

## Mary, the Church and her Society

When Jean-Claude Colin thinks of the Virgin Mary he tends to see her in relation to the Church, typically as supporting it at its birth and at the end of time. I want to reflect with you now on four ideas or expressions referring to Mary and the Church that are current in the Society of Mary and elsewhere. These are: 'A Marian vision of the Church', 'Mary model of the Church', 'A Marian Church', 'Begin again a new Church'; only this last expression is really Colinian. Sometimes Marists roll several of these together, for example to say that our mission is 'to build a Marian Church'. Perhaps we need to unscramble them and look carefully at each. Finally I want to look again at what it means to be the Society of Mary.

### **1. A Marian Vision of the Church**

Fr Colin's way of understanding the Church, in which the presence and action of Mary are decisive, has been called by Jean Coste his 'Marian vision of the Church'. That was the title he gave to a public lecture delivered in Rome in 1984 and published in vol. 8 of the Maristica series bearing the same title (pp. 166-196). This expression, coined by Coste, was taken up in our present Constitutions, n. 92, in a sentence introduced after the 1985 Chapter: 'Marists are called, above all, to make their own a Marian vision of the Church.' The text continues: 'To achieve this, nothing will be as effective as a re-living of the founding experience of the Society', namely the moments of Fourvière, Cerdon and the mission in the Bugey.

Coste's Rome lecture presented before a general audience the results up till then of his work on the origins of the Society of Mary. Those who were listening to him were, for the most part, completely ignorant of Colin, Courveille and company, so it is interesting to see what Coste considers to be most important to mention. He begins with a rapid survey of Marist origins, in which he does not mention either Fourvière or the Bugey missions and has only a word or two about the Cerdon years. On the other hand, he has a lot to say about Jean-Claude Courveille and the message he brought to the major seminary at Lyons as coming from Our Lady in the cathedral of Le Puy. Coste goes into

detail about it in the second part of his lecture, in which he sets out Colin's utopian and eschatological ideas on the role of Mary at the birth of the Church and at the end of time. He also speaks there of Colin's three 'no's, inspired by the figure of Mary in the nascent Church, to the misuse of three forms of power to which an apostle is tempted: money, the power to decide and personal prestige. 'In these three areas,' writes Coste (p. 182), 'what Colin saw as the antidote to evil, to the corruption of the apostle's heart through greed, authoritarianism, and vanity, was the image of the Virgin Mary and the newborn Church for whom she was an example and a support.'

In the third and final part of his lecture, Coste wanted to 'bring out briefly the main elements which make up this Colinian vision' – his Marian vision of the Church. He makes three points. First he develops the intimate link between Mary and the Church, especially the Church in its beginnings and at the end of time, which Colin applied to the role his Congregation would be called to play (p. 184). He concludes: 'Through the belief of its founder, the Society of Mary can thus be counted among the eschatologically oriented religious foundations. Of these there have been many since the middle ages and they expressed the best of themselves by projecting unto the end of time, in utopian fashion, the values they bore' (p. 186f., referring to the sociologist Jean Séguy).

His second point follows on: 'However, and this is crucial, within this eschatological projection Mary holds a place which formerly belonged to the Holy Spirit' (p. 188). According to the main stream of the eschatological tradition flowing from Joachim of Flora in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Age of God the Father was followed by that of the Son, which in turn is to give way to the Age of the Holy Spirit. This is the scheme we find, for instance, in St Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, where the Age of the Spirit blends with that of Mary, who intervenes at the end of time. In sharp contrast, 'Colin never mentions the three ages. Nor does he attribute a role to the Holy Spirit in the last times: the eschatological projection is entirely directed upon Mary.' Coste comments: 'Such a development is certainly significant. How it took place and what it means has yet to be studied' – and, to my knowledge, it still needs to be studied more than twenty years later.

Coste's final point about Colin's Marian vision of the Church is that 'the dominant note of his Marian eschatology is not so much apocalyptic as it is pastoral' (p.

190). He explains: ‘In the mind of their founder, Marists are to be the instruments of his plan of mercy, or more precisely, as he often said, “the instruments of the divine mercies towards sinners”. Their job will be to reach sinners at all costs, while effacing themselves as much as possible so as to remove all obstacles to God’s action. The leitmotiv “Hidden and unknown in the world” now becomes pastoral praxis and determines a radical reappraisal of how to behave in the pulpit, in the classroom, and in the confessional, thus preparing the way for a new kind of Church witness that will articulate this Marian approach’ (p. 190f.). To end this summary of Coste’s remarkable lecture – which should not be consigned to oblivion and neglect – I cannot resist quoting its beautiful conclusion (p. 194f.):

‘Whenever a Marist abandons the stronghold of one who owns the truth and becomes instead defenceless as one who knows he must disappear in order to allow God to take over, then he understands how Mary is present in Colin’s vision of the Church and its mission.

‘Thanks to her something stirs in the heart of the apostle, a certain image of the Church emerges which prefigures the Church of the last days. In a sense, yes, the Church begins again, the Church which, from its birth at Pentecost, is less concerned with lasting forever thanks to a solid structure than with starting again each morning, humbly, around the Lord’s supper, with Peter and the apostles, awaiting the coming of the Spirit, persevering in prayer with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.’

## **2. Mary Model of the Church**

In n. 10 of the Constitutions we read:

‘... It is in pursuing these aims (of the Society) in the spirit of Mary that they will help to renew the Church in her image, a servant and pilgrim Church.’

A number of things could be said about this text. It too was inserted after the 1985 Chapter, with the idea of incorporating some elements of the provisional legislation of the 70s. In fact its source is in the statement of the Chapter of Renewal of 1969-70 on ‘Marists and the World Today’, published in *Decreta Capitularia*, n. 128. The preceding paragraph, n. 127, refers to Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, nn.

63 and 65, where the Council makes its own a tradition going back at least to St Ambrose, which speaks of Mary as the model and figure of the Church and of the Church as becoming more and more like this model. So the Marist General Chapter continues:

‘Now that this conciliar insight must be translated into the reality of everyday life, Marists believe that their tradition has already given them a modest but real experience of the direction the Church is taking in an effort to draw close to its type, Mary: a Church always searching after Jesus Christ, a serving Church, poor, lowly, without place of privilege, so that He may be proclaimed. The Society was made sensitive to these attitudes by the words of its Founder and the example of its elders, so that it must now feel an increased responsibility to be faithful to its early mission.’

The beautiful statement *To be a Marist* of the 1977 General Chapter takes over a shorter version of the text we have just read in its n. 15: ‘Our communities witness to the Church’s desire to grow nearer its perfect image in Mary: a Church which perseveres in its search for Jesus Christ, a servant Church, not wanting to domineer, without place of privilege, concerned only that He be proclaimed.’

Now listen again to our present Constitutions, n. 10:

‘... It is in pursuing these aims (of the Society) in the spirit of Mary that they will help to renew the Church in her image, a servant and pilgrim Church.’

This formula ‘renew the Church in Mary’s image’ is somewhat more independent of the vocabulary of Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* than are the Chapter texts of the 70s. Perhaps the final redactors of our Constitutions realised that Fr Colin never speaks of Mary as model, type or image of the Church, even though these expressions are traditional and even patristic; Colin speaks of Mary as model of the Marist and of the Society that bears her name, but not of Mary as model of the Church. Jan Hulshof has dealt with this fully in his paper to the Third International Colloquium on Marist History and Spirituality ‘Mary Model of the Church. A Marian and Ecclesial Spirituality’ (*FN* 3,4, 1996, pp. 586-602, p. 589f. and 591f.) Even so, the most recent text, in its conciseness, stresses even more than the earlier ones the idea that Mary is the model of a ‘servant and pilgrim Church’.

Another observation. The idea of the ‘servant Church’ is already in the texts of 1969-70 and 77, but that of a ‘pilgrim Church’ is new. It’s true that the earlier texts did

speak of a Church 'which perseveres in its search for Jesus Christ', but that's not really the same as a 'pilgrim Church'.

In fact, of course, neither expression is Colinian. On the other hand, both go back to important ideas of Vatican II and the post-conciliar era. They even represent two ecclesiologies, or rather, two 'models of the Church', to quote the title of Avery Dulles' famous book. As you know, the dominant model at the Council was that of the 'People of God', or even the 'Pilgrim People of God'. For forty years already before the Council, important research in Scripture, Patristics and Liturgy had been giving the Church a renewed sense of Salvation History, of God's plan revealed through history to save the human race by means of a chosen people. This people is guided by the Holy Spirit, but is itself on the move, on pilgrimage, like the rest of humanity. The Old Testament type is of course the people of the Exodus. This model stands at the very opposite of everything that would present itself as settled once and for all or triumphant. For Cardinal Suenens, one of the great conciliar figures, to adopt such a model brought with it 'a sort of spiritual revolution', especially for those formed in a more static and hierarchical ecclesiology. The 'Pilgrim People of God' model does not seem to have kept its primary place in the documents of the magisterium after Vatican II.

The other model, that of 'Servant Church', was favoured by the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the modern world, and since then has been adopted and developed by the magisterium in its social teaching. In this model, the Church is regarded as called to continue the mission of service for which Christ came into the world. The Council did not invent this way of seeing the Church; instead we must look to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose writings were very influential in the 60s. The latter especially presents Jesus as 'the man for others' and argues for a servant Church that would share in human destinies, that would not seek to dominate but would agree to help and serve, after the example of Jesus. This is the tone we hear in the Marist Chapter text of 1969-70, which wants a 'a serving Church, poor, lowly, without place of privilege, provided that He may be proclaimed'

This model proposes an attitude on the part of the Church that was rather new at the time: to listen to the world and learn from it, to read the 'signs of the times' and discern the action of the Spirit. The Church's task was then to walk alongside all

movements and persons of good will working for peace, liberation, justice, development, reconciliation.

There's no difficulty about wanting to renew the Church on the 'Servant' and 'Pilgrim' models. And even if Fr Colin never used these precise expressions, you don't have to look very far to find real points of contact with his own thought, especially in the *Ignoti et occulti*. On the other hand, you would have much more trouble in working out exactly how a 'servant and pilgrim Church' would thereby be 'renewed in Mary's image' or even 'grow nearer its perfect image in Mary', to quote our Marist texts. There is, to be sure, Luke 1:38, where Mary declares that she is the 'servant, or handmaid' – but 'of the Lord'! On the other hand, it's Jesus who says of himself: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve' (Matt 20:28) and 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matt 8:20). He is really the model of a 'servant and pilgrim Church'. Surely we wouldn't be less Marist by referring from time to time to Jesus!

In any case, I would like to end this part of my talk by quoting two Colinian texts that speak, if not of Mary model of the Church, at least of Mary model of the Society in its attitudes towards the world in which we live. The first is *FS* 85,1-2, from 1844:

'... Someone said once: "The Marist Fathers ... there is no need to ask what their spirit is. Their name is a sufficient indication, if they understand it properly." Colin replies:

'Indeed, Messieurs, the blessed Virgin (as the Church tells us) is the channel of graces, the Queen of the Apostles, and what great good she did for souls. Yet in this world she was hidden and as it were unknown.'

Two years later, in 1846, he expressed himself in terms that were still more specific (*FS* 120,2): 'Let us be small, Messieurs. *Nolite altum sapere*, let us be small. The blessed Virgin was so small, although in reality she was the Queen of Heaven and the first of all creatures. She is our model. Let us do a great deal of good, but like her let us do it, *tanquam ignoti et occulti*.'

Even if Colin does not think of Mary precisely as the model of the Church, she is a model – even *the* model – for the Christian and the Marist. Mary provides a model of a style of behaviour that does not refuse to move into action, even on a big scale, but which is – to quote again the excellent formula of the Chapter of 1969-70 – 'poor, lowly,

without place of privilege, provided that Christ may be proclaimed'. Once we have given up, with Mary, all power for ourselves we will know how to walk alongside those who have no power; we will at last be able to speak with the true authority of the Gospel.

### **3. A Marian Church**

The expression 'a Marian Church' is neither Colinian nor conciliar. It seems to be of very recent vintage, publicized, even perhaps invented, by Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the last few years it has become extremely popular in Marist usage, where it is occasionally contrasted with or even opposed to 'a Petrine Church', standing for authority and institution, a masculine Church, if you like, to which we might prefer a more feminine one, more flexible and nurturing. It might be a good idea to look again at this expression in the context of von Balthasar, to see at least how he uses it and what he implied by it.

Even though 'a Marian Church' does not appear in the Constitutions – presumably the expression was not yet current in the mid-80s – our starting point is nevertheless n. 117 of the 1987 Constitutions, which picks up, with slight revisions, n. 80 of the provisional legislation of 1977:

'The Society, like the Church, finds its model in Mary the woman of faith. Its spirituality ... tries to make its own the Christian experience lived by Mary.'

A question may well occur to you: How can we make our own the Christian experience of Mary? Wasn't that unique and personal to her? I don't know what the legislators of 1977 and 1985 had in mind in composing these texts. However, the search for an answer led me to none other than Hans Urs von Balthasar. Now I don't suppose for one moment that the authors of our texts meant to send us off to Balthasar in order to interpret them. Nonetheless, it is Balthasar who does in fact speak of 'Mary's experience of Christ' and of how we can share in it. And it is precisely in this general context that he speaks also of the 'Marian dimension or profile of the Church' and even of a 'Marian Church'. So we have every interest in pursuing this line.

Balthasar writes about the 'Marian experience' in vol. I of his book *Herrlichkeit*, published in 1962; the English translation of the second edition of 1967 appeared under

the title *The Glory of the Lord* in 1982; the passage in question can be found on pp. 350-365. There he speaks of the 'archetypal experiences' that certain members of the Church have deposited in the common treasury of the Communion of Saints for all to make use of. Each of these archetypal experiences is a privileged way of sharing in Christ's own experience of God. Here Balthasar asks the same question as we have asked: How can other members of the Church share in this experience?

Balthasar distinguishes four ways in which the Christian experience can relate to Christ and to his own experience of God. First, there is the eyewitness experience of the Twelve, their experience of Jesus living, dead and risen, an experience that is expressed in the 'Petrine tradition'. Next is the charismatic experience of Paul, which is particular to him and cannot be reduced to that of the Twelve. Then there is John's special experience, which puts us in contact with 'what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have contemplated and touched with our hands, the Word of life' (1 John 1:1). Finally, but we could also say in first place, at a level that is much deeper and closer to the centre, there is the experience of the Mother of the Lord. Her experience was at once intimate and total; it flows into the Church and makes it fruitful. So, four archetypal experiences, the Petrine, the Pauline, the Johannine and the Marian. Elsewhere in his works, Balthasar proposes other, somewhat more complex, schemas, but in each of them Mary's place is foundational.

In fact, the Marian experience of Christ supports or underpins the threefold experience – Petrine, Pauline and Johannine – that the apostles contribute to the Church. Her experience precedes and conditions theirs. It links faith and vision, earth and heaven, and overcomes the tension within the Church that is immaculate and at the same time the Church of sinners. The Christian who shares by prayer and contemplation in Mary's experience of Christ is able to live the perfect accord between the grace that calls and invites and the grace that responds and accepts (cf. p. 363). In other words, the Christian can make his or her own the faith and obedience to God's Word of Mary 'the woman of faith'. At the same time, since Mary 'both believed by faith and conceived by faith' – to quote St Augustine (*Sermo* 25,7; PL 46, 937; cf. St Leo the Great: 'conceived in her mind before her body', *Sermo 1 in Nativitate Domini*, 2; PL 54, 191) – she is both 'the first believer' and 'the Mother of God': the two cannot be separated. Mary's experience of



Christ – and also our share in it – is both spiritual and bodily. For that reason, we cannot appeal from the visible, hierarchical, ‘Petrine’ Church to an invisible, spiritual Church where we would find the ‘Marian dimension’. On the contrary, it is in the visible Church of sacraments and institutions – the Church formed by the distinct yet united experience of Peter, Paul and John – that we find Mary’s experience of Christ and God.

In short, the Marian dimension or profile of the Church – or, if you wish, the Marian Church – complements and even precedes the Petrine dimension; this was a favourite reflection of Pope John Paul II. It would, however, be a disastrous mistake to oppose these two dimensions, to opt for a ‘Marian Church’ in place of a ‘Petrine Church’. The one Church is Petrine, Pauline, Johannine – and first Marian. Balthasar himself wrote that, where the Marian dimension is denied, ‘everything becomes polemical, critical, bitter, humourless and ultimately boring, and people in the masses run away from such a Church.’ There is, of course, more than one way of denying the Marian dimension; one is by an exercise of authority that is harsh, heavy handed and uncaring. It would, however, be a sad irony if a use of the ‘Marian Church’ as a stick with which to beat the hierarchy – and in particular Rome – only made us bitter, humourless and boring.

A final thought. A Marian Church is not a feminized Church. The relative absence of men – of normal adult males – from our churches may not be an accident. Perhaps we are in fact getting exactly the results that the services we provide are designed to produce: a Church to which men do not feel that they belong. It would be a travesty if we Marists were contributing to this ‘in the name of Mary’. Perhaps we should speak a bit more, not only of Mary, but also of Peter, Paul and John – and Jesus.

#### **4. Begin Again a New Church**

That being said, we all know that Jean-Claude Colin wanted ‘a new Church.’

In *FS* 120,1 we read these words of the Founder: ‘The Society must begin a new Church over again.’ He adds immediately: ‘I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church.’ Fr. Colin doesn’t want to start a new Church: ‘That would be blasphemy.’ All the same, he

wants a Church that is new, renewed if you like, but so radically that, in the last analysis he doesn't refuse to repeat his first expression, 'we must begin a new Church over again.'

'Begin over again'. The earliest Church was for Colin something of a 'Utopia' (it probably was also for Luke). The function of a utopia – whether situated on a remote island, in the past or in the future – is to bring out what is unsatisfactory about present reality, perhaps also presenting a model for change. So the utopian vision of the newborn Church brings out what is unsatisfactory about the Church as she is today. On the other hand, this utopia calls us to move ahead, not to turn back; its attraction is not archaeological but teleological. The project is not to reconstruct the Church of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, or to remove from the Church of today whatever we can't find in the New Testament, which was the ideal of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformers; the project is rather to prepare the Church of the last days – when Mary will be its support as she was for the new-born Church. From this moment, we must begin over again to be 'Church'. The young Colin was thinking especially of the Church in France and Europe, devastated by the Revolution and ensuing wars and partly compromised by collaboration with Napoleon. In our time, the notion of starting the Church again is beginning to take on an even more literal meaning.

'We have to', 'the Society must': Colin is convinced that the Marists exist in order to start the new Church again. He wants to enlist all our efforts, all our prayers in the cause of realizing this goal. He is as well aware as anyone of the enormous disproportion between the greatness of the project on the one hand, and the fewness of the Marists and the poverty of their resources on the other. But that doesn't discourage the Founder. On the contrary, he even finds in that the confirmation of his intuition: 'The Society of Mary, like the Church, began with simple, poorly educated men, but since then the Church has developed and encompassed everything. We too must gather together everyone through the Third Order – heretics alone may not belong to it.' This project is expressed in an early text of Marist legislation, the *Summarium* of 1833 (n. 109): to 'gather, so to speak, all the members of Christ, whatever their age, sex or condition, under the protection of the Blessed Mary Immaculate, mother of God, to rekindle their faith and piety and to nourish them with the doctrine of the Roman Church' (cf. *OM* 427,2; Keel, 93).

Reading these texts, you get the impression that Fr. Colin isn't simply saying that the Society of Mary is called to work to bring about the 'new Church', but that the Society of Mary itself already constitutes the seed of this new Church. That's also Coste's opinion. Speaking of Colin's famous reply to Cardinal Castracane, that he wanted everyone to be Marist, with the Pope at our head, Coste comments that his response 'shows clearly that he envisaged more than the foundation of a congregation, albeit a multibranch one open to lay people, but the renewed Church of the last times, of which the Society of Mary is a small but effective beginning' (*A Marian Vision of the Church*, p. 187; in this context he quotes *FS* 120,1).

What are we going to do with this bold, not to say crazy project? Perhaps we should just keep quiet about it and decide that it belongs to the personal vision of Jean-Claude Colin, which in no way binds Marists! In what sense can Marists constitute, even as a seed, the new Church of the latter days? If we were to reply to a polite inquirer, that this is the purpose of the Society, we would meet with incomprehension or incredulity, if not outright derision. Nevertheless, the General Chapter of 1969-70 intended to enter into this intuition of the Founder. In DC 1969-70, n. 130, we read:

'Together with the whole Christian body, we are living through the birth of a new Church in a new world. The Council has urged us to enter resolutely upon *aggiornamento*, and this is facilitated for us by the Marist spirit. All her life long, Mary was led towards objectives which lay beyond her understanding, and found in faith the daily reply to the signs of her times. With her we also advance in faith towards the unforeseen, certain that God is leading events, and that faithful to the Spirit, we have to discover the features of the renewed Church of tomorrow.'

It is amazing that the Colinian command to begin again a new Church does not figure in our present Constitutions – unless it is represented perhaps by n. 14, which says that 'Marists are called to establish the Church where it does not exist and to renew existing communities...' – but that's not at all the same thing.

It seems that we have to do here with a central intuition of Colin. To abandon it, openly or tacitly, is equivalent – or so I feel – to disowning our Founder. But how can we make this intuition our own while remaining faithful to Colin and also clear sighted about our realities? If we were to put this question to Colin, he would probably direct us to the

end of St Matthew's Gospel, where Christ commands eleven poor guys who haven't all ceased to have doubts: 'Go and make disciples of all nations.'

At this point it would be too easy to reply that we Marists are called to carry out our ministries with this inspiring vision of Colin in the background. But for Colin, or at least this is how I read him, the vision of the new Church of the latter days is not in the background but at centre stage. If we want to follow Colin, we are going to put this vision in the centre of our personal and communal project.

But there's no place here for any sort of Marist triumphalism. We don't claim to be already this new Church in miniature. On the contrary, our first project has to be to do everything so that our communities and the Society as a whole anticipate the end-time Church as they imitate the new-born Church, precisely by being *cor unum et anima una*. After that, the goal of our efforts and our prayers will be to gather into unity 'all the scattered children of God' (cf. John 11:52). There we have the new Church of the latter days. But before we can begin again a new Church, perhaps we need to begin again a new Society of Mary.

## **5. Mary and her Society**

When I went to Rome in 2002 to work with our General Administration, my task, as I understood it, was to provide applied research on the present state of the Society in context and to think creatively about its future. I was talking with my then Spiritual Director, a man who had had much experience of religious life in many forms and in many parts of the world. When I asked him if he had any ideas for the Society of Mary, he replied: What about reconsecrating your Society to Our Lady? He told me about a Marian religious community that had fallen on hard times in terms of vocations and morale. It decided to solemnly renew its consecration to Our Lady – no doubt there was more to it than simply reading out a prayer. There followed what amounted to a complete turn-around in the wellbeing of the community.

I never followed that up. It wasn't that I was sceptical about the story – in fact I was quite impressed. But I didn't have enough conviction to recommend to the Superior General and Council that they reconsecrate the Society to Mary. Such an act would have

gone clean against ways of thinking that are widely and tenaciously held in the Society today. For one thing, it would have been a significant act of devotion to Mary. I think that as such it would have met with resistance from many Marists, on the grounds that we don't have 'that sort' of devotion to Mary. It is a fact, of course, that the Society is not entrusted or associated with a particular Marian devotion, like the Rosary for the Dominicans or the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help for the Redemptorists. On the other hand, the Colonian Constitutions have a whole section 2 of ch. 5 (Common Rules) with the title 'Let them be specially devoted to blessed Mary'. This devotion is to be expressed by a number of practices, some of which are distinctive of the Society, including the three Hail Marys and 'Sub tuum' morning and evening, the Saturday fast, Mary's image above the superior's door, as well as common devotions like the Rosary. Our present Constitutions also have a section 6 'Special practices in honour of Mary' in ch. 3, art. 2. This repeats a number of the devotional practices of the old Constitutions. I also believe that many Marists do carry them out, and I've yet to see a Marist house that doesn't have a statue, icon or other representation of Mary above or near the superior's door.

On the other hand, we do seem to be somewhat inhibited about common or public acts of Marian devotion. This could to some extent be culturally determined or a 'guy thing' – not too much into flowers and candles. At least perhaps we would like to think so. But the Marist Brothers don't seem to have the same problems. They are much simpler and more spontaneous than we are in expressing devotion to 'the Good Mother'. That is one of the features of the Marist Brothers from which we might learn; others, I would say, are their sense of brotherhood and their professionalism.

Regarding Marian devotion, we may try to rationalize our own approach by saying something like, We are not meant to be looking *at* Mary so much as looking *with* her at Jesus, God, the world. True, of course, but nonetheless, perhaps, used as a rationalization of our comparative lack of common or public manifestations of Marian devotion.

In fact, the term rationalization may contain a clue and lead us much further. As a group of people, I think we are rather good at being rational. We got a solid training in it at the Seminary, and it has stood us in good stead since. We are reasoners, tending

towards the abstract and the cerebral. I wonder if that's not what we have done to Mary: we are better at thinking or talking *about* her than at singing hymns or addressing prayers *to* her. In itself that might not be so disastrous – we all have our charisms. But it would be much more worrying if we have turned Mary into an abstraction; if, instead of being a real person for us, she has become a symbol, a sort of rhetorical shorthand standing for a certain number of ideas, such as how we are to be present and active in the Church, or femininity.

The consequences go wider than simply devotion to Mary. The first Marists were deeply convinced that they were doing 'Mary's work' – it was an expression that came easily and often – that Mary had chosen them to carry out her own task of supporting the Church at the end of time. Not only were they convinced of this; their conviction motivated them to do quite amazing things, like heading off to the Pacific. Do we still have this conviction and motivation? Do we think we are doing Mary's work, in the sense of being chosen and commissioned by her? Or, if we use that expression, perhaps it simply means doing what we are doing in what we would like to think is a 'Marian way'.

In order to believe that we are doing Mary's work in that strong sense, we have to have a high sense of our own calling and destiny – namely that it really does come from Mary. That means, of course, that Mary has to be for us a real person, and not an abstraction or a symbol. That would be the challenge of reconsecrating the Society to Mary, if it were to be more than merely a form of words, a lovely new prayer printed on a special card, to be recited on appropriate occasions. We would be obliged to renew our sense of Mary as a real person, who initiated the Society and still, we hope, guides it (unless she's given up on us – a possibility that Fr Colin foresaw). We would be obliged to rededicate ourselves to *her* work, to have a sense that we were personally chosen and commissioned by her. We would be obliged to renew our sense of what it means to belong to the Society *of Mary*.

Could the Society of Mary today, could we, personally and as communities, accept that challenge?