

Colin Jokes

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Colin said to the students in Belley: ‘Servite Domino in laetitia et exultatione’. He quoted Saint Francis of Sales who said ‘Les saints tristes sont de tristes saints’.¹

A footnote by the editor, Jean Coste, to document 284 in *A Founder Speaks* refers to jokes about and by Marists. Mayet describes Colin as habitually jolly and joyful, as someone who sustained and promoted joy, who was joyful in conversations.² Edwin Keel, too, included this aspect of Marist life in his collection of basic texts.³ This trait of the Marist founder is worthwhile recalling. Sometimes he used a good joke or a laugh as means of government, to solve a tension, or to respond to a tricky question. Mayet noted:⁴

“I have sometimes seen him get out of a tight spot in the same way. This approach, if it were too frequent, would upset subjects, alienate and antagonise them, but used appropriately, with prudence, and in suitable circumstances of place, time and persons, it can be useful on occasion.”

The years 1832 onwards saw the Marist educational establishment at Belley. Colin allowed for a ‘holy cheerfulness’:⁵

“The house in Belley was reputed to be particularly cheerful. At the boarding school of La Capucinière, where younger children were mixed with a few theology students, he recommended “a holy cheerfulness” for everybody. This went hand in hand with a certain lifestyle, a wide freedom in games, long recreations which he refused to shorten when asked by the one in charge of the house, and walks adapted to the stamina of the youngest pupils.”

Colin enjoyed a good laugh.⁶ He could laugh about events, other persons, about his actions now and in the past. He enjoyed laughing

¹ Grenot, *Séminaires et collèges*, p. 5.

² FA Index 224 ‘Joy’.

³ E. Keel (ed.), *A Book of Texts for the Study of Marist Spirituality*, p. 327 – 339.

⁴ FA, doc. 284, 3 (1844).

⁵ F. Drouilly, *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, *Avis*, p. 106 and 108.

⁶ FA Index 226 ‘Laughter’.

with the community. Mayet often states, ‘he entertained us greatly’.⁷ He made jokes about others:⁸

“To ensure an atmosphere of joy and holy freedom, he himself kept things going at meals in an incredibly lively fashion. He was continually teasing M***, an apostolic missionary then staying a few days with us in the theology house, and he would constantly make jokes for Fathers Ducharne and Déclas and M. Philippon. The whole community was often in high spirits. At every turn he mingled jokes with interesting snippets, edifying news and the odd word to the wise which created a great hush.”

Father Jallon (1782-1854) for example was known for his myopia and this caused confreres to joke about it.⁹ Colin did not mind others joking back.¹⁰

“The young Marists turned his jokes back against him. You would have said that it was for all the world a family surrounding their father, you might even doubt whether there was ever a family where so much abandonment reigned.”

To relax from too much work, Colin would raise a laugh:¹¹

“The Brothers, through much hard work, had made a very fine walk at La Neylière, and Father Colin promised that those using the walk for the first nine days would pray for them. He encouraged them and joked with them; he allowed them to have a short recreation to take their minds off their work.”

Once a year collected newspaper clippings were read to the community – Colin made it a little show which caused great laughter:¹²

“Then he began to open out a large newspaper, in which were a great number of slips given to him by Marists on things they had noted for attention, or on things of use to the Society (as was done every year). He said with a laugh, drawing the top of the paper up in front of him as if to hide something, even though he was up on the rostrum and a considerable distance away from us: ‘No one sees these slips but me: that is why I have my big newspaper as a rampart.’ The whole Society could not help

⁷ FA, doc. 216, 2, as one example of many.

⁸ FA, doc. 242, 2 (1842-43).

⁹ Archives: OM 4, p. 300-301; See OM, doc. 667, doc. 819, 62; doc. 871, 18.

¹⁰ FA, doc. 359, 3 (c.1846).

¹¹ FA, doc. 383 (1850).

¹² FS, doc. 60, 12 (1842).

laughing when they saw the simplicity with which he said this. He laughed himself too.”

In such a relaxed atmosphere Colin nevertheless many times made his point about the spirit of the Society, about its style and way of going about things. Among confreres, outsiders not present, Colin would relax and share his experiences and thoughts as Mayet recalled:¹³

“Very often Father used to give a *Deo Gratias* at dinner and supper, and then he gave himself up to the most pleasant and agreeable chatter. All hearts around him bloomed in delight. He used to tell us what had happened in the early days of the Society, on his journeys to Rome; he spoke of the requests he received, of our missionaries, their letters. Occasionally he gave some of those lively thrusts that set hearts aflame, or uttered a few of those momentous remarks which, in a single go, express the whole spirit of the Society. He would address a word to this one, another to that one, joke with someone here, tease someone there, without ever hurting anyone, and often the whole community would be laughing with him. You cannot imagine, if you have not witnessed it, the abandonment, the simplicity that pervaded those conversations. The young Marists who up till then had been engrossed in their studies elsewhere were amazed; they drew their seats close to Father and all hung on to his lips. Each placed great store by these interesting little recreations, and without lacking in respect for Reverend Father Superior General, they were more than a match for him and they turned his jokes back against him. You would have said that it was for all the world a family surrounding t heir father, you might even doubt whether there was ever a family where so much abandonment reigned. They were all at their ease; these informal conversations did much to instil cheerfulness in all, to encourage open-heartedness one towards the other, and at the same time to bring out to advantage the spirit of the Society; this was indeed one of Reverend Father Superior General’s aims.”

Against the background of reading authors like Rodriguez etc., it is quite astonishing that Colin could recommend to relax and to rejoice:¹⁴

“Always be joyful! Allow yourself to be possessed by joy. Dance a little. Cheerfulness brings a little relief to nature.”

Jokes collected by Mayet, Colin and others¹⁵

¹³ FA, doc. 359 (c. 1846), 1 – 4.

¹⁴ F. Drouilly, *Les Avis*, p. 106, with references to FS, doc. 45, 3, and FS, doc. 50.

¹⁵ Sources in FA, doc. 284. Titles, translation and summaries are mine.

Let us illustrate the good humour among the early Marists with some examples.

*Unbearded youngsters!*¹⁶

Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn went to see Courbon, one of the vicar generals of Lyon, in the early 1820s. She pretended to be discouraged and complained that the branch of the priests might not succeed. Courbon gave her the following reply: “They will succeed. The time has not yet come, but they will succeed. We want to test them thoroughly: they’re still only unbearded youngsters” (As we know, M. Courbon liked a joke).

*Are you the Marionistes?*¹⁷

The priests constantly tried to form a religious group. They either got a very vague answer or were laughed at. Courbon liked jokingly to call them not Marists but Marionistes!

*My little marionettes*¹⁸

In his jovial voice, Courbon, leading vicar general of Lyon after the departure of Fesch, would say: ‘My little marionistes (like one says marionettes), I like them a lot, but we have to let them grow up first’. This opposition caused much inertia at the beginnings.

*A smart answer!*¹⁹

At 1815, seminarians at Lyon refused to sing the Domine, *salvum fac imperatorem*, as a hymn to Napoleon in place of that to the recently returned king at common prayers. This was a very delicate political situation and continued to be so after the final fall of Napoleon. Courbon, in charge in Lyon, was asked afterwards what his opinion was. His reply said much in few words: Those who did sing it have done well to do so; those who did not sing it have done even better. Colin admired him for his prudence. Colin was a leader of those who refused to sing it.

*He would not set the Thames on fire*²⁰

¹⁶ OM, doc. 513, 4 (1840)/RMJ, doc. 101, 4, Mother St Joseph recalls the origins.

¹⁷ Cf. OM, doc. 535, 5 (1842): You are the Marionistes!

¹⁸ Cf. OM, doc. 752, 13 (1853), Maître-pierre on the origins. See also OM, doc. 669, 11 (Mayet).

¹⁹ Cf. OM, doc. 562, 6 (1842/43); FA, doc. 202.

In October 1833 Colin arrived at Loreto for a week of pilgrimage. He looked for a place to stay and knocked on convent's doors. The first convent refused to give him a room. He was lucky at the second. His simplicity and shyness helped him. Colin said himself to Mayet during recreation in 1846: They received me because they said this man would not set the Thames on fire (“Un home qui n'avait pas l'air d'avoir inventé la poudre”).

*Hide the Marists in a bag!*²¹

“If we make ourselves small, God will bless us. So, my little Marists, be so very small. You know, if I could, I would put all my Marists in a bag, so that the world not concern itself with them.”

*No castles in Spain!*²²

“Doubtless it is praiseworthy to have zealous intentions, but we must also take care not to let ourselves build castles in Spain, as they say, and to neglect our duties here.”

*What a rotten prophet!*²³

Colin burst into laughter. “Ah! When I was in the major seminary, if anybody had told me ‘One day you will visit the Pope, the Cardinals, the Ministers of State’; if anyone had told me my life would be one great whirlwind of affairs! Ha! What a rotten prophet, I would have said to myself...”

*Poor donkey!*²⁴

Con commented on the many decrees concerning the missions with humour: ‘At Rome they told me that if you put all the contradictory decrees issued by the same Roman congregation on the back of a donkey, it would collapse under the burden!’

*Tie the rabbits and take them out on the field!*²⁵

²⁰ OM, doc. 624 (1846): Colin in Italy in 1833, Loreto, and Rome.

²¹ FS, doc. 57 (1842).

²² FS, doc. 44, 8 (1842).

²³ FA, doc. 229 (1842).

²⁴ Mayet, Vol. 4, p. 564 (November 1846). Quoted in Schianchi, *Colin and Propaganda Fide*, in A. Greiler (ed.), *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania*, Hindmarsh, Atf Press, 2009, here p. 38.

²⁵ FA, doc. 284, 2 (1844).

In one of our houses, the Brothers were very annoyed at having rabbits committed to their charge and complained to Father Colin. The latter, unwilling to make changes in these arrangements, instead of replying seriously said by way of a joke: “You must tie them all, lengthwise, to a rope (there were twenty rabbits) and take them like this out into the field.” They laughed so much over it that they could not eat their dinner and gave no further thought to the trouble these little creatures put them to.

*The superior general? He is busy with the pigs*²⁶

We were at recreation in Puylata, when somebody said, “Just look at Father Colin playing with the pig, teasing it and making it squeal! I am quite sure that the good Father is making more than one act of interior humility, and has more than one pious thought as he plays his game. But supposing a stranger came along at this very moment and asked to see the Superior General of the Marists, and in pointing him out we answered, ‘Monsieur, that’s him enjoying himself on that mound with the pig’, I wonder what he would think?” Everyone burst out laughing. The same reaction may have been provoked when Colin was in Cerdon:²⁷ “While a curate at Cerdon, he amused himself by teasing a goat with his hat.”

*These women at singing practices – and these men....*²⁸

Marists should not conduct hymn practices for women outside of the church. Which of us is as strong as Samson? A single glance was the undoing of David. And what about Samson? Someone said to me: “These women at singing practices begin by being devoted to the music and finish up being devoted to the musician.”

*We will bury you!*²⁹

Father Chare one day sought out the Very Reverend Father General and asked permission to have a special breakfast for himself, which he thought would be beneficial to him. Father Colin replied, “Yes, you shall have your little dish, I shall have my little dish; everybody will have his; there will be as many breakfasts as there are individuals! What a fine community that will be!” Father Chare, who was a saintly Marist,

²⁶ FA, doc. 316, 7 (1844/45).

²⁷ FA, doc. 316, 6 (1844/45).

²⁸ FS, doc. 114 (1846).

²⁹ FA, doc. 354 (1846).

grasped the point. Never again did he ask for anything special, despite his poor health.

There was talk of sending Father Ducharme on mission. He did not think that his health would hold out. He went and told Father Colin that if he were sent on this mission he would die. Father Superior's reply was: "Very well! If you die, we shall bury you." However, to be on the safe side, he asked Father Maître pierre to take Father Ducharme to see a doctor. The doctor answered that he could find nothing in Father Ducharme's condition to prevent him from doing what was asked of him. Father therefore did go, and returned all the better for it.

*A really touching sermon*³⁰

Father Jallon had an extraordinary memory and knew word by word the sermons of certain authors, declaiming them with gusto. One day, a lady took one of his sermons to be aimed at her, and rebuked him for it. Father Jallon replied with wit: 'But Madam, you are honoured indeed, for they were thinking of you 200 years ago!'

*An Italian is never in a hurry*³¹ ... *An Englishman does not joke*³²

In 1833 Colin was abroad the first time, in Rome. He had to learn that other people do things differently. About Roman bureaucracy he said: "People here are not in a hurry... I have here in Rome also a chance of exercising the little patience I possess. We Frenchmen want to get everything done in one day; that is what the Italians tell us, and they never tire of repeating: 'Pazienza! Pazienza!'"

After warning his confreres against nationalism in the Society of Mary, Colin dared to conclude with the following: "A Frenchman gradually becomes accustomed to joke with those with whom he lives. An Englishman does not joke." However, his last phrase was: "But they are a fine people, of remarkable character."

*Who changes our water into wine?*³³

Father Colin said to us, 'I have just come back from La Neylière! ... The days I have just spent in that house are the most delightful days of

³⁰ FA, doc. 371, footnote (1849).

³¹ OM, doc. 295, 3.4; Kerr, *Colin*, p. 265. See Peter Chanel's remark in a letter to Chavoïn: "We are well, and have good appetites in spite of being in Italy", A. Ward (ed.), ... *Ever Your Poor Brother*, Rome, 1991, p. 73 (28 September 1833).

³² FS, doc. 183 (1850).

³³ FA, doc. 386 (1851).

my life. We were without wine, so the water jugs were ceremoniously placed on the tables. ‘Someone should change the water into wine’, joked Father Lagniet cheerfully. Oh! When I saw that”, continued Father Colin, “I was so carried away by this emery spirit that though I would never think of such a thing anywhere else, I began to clink glasses with the Brothers... We laughed our hearts out; we were so happy; it was a real little feast.”

*I will tell the superior general!*³⁴

At that time there was a decent serving man in charge of the stables on the property, a rough-and-ready character, who claimed that Very Reverend Father Founder was spoiling both his fields and his beasts, and could not bear these visits. Whenever the good Father gave a handful of grass and oats to some beast or other, terrible Mathieu (that was the servant’s name) would pop up from nowhere and shout angrily and in all earnestness at him, “I saw you! I caught you! You tore up my clover from the fields. You are damaging everything. You feed m y animals and make them ill. I am going to report you to the Superior General!” And the Founder, with a benevolent smile, would reply, “Mathieu, turn the other way; don’t look!” – “How could I be expected not to love the good Lord’s creatures?” he later recounted in all simplicity. “As soon as I go in, I declare, if my little horse does not begin to look up at me, to prance, to call to me, to entertain me with all his tricks! I simply have to give him a little bran, a few oats.” Then he would take up the defence of the servant, “It is out of loyalty to the house that he does it.” And he would laugh heartily.

*A hissing pronunciation*³⁵

Colin had a speech difficulty. He worked hard on it during his seminary days.³⁶ A certain hiss in his pronunciation stayed with him. His *Chertes oui!* [*Certes oui*, ‘indeed’] was famous among those familiar with him. He admitted this himself and could laugh about it.

³⁴ FA, doc. 394, 2 (1866).

³⁵ OM, doc. 819 (1869-1870), footnote on p. 253: « On sait que le P. Colin avait une prononciation chuintante, et ses *Chertes oui!* Etaient célèbres parmi ses familiers. ». OM 4, p. 515, more examples for the wrong pronunciation of Colin due to his speech problem.

³⁶ FA, doc. 240 (1842). As major seminarian, Colin practised with pebbels like Demosthenes.

On the other hand he could say: ‘When I am in a temper, the words flow out of me like a spring and I am not the least bit hampered.’

*Attacked by the dove, the serpent and the ferret*³⁷

When Colin was an old man, confreres wanted to hear about the origins, especially, if there have been any supernatural interventions, apparitions of Mary to him, and the like. Among those were his secretaries, Fathers David and Jeantin, and Father Choizin. One tried to trap Colin to talk about such events charmingly, the other one tried it more directly. Colin was aware of their efforts and called them his ‘dove’ and ‘serpent’. Choizin decided to attack more directly, straightforward. Jeantin called him ‘the ferret’. Eventually the three managed to extract some hints from Colin about supernatural interventions in his life.

*Do not laugh at a child’s confession*³⁸

Talking about childhood memories, Colin once admitted that he had to try hard not to laugh at a child’s confession. The boy confessed various things. All the time he created a mysterious atmosphere of some secret still in the air. So Colin asked if there is anything else the boy wanted to say. Finally the boy admitted: I found a bird’s nest. And he urged Colin: But do not tell my brother!

*I will topple my tombstone over!*³⁹

Colin said, ‘All I want on my grave is a cross and my name, Colin: nothing else.’ Someone said to him, ‘Father, when you die they will put just what they like on your grave.’ ‘Of course,’ he replied, ‘but I am saying that in the event of some kind of monument being erected to me, if I could come to life again, I would topple the whole thing over.’

Final remarks

Life in a Marist house included very often good humour, especially when Colin was present. He made a difference.⁴⁰ He could inject life in

³⁷ OM, doc. 819 (1869-1870), p. 258; Kerr, *Colin*, p. 187 (for the ferret).

³⁸ OM, doc. 880, 6 (1895), notes by Father Jeantin.

³⁹ FS, doc. 86 (c.1844); Cf. J. Coste, *A Certain Idea of the Society of Mary: Jean-Claude Colin*, Rome, 1990, p. 50. The monument at the grave of St Boniface in Fulda, Germany, portrays the Saint looking out of his grave to see what happened to Christianity he brought to Germany.

⁴⁰ FA, doc. 192, testimony by a confrere who came from another house.

a community.⁴¹ One of his tools was simply to joke. He was joking, others fell in, and the whole group was laughing. Mayet did not make up pious anecdotes. Some of the situations at first sight do not give credit to a founder. On the other hand, precisely here Mayet is the honest witness. What at first seems to be unusual for a holy man proves yet another reference to the place of joy in the Christian tradition, the belief in the good news, often proved by holy men and women like St Francis and Saint Theresa of Avila. Colin pointed out a word of Saint Paul to Eymard:⁴²

“You must meet everyone with peace of soul, making yourself all things to all men, bringing joy to the hearts of others... Always be joyful: Rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4). To be calm in spirit is a great virtue.”

The 1987 constitutions include in their description of Marist life this feature of joy:⁴³

“Its spirituality is simple and modest in its expression, close to the lives of ordinary people, apostolic in character, and marked by spontaneity and joy.”

⁴¹ FA, doc. 257.

⁴² FA, doc. 45, 3 (1842); see also FS, doc. 50 (1848).

⁴³ *Constitutions* 1987, Nr. 117; See J. Hulshof, *Constitutions, New and Old* (Maristica, 6), Rome, 1993, p. 184-188 (with other references), and Id., *With a More Lively Confidence. The Society of Mary and its Renewal in Spirit and Body*, Rome, 2005, p. 11.