1:6-12 begins with a question put to Jesus by his disciples: 'Lord, has the time come for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?' The question expresses the expectation of many Jews that God was going to raise up a liberator who would restore Israel's political independence under God. Jesus' disciples had been hoping that he was the one chosen by God, but his death on the cross seemed to put an end to their hopes (cf. Luke 24:19-21). Now Jesus, by returning from the grave, has proved that he was after all the one sent by God, so he must be the awaited liberator. Was this the moment when he would set about the great work of national liberation? Jesus does not give a direct answer to this question, but replies first that it is not for them to know times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority. He then diverts his disciples' minds to something that is going to happen to them quite soon, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and to the task that lies ahead of them. 'After saying this, he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid [or carried] him from their sight.'

Anyone familiar with the Old Testament who read or heard this account of the Ascension of Jesus would have been reminded irresistibly of another person who was taken up to heaven. That was the prophet Elijah, the story of whose ascension or assumption in 2 Kings 2:1-18 lies in the background of the narrative of Acts. The parallel is clear in the general structure of the two stories and is made unmistakable by a direct quotation of the Greek expression 'he was taken up to heaven' from the Septuagint. Jesus is presented here as a new Elijah (elsewhere in the New Testament, that is said of John the Baptist, but that is another story). Now the Jews of Jesus' time believed that Elijah was going to come back to earth to prepare God's people for the Last Day. This expectation is expressed in Malachi 3:23-24 (which are the last words of the Old Testament in 'our' Bibles): 'Know that I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before my day comes, that great and terrible day. He shall turn the hearts of fathers towards their children and the hearts of children towards their fathers, lest I

come and strike the land with a curse.’ In other words, Elijah’s work of preparing for the Day of the Lord is one of reconciliation and restoration of unity and peace. It is therefore highly significant that in the account of the Ascension in Acts 1:10-11, two men in white garments (angels) tell the watching apostles: ‘This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, *will come back* in the same way that you saw him go to heaven.’

So Jesus, like Elijah, has been taken up into heaven, whence he will return to prepare God’s people for the Day of the Lord. Peter expresses this same expectation in Acts: ‘Repent, then, and turn to God, so that he will forgive your sins. If you do, an hour of consolation will come from the Lord, and he will send Jesus, who is the Messiah he has already chosen for you. He must remain in heaven until the time for the restoration of all things...’ (Acts 3:19-21). In Peter’s thinking, Jesus’ Ascension is oriented towards his return: he has gone up to heaven precisely in order to be held in reserve there until the destined moment when God will send him as Messiah to restore all things. According to the logic implicit in the reference to Elijah’s return according to Malachi, this ‘restoration’ concerns essentially the unity of human beings among themselves and with God.

4. Mary at the end of time

And Mary? How is Mary going to ‘support’ the Church at the end of time?

One author who comes close to the Colinian idea of a special intervention by Mary at the end of time is the Russian Orthodox theologian Serge Boulgakov (see ‘Biblical Approaches’, p. 528). In his work published in French under the title *L’épouse de l’agneau*, Boulgakov does not hesitate to use the expression ‘Marian parousia’, which he believes will come no later than that of Christ, and even before: ‘Remaining in the world after the Ascension, alone, so to speak, without her Son, the Mother could alone still anticipate his coming, if that was necessary for humanity which has need of the vision of her face which touches its heart.’ Marian apparitions are proofs of her abiding presence to the world. Boulgakov continues: ‘By reason of this general drawing closer of heaven and earth, which precedes the Parousia, a particular manifestation of the Mother of God, prior to the Coming, becomes conceivable.’ The writer then evokes the vision of the Apocalypse (21-22): ‘And (the angel) said to me: “Come, I will show you the Betrothed, the Bride of the Lamb.”’

And he took me in spirit on to a great and high mountain, and he showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, which was coming down out of heaven from God...' 'This symbolic language used by the Visionary of the mysteries,' asks Boulgakov, 'has it not something to do with the appearance in the world of the Spirit-bearing Bride who makes smooth the ways of the Lord?' I would draw your attention to Boulgakov's application to Mary of the image of the city of God coming down from heaven (Ap 21), an image which plays such an important part in the thinking of Mary of Agreda and provides the title of her work.

Although Boulgakov admits that Scripture has nothing to say of Mary's participation in the Parousia of Christ, he cites the testimony of Tradition in the form of the Byzantine and Russian iconography of the Last Judgment, where Mary is always represented at the right hand of her Son. (The same is also true for Western iconography.)

In his article 'Marie dans l'église naissante et à la fin des temps', Fr. Coste expresses the view that '... present-day thinking on Mary and the Church will perhaps reach its full maturity when, in the light of the recent dogma [of the Assumption] and the new perspectives of biblical theology, it is in a position to set out clearly the eschatological consequences of Our Lady's unique mission in God's plan' (*ActaSM*, vol. 6, p. 188). I propose to take up Coste's insight and try to understand Mary's Assumption in the light of the narrative of Jesus' Ascension in Acts. When you look closely at the parallel between these two events, you are led to this conclusion: if Mary – like Jesus – has been taken up to heaven, it is so that she – like Jesus – can return from heaven at the end of time to prepare God's people for the Day of the Lord. This, I allow, is not how we have usually understood the dogma of the Assumption. On the other hand it is, I submit, a legitimate way of understanding the 'eschatological consequences of Our Lady's unique mission in God's plan.' It corresponds to the intuitions of Fr. Colin and Serge Boulgakov concerning the role of Mary at the end of time.

If Mary's Assumption, understood in the light of Acts 1:6-12, authorizes us to speak of a 'Marian parousia', what more can we say about the Return of Mary? When Mary comes again, what will she do? Let us recall that, according to the prophet Malachi, Elijah – the prototype of Jesus ascended into heaven and of Mary assumed into heaven – will come before the Day of the Lord. In order to prepare the people for God's coming and to avert the divine curse, Elijah will 'turn the hearts of fathers

towards their children and the hearts of children towards their fathers.’ We might infer that Mary is to play a part in preparing God’s people for his coming, and that her part will consist in reconciling the children of God with one another, so that they will truly be God’s family.

5. In search of time present

Time past and time future – but what about time present? We have been looking at the newborn Church and the Church of the end time. How should we regard the Church of the present time? How should we regard – with the eyes of Jean-Claude Colin – the moment of history in which we live?

Edwin Keel, commenting on the words of Mary at Le Puy, makes the following point (‘The Work of Mary at the End of Time’, *FN* 1,4 (1991) 427-444, p. 430): ‘The problematic of the word we are interpreting arises from the fact that there is no present time expressed – there is reference only to the past of the nascent Church and the future end of time – and yet the word is addressed to people who find themselves at neither of these two end points, but somewhere in between. We are tempted to resolve the apparent anomaly by simply reducing the “end of time” to “our time”, as if all that Mary was talking about was being present now without further qualification. Or we try to insert the present, expanding the text: “Mary was the support of the new-born Church, she supports the Church today, and will do so until the end of time.” But this makes of the text a meditation on Mary’s constant activity in the Church, takes the edge off the prophetic character of Mary’s intervention at this particular moment of history, and reduces the “end of time” to a simple temporal limit and conclusion of Mary’s never-varying activity on behalf of God’s people in this world.’

It is indeed tempting to situate ourselves in the present as the midpoint between past and future, according to a tripartite schema. In that case Mary’s work in today’s Church appears as the continuation of what she was doing in the beginning and promised to continue right to the end: Mary was the support of the Church at its birth; she still will be at the end of time; so she is the support of the Church here and now and makes use of the Marists in order to carry out her work. That is more or less what the Chapter of 1969-70 said in its declaration *Marists and the World Today*, on ‘The Mystery of Mary in the Church (n. 127): ‘Mary was present in the Church at its

very beginnings, she was its inspiration and its support, although she held no prominent position and remained hidden among the faithful. Her presence revealed to Father Colin the place a Society bearing her name might occupy in the Church at a time of upheaval.’ The same number continues a few lines later: ‘The second Vatican Council showed a similar consciousness on the directly theological plane, and for the benefit of the whole Church, when it looked to Mary to deepen its understanding of the Church and its mission.’ This is a beautiful text, but you will notice that the properly eschatological reference has disappeared, or rather has been translated into the reference to ‘a time of upheaval’. In a similar way, the present Constitutions (n. 5) speak of ‘Mary’s desire to be ... a support for the Church in these uncertain times, just as she has always been since the days of Pentecost’.

On the contrary, for Colin history does not take place in three moments – past, present, future – but in two only – past and future-already-beginning. No, in the last analysis, there is perhaps for Colin only ‘time-coming-to-an-end’, for the end will be like the beginning, and the utopia of the newborn Church is striving to become a reality in the parousia: ‘Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past’ (T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*).

It is proper to Colin to ‘read’ his century, not simply as a time of crisis, but as already the last time. We have to add, of course, that he did not necessarily think – at least it was not his habitual and characteristic way of thinking – that the world was literally going to end tomorrow (even if he saw more signs of the approaching end after 1848!). It’s a bit like the eschatology of the New Testament, as Coste has pointed out: the kingdom of God is ‘close at hand’, even ‘already here’, although it is ‘yet to come’. For Colin too, the ‘close at hand’ is nearer to ‘already here’, even though we do not know the ‘times and dates’ that the Father has fixed by his own authority (cf. Acts 1:7). In other words, if Mary is acting now in the Church, if – as she told the young Jean-Claude Courveille at Le Puy – ‘it is my wish and the wish of my Son, that there be another Society, one consecrated to me, one which will bear my name’, it’s because she wants to be ‘the Protectress’ of the Church ‘in this last age of impiety and unbelief’ (cf. *OM* 718,5; Keel, *A Book of Texts for the Study of Marist Spirituality*, no. 1).

Colin thus lines up with the New Testament, where it is a matter of living *now* as if we were living in the very last days, without necessarily thinking that we are there in the most literal sense of the words. For example Saint Paul can write to the

Christians of Corinth: 'I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with this world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor 7:29-31). But the same apostle does not forbid his disciples to marry or have children on the pretext that the world is soon coming to an end. Christians continue to buy and sell, to work and manage their affairs. Nonetheless, to live as a Christian, is to live now as one will have to live at the very end, in accordance with the values that will then be the only ones that remain. And that's how to live as a Marist – with the assurance of Mary's 'support' for the Church.

6. So what are we to do?

So what are we to do in this in this time that is coming to an end? What is the task that falls to us Marists as instruments of the Blessed Virgin and so of the divine mercies? What is our Mission? Or are we simply to sit and wait for the literal end of time?

We have seen in Fr. Colin's thinking the structural link between the beginning and the end, to the point that he never speaks of one without the other: Mary will be the support of the Church at the end of time *as* she was of the Church at its birth, and even more so. As we have seen, Mary's role in the Church at its birth, as suggested by Acts 1:14, consisted above all in reconciling and uniting the disparate groups that existed in the Church. If we take the line of Malachi 3:23-24, Mary's role at the end of time will consist of reconciling and uniting God's family. Reconciling and uniting, at the end as at the beginning. Fr. Colin does not tire of repeating to his Marists that their sole model should be and is the Church at its birth. Of all the features of the new-born Church traced by Luke in Acts, Colin gives first place to the one he sums up in the well-known formula: *Cor unum et anima una* (cf. Acts 4:32).

Like the first believers of Acts 4:32, Marists are to be 'one heart and one soul' – *cor unum et anima una*. We are called in this way not only to imitate the new-born Church, but also to reproduce this same union of heart and soul in the Church of the future, 'so that, to quote the *Summarium Regularum Societatis Mariae* of 1833, at the end of time as at the beginning, all believers may, with the help of God, be *one single*

heart and one single soul in the bosom of the same Roman Church and that all, walking in a way worthy of God under the guidance of Mary, may attain eternal life.’ Coste comments (‘Analysis of Data’, FN 3/3, 1996, p. 249): (In this text) ‘which probably goes back to the Cerdon rule ... Colin identifies the phrase *one heart and one mind* as the characteristic trait of the people of the latter days as it was of those of the early days.’

What, then, is the Mission of the Society of Mary? That is not a question that Fr Colin answers. In his day, the word ‘mission’ did not bear the meaning that we have in mind: he talks about the ‘end’ or ‘goal’ of the Society, but not about its ‘mission’. Based on what we have been seeing, I would say that it is our Mission to reconcile and unite God’s family in order to prepare his coming. This is how Marists are called to take part in Mary’s ‘work’, to be the support of the Church at the end of time as she was of the Church at its birth. If I am right, that would give some clear directions for our choice of ministries and for the perspective in which we carry them out.

I will only add that reconciling and uniting is not easy. It costs. It cost Jesus his life.