

Our Vocation: Do Great Things for God like Mary

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The Fourvière pledge of 1816, foundational document in the Marist story, aimed at the Marists doing great things: “capable of all things in Him who strengthens us, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Saint Paul wrote God’s grace was not given in vain (1 Co 15: 9-10). He allowed God to use him as instrument and thus great things were achieved. Colin often referred to this basic experience of Paul.

It was also Colin’s own personal experience and he usually formulated this in a Marian expression. The *Magnificat* is the Marian passage most frequently quoted by him.

While Marists easily associate the virtue of humility with their vocation, they are not to overlook the fruit this bears in the understanding of Colin.

What Colin said to a young man in spiritual direction, “God will do great things through you (*A Founder Speaks*, doc. 52) can for Jean Coste be linked to the *Magnificat*, ‘God who is mighty has done great things for me’ (Coste, *Marian Vision*, p. 258). God has done great things through Mary.

In 1987 Canadian Marist Yvan Carré did a preliminary study on the basis of references to Colin speaking about ‘doing great things’.¹ This study I would like to make known and reflect further upon our Marist vocation, ‘to do great things’.

Great things for God

Yvan Carré raises as a starting point:² How can Marist spirituality link two seemingly very diverse elements: humility and great things? This is precisely the link Colin established in Marist tradition. Saint Thomas already explained it: humility refers to the human person, great

¹ Yvan Carré SM, *De grandes choses*, in *Journée Colin, 1987: Etudes et réflexions*, Hull, 1988; copy in APM.

² Carré’s dossier of texts quotes the following: *A Founder Speaks*: doc. 36, 1 (1838-39); doc. 52 (1842); FS, doc. 59, 34 (September 1842); doc. 74, 3 (December 1843); doc. 132, 24 (November 1846); doc. 140, 11-12 (June 1847); doc. 142, 3 (August 1847); doc. 172, 17 (January 1849); doc. 188, 17-18 (September 1853); Letters Colin: to Lagniet, 16 October 1845; to Mayet, 28 November 1867; from *Doctrine Spirituelle*: p. 26 (Jeantin, *Colin* 4, p. 92); p. 61 (Jeantin, *Colin* 4, p. 136; Mayet 9, p. 437) (1850); p. 555 (Jeantin, *Colin* 5, p. 452; Mayet 5, p. 621); p. 422 (1842); p. 426 (1846).

things refer to God. It is not about my achievements but about God working through me. Another great example is Saint Paul. We read in 1 Corinthians 15: 9-10:

“I am the least of the apostles, indeed unfit to be called an apostle... Yet it is by the grace of god I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.”

Colin employed the example of Paul to illustrate for the confreres the point in question (FS, doc. 140, 11-12 (1847):

“[11] What is a tool by itself? Let us place ourselves in the hands of God like the tool in the hands of a workman. As long as you rely on yourself, you can expect nothing. [12] But in addition, a great feeling of confidence. You must say to God, ‘Lord, you can do great things through me. You made the world out of nothing, and from a persecutor you made a great apostle. With me you have everything to gain, for whatever you do through my ministry, no one will ever say that it was I who did it.’”

‘To do great things for God’ is established in the oral tradition from Colin in references in *A Founder Speaks* and *A Founder Acts* and others published in *Doctrine spirituelle*. These quotes refer to Marists and foreign missions, education, Colin in Rome, admission of candidates, and the overall mission of the Society.

Already in the first years as General, to do ‘great things for God’ was perceived as a goal and compatible with Marist humility. In the spring of 1841, Colin talked to the Marists in Belley (*Colin Sup* 1, doc. 255, § 13 (March-April 1841)). Maître-pierre, his vicar, had in mind to separate the priests from the other branches because collaboration caused complications. Colin refused such a plan. He said, do not separate what God united, because without their prayers ‘on ne fait pas grand chose’, we cannot do great things.

In 1853, Maître-pierre wrote down his (and of others) impression of the founder after 1836:³

“On the contrary, convinced that this is the work of God, his humble simplicity has never hindered him to believe that the Society of Mary is called to do great things in the Church of God.”

³ Gaston Lessard SM, *Devenir mariste* (Collection: Présences de Marie, 1), Saint-Augustin, 2001, p. 73 (cf. OM, doc. 752, 43): «Ainsi, persuade que c’est l’œuvre de Dieu, sa modeste simplicité ne l’a jamais empêché de croire que la Société de Marie ne soit appelée à faire de grandes choses dans l’église de Dieu».

Colin saw a spirit of humility and great achievements linked in Mary. In Mary of Agreda he read about it. Mary embodies both, humility, human weakness, hidden and unknown presence, and the great things, the marvels God can achieve through such people like Mary, like Paul. The gospel of Luke chapter 1, verse 49, gives us the Marian base:⁴

“For the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name.”

The 1872 Constitutions

These ponderings by the Marist founder finally flowed into his central written work, the Constitutions finished in 1872 and approved by Rome in 1873. What is kept in the constitutions of a congregation is of course fundamental and has a definite weight and importance and as it were canonical status. Although not formally set out as the beginning or end of the text our idea appears in different numbers.

A Marist needs to be able to ‘achieve great things’ because such is the mission of the Society. This condition we find already in his 1842 constitutions (no 34) and it was kept and repeated in the 1872 text.

Colin finally fixed the spiritual background to the mission of the Society in the text. The concordance to the Latin text established by Lessard/Rizzuto helps us to find the references.⁵ One is given by Carré (no 59). The text has one more.

Number 59 lists those candidates not to be admitted. In the second part it reads:

“...those who are fond of their own comfort or too delicate, because such people are generally inclined to be lukewarm and incapable of great things;”

Mayet kept a commentary by Colin on this (FS, doc. 172, 17). We are in January 1849. Colin reacts to a priest hesitant to take up teaching:

“It says in our Rule that we must pay particular attention, keep a careful watch on those who are *nimum delicate quia ad magna non sunt apti* [‘those who like to be mollycoddled, for they are unsuited to achieving great things’]. I wrote the same thing again these last few days to our professors, to my sons, my novices at Agen, the house which is my great consolation, and of which I cannot think without being moved.”

⁴ Cf. A. Greiler SM, *Transforming Grace*, in FN 10, 2 (2008) 397-399.

⁵ G. Lessard SM - M. Rizzuto SM (eds.), *Constitutionum Societatis Mariae Concordantiae*, 6 Fascicles, Washington, D.C., 1982, s.v. ‘magnus, magna, magnitudo’.

Beyond the ministry of teaching in colleges, all Marists are called to the same excellence. This includes the qualities the Superior General needs to have:

“Number 302: Moreover, the following qualities are also extremely necessary: ...magnanimity to undertake great things for the glory of God and the salvation of souls and to pursue them with constancy in spite of difficulties;”

The 1987 Constitutions

After Vatican II the Marists were challenged to update their legislation, in particular the constitutions, their rule of life. Has this key principle of the founder been kept in the new text, elaborated finally by the general chapter of 1985 and approved by Rome in 1987?

A first reading seems to stress only one pole: the virtue of humility in its Colnian expression of ‘hidden and unknown’. Mary plays a prominent role. She leads to the overall mission of her Society: support, love (no 78) the Church as Mary did (nos. 5.15.17.18.74.92.103), and at the same time contribute to its renewal (no 78).

Candidates join ‘a project of apostolic religious life’ (no 33). They need qualities to be able to ‘contribute effectively to the mission of the Society’ (nos. 42e.66.71):

“Number 42... (e) the intelligence, judgement and physical health necessary to enable him to contribute effectively to the mission and apostolates of the Society;”

This is much more careful than Colin’s blunt statement: ‘delicate’ people are not suited for a congregation which is called to do great things for God.

The ‘more’, the Ignatian ‘magis’ Colin asked for in the Society appears explicitly in academic and professional performance. However, in tone again watered down compared to Colin’s phrase:

“Number 27: Through prayer they will learn to place their gifts unselfishly at the disposal of the Society for the sake of the Kingdom. The humility which characterizes their apostolate does not exclude high levels of academic achievement or professional excellence.”

In three numbers in the final part we find the expression coined by Colin for the mission of the Society, ‘do great things’.

“3. Apostolic Life. Number 136: The Society of Mary is constituted in the Church as an apostolic religious community. The phrase ‘unknown and

even hidden in this world’ indicates the manner in which Marists engage in the apostolate and it does not hinder them from doing great things for God. It leads Marists to place themselves in the situation of those to whom they are sent and to put aside everything in themselves which might be an obstacle to the working of the Spirit.”

“1. Humility. Number 220: In this way, liberated from undue self-concern, they will be useful to others and do great things for God, and so the Society will achieve its goals. They leave it to the Lord to say the healing word that brings inner peace and the freedom to serve their neighbour.”

“6. Fidelity to the Spirit of the Society. Number 228: The secret of their own presence in the Church and the world of today: a presence attentive to God and vibrant with zeal, so that while doing great things for the Lord, they may seem to be unknown and even hidden in the world. This was Mary’s way; this is Mary’s work. It is expressed for all Marist in the words of Jean-Claude Colin.”

In these numbers both poles are present: humility – great things. They are linked in fact. Humility is the path to do great things. This is the paradox in the lives of Mary, Colin, Jean-Marie Vianney, in other words, this is the paradox of grace. The expression ‘great things’ from Colin is preserved for naming the aim of the Society.

The vocation of the Society

Searching for a short formula to capture the mission of the Society, we turn to the founder. The phrase ‘to do great things for God’ is one of the key phrases he left as our patrimony. Mary was the lowly handmaid through whom the Lord could do great things. Colin’s frequent references to Paul make this even more explicit.

To do great things was meditated upon by Colin over many years as the vocation of the Society. Finally, the founder placed the phrase and requirement in his constitutions of 1872.

Overall, the mission of the Society according to the 1987 text is much more focused on the Church. Colin used the phrase ‘do great things’ to various ministries. In fact, the new constitutions seem less courageous than the old text.

Could we say, Colin was thinking more in terms of the kingdom, the gathering of a Marian people in the utopia of the end times, while the approved legislation of 1987 narrowed it down to the presence of Mary

in the Church then and today? Colin spoke of Marists doing great things for God – not only for the Church.

The Marist founder himself, the men and women in Oceania, the confreres in the history of the Society of Mary have given ample proof that this call inspired them to perform great things.

Yvan Carre's emphasis on Marists as 'instruments for doing great things' cannot be underlined enough. And it evokes a different image than the idea of 'Marists being, humble, hidden and unknown' as our primary description. Mayet already left us a famous comment – 'hidden and unknown does not mean dead!' Colin said:⁶

"Messieurs, if God wills to make use of us, we must take courage, we must not be faint-hearted; that is not what pleases God. The faint-hearted will not accomplish great things for God: *omnia possum in eo qui me confortat* ('I can do all things in him who strengthens me', Phil 4, 13)."

Colin pleaded for excellence in studies. He took up the challenge of the youngest and most difficult foreign mission of the Church. He asked if candidates were able to do great things, he trusted that God would do great things through Marists.

Therefore I would like to conclude with what he called his prayer (FS, doc. 132, 28 (1846):

"How I like that prayer, "Lord, do great things through me" Some may say, "But that is pride," but I on the contrary say it is humility. For I am nothing and God made the world from nothing. I acknowledge my nothingness and the almighty power of God by this prayer."

⁶ FS, doc. 44, 9 (1842).