

The Earliest Church Sole Model of the Society of Mary

1. A Colinian theme

Many texts prove that the earliest Church or new-born Church (in French 'l'église naissante', literally, the Church in the process of being born) is for Jean-Claude Colin the model, even the sole model, of the Society of Mary. When we hear that, we may suppose that this is because he found in the early Church an example and symbol of Mission. We will the more easily suppose that if we see the early Church in the image of Pentecost: the first disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, go out to bring the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth; so they are a model for us.

However, when we look carefully at the newborn Church in Acts, we begin to see that it doesn't lend itself so obviously to being a symbol of mission. And when we read carefully the way Fr Colin speaks about the early Church, we realize that he is not presenting it as a symbol of mission. What, then, does he mean by saying that it is the sole model of the Society? Let us see.

Take *FS* 42,3. The year is 1841, and Fr. Colin is defending the preaching style of Fr. Etienne Séon, which some criticized as too simple and unsophisticated. This leads him to make some more general comments: 'The apostles were not liked by the rich, or those with power: they turned to poor people like themselves. Then God raised up a Saint Paul, full of magnanimity and afraid of nothing, who turned his attention to everyone. They were right in saying that he was not lettered, that he did not speak well: it did not matter ... He did not concern himself with what people said about him.' Fr. Founder warms to his theme:

'As for ourselves, we do not take any congregation for our model; we have no other model than the newborn Church. The Society began like the Church; we must be like the apostles and those who joined them and were already numerous: *Cor unum et anima una*. They loved each other like brothers. And then, ah! No one knows what devotion the apostles had for the blessed Virgin! What tenderness for this divine mother! How they had recourse to her! Let us imitate them: let us see God in everything.'

Notice how the reference to the Church of the beginnings changes in the course of the discussion: from 'the apostles' then 'Saint Paul', Colin arrives at last at

the Church of Jerusalem. This is one face of the newborn Church that is the sole model of the Society; we shall see that there are others. Our Founder draws attention to two or three aspects of this primitive Church, which Marists are to imitate. First is the brotherly love that the apostles and their companions have for one another; this love is characterized by the Latin quotation from Acts 4:32, which is like a constant refrain on Colin's lips: *Cor unum et anima una*. The second feature of the nascent Church that Marists are to imitate is more likely derived from Mary of Agreda than from Acts, namely the apostles' devotion for Our Lady. Finally, 'Let us see God in everything'; this is the only point about which Colin says explicitly, 'Let us imitate them', but it is not a special feature of the earliest Church; instead, it recalls rather St Ignatius' 'Contemplation to Gain Love'.

At the end of the retreat of September 1846, Colin returns to the theme (*FS* 115,5): 'My dear confreres, may the closest bonds of charity unite us always, may we truly be one in heart and soul. The Society of Mary must re-create the early days of the Church.' There is a hint in this last sentence that, for Fr. Colin, the Society of Mary should itself be in some way the new-born Church begun again, a community in which, as in the Church of Acts, everybody is 'one in heart and soul'. The group of seminarians who signed 'a little act of commitment' and renewed it solemnly at Fourvière on 23 July 1816 numbered twelve (cf. *OM* 425,1, etc.; 294,1). Was this a simple coincidence, or was there a deliberate imitation of the original apostles?

Two days later, Colin is still eloquent on this subject, this time with more than a touch of mystery (*FS* 117,3): 'As for us, Messieurs, we must re-create the faith of the first believers. That is precisely what was foretold in our earliest days [he uttered these words in a somewhat mysterious and uneasy manner]. It was foretold that the Society of Mary was to take as a model none of the congregations which preceded it; no, nothing of all that; but that our model, our only model, was to be and indeed was the early Church. And then 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.'

What does that mean, 'That is precisely what was foretold in our earliest days'? None of the four or five rather different versions of the 'revelation of Le Puy' states that the Society of Mary was to be modelled on the earliest Church. For Coste ('Analysis', *FN* 3,3, 1996, p. 250), 'the order to take the church as model was given to Colin himself and in relation to his work on the rule... [Here] we have a later contribution which appeared at some time after the 1816 promise, at a time when the

idea of a Society of Mary began to take shape in the Cerdon curate's thinking as he attempted to "lay down the early foundations for a rule." What is the model referred to? Is it that of the great orders of the Middle Ages, or of the Jesuits, or of more recent congregations? "No, nothing of all that. Our model, our only model, must be and is the early church." (cf. *OM*, doc. 631).

That may well be so. All the same, the conclusion of the passage just quoted from *FS* 117,3 – 'And then the blessed Virgin, who did such great things then, will do even greater ones at the end of time' – reads like a paraphrase of the 'revelation of Le Puy' as transmitted by Colin: 'I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time'. That might be a sign that Colin is in fact thinking of the period before 1816, when he says: 'That is precisely what was foretold in our earliest days.' If he is not thinking of Le Puy, he may be remembering the enthusiastic days at the Lyons Seminary. Finally, 'That is precisely what was foretold' is not the way you normally speak about an idea that has occurred to you, even if you regard it as a divine inspiration: I feel that somewhere there is a 'prophecy' in the charismatic sense.

Several days later again, still in September 1846, Colin is commenting on the other Latin phrase that he constantly repeats (*Tanquam ignoti et occulti* – 'Hidden and unknown'); he has this to say (*FS* 119,9): 'It was the approach that the Church followed, and you know that we must have no other model than the early Church.' 'We *must* have no other model': this is a duty binding on Marists.

At the conclusion of the next annual retreat, in August 1847, Fr. Colin applies the motto *Cor unum et anima una* specially to recommend a union that is psychological and affective to those who do not live together (*FS* 143,2): 'Yes, Messieurs, *cor unum et anima una*: we shall not be united in body, in the same place, since Mary does not wish it, but very much so in heart and mind.'

Our last quotation is especially interesting. It dates from September 1848 (*FS* 159): 'Let those who are leaving for Oceania imitate the apostles; let those who are staying in Europe imitate the early Church. At the end of time the Church will be as it was in the time of the apostles.' In a footnote Jean Coste notes that 'Father Colin is here distinguishing between the apostles whose voyages are recounted in Acts and the local Jerusalem community, of which Acts twice gives us a miniature ideal picture (Ac 2:42-47; 4:32-35).' Fr. Colin wants to apply the paradigm of the Acts narrative also to the missionaries of Oceania and not only to the Marists who remain in Europe.

By the same token, it rather seems that the newborn Church is not for Colin a symbol of Mission. For that, as we shall see, he has recourse to other New Testament references. Finally, we see that for Colin the end is to be like the beginning: the utopia of ‘one in mind and heart’ finally brought about in the Church of the end times.

In any case, there is no doubt that for Colin the earliest Church is the only legitimate model for the Society of Mary. So it is all the more surprising that this major Colinian theme does not occur in our Constitutions, which set out to place in our legislation the central insights of our Founder. On the other hand, the new Constitutions, like those of 1872, adopt the *Cor unum et anima una* (cf. n. 3) This phrase – to quote Fr. Coste (‘Analysis’, *FN* 3,3, 1996, pp. 229-230) – expresses ‘the best in that church to which Colin was referring his Marists.’

2. Three Faces of the Earliest Church

When we think of the earliest Church, the new-born Church, we generally think of the Church of Acts. Most of what I have to say about the earliest Church as sole model of the Society of Mary does refer particularly to the Church after the Ascension of Christ. However, it is good to remember that, when Fr Colin speaks of ‘l’église naissante’, he may sometimes have another reference in mind. In fact, the new-born Church has at least three faces.

One of these faces, or, if you prefer, places where we find the earliest Church is Nazareth. Nazareth is a familiar image for Jean-Claude Colin, as it is for the whole French spiritual tradition to which he belongs. It is a rich image, with several facets. Coste wrote a long article on ‘Nazareth in the Thought of Fr. Colin’ (*ActaSM*, vol. 6 (1961) 297-400). But it is enough to look up Nazareth in *FS*, where you will see that the reference is mostly to the hidden life of the Holy Family, especially to the thirty years spent there by Jesus before his public ministry. Sometimes there is a particular application to the Brothers (8 §1), or to Marists during their formation (e.g. 49 §1); but the life of obscurity, prayer and work at Nazareth is an abiding reference for all Marists (e.g. 44 §3). There is, however, one passage in *FS* (10) that explicitly refers to Nazareth as the cradle of the Church. The Founder is marvelling at the fact that the Society of Mary has come to birth in the remote, little provincial town of Belley. Someone remarks: ‘No order has ever begun like this in a small town.’ ‘Yes, there was one,’ replies Colin, ‘but only one: the order of the Church. Nazareth was its

cradle. Jesus, Mary and Joseph: there you have the Church coming into being. It began there.’ That should make us cautious about taking Nazareth simply as a symbol of the hidden life. In fact, Coste shows that, at least in the period before 1850, Fr. Colin’s thought passes easily between Nazareth and the Church after the Ascension as references for the earliest Church (p. 328, where, however, he points out that Colin never uses Nazareth in reference to the external activities of the Society). After 1850, it is true, Nazareth tends to refer rather to the ‘hidden life’.

There is another place where the Church comes to birth, and that is Calvary. It is true that Calvary is not a typically Colinian symbol: there is no reference to it in *FS*. On the other hand, it is deeply Marist, for it belongs to the ‘revelation of Le Puy’ as remembered by Jean-Claude Courveille towards the end of his life. As he recounts his own experience, he ‘heard’ our Lady say: ‘I have always imitated my Divine Son in everything. I followed Him to Calvary itself, standing at the foot of the Cross when He gave His life for man’s salvation. Now in heaven, sharing His glory, I follow His path still, in the work he does for His church on earth. Of this Church, I am the Protectress...’ (*OM* 718, 5; Keel, 1). Note how this text has a similar structure to the more familiar ‘I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time’; we find also a similar declaration by Mary: ‘Of this Church, I am the Protectress.’ As remembered by Courveille, the reference to the end of time comes a few sentences later: ‘...in this last age of impiety and unbelief ...’ Where Colin’s version has ‘the new-born Church’, Courveille’s speaks of Calvary and Christ’s death on the Cross. The two apparently different images come together in the traditional belief that the Church was born on Calvary from the pierced side of Christ (thus Augustine, *Tractate in John* 120:5; John Chrysostom, *Catechesis* 3, 13-19). For a magnificent reflection on these themes I refer you to Peter Allen’s article in *FN* 6,1, 2003, pp. 61-79.

3. The primitive Church in Acts

The most familiar face of the earliest Church, which the Marists are to take as their model, is, of course, that of the Church after the Ascension as portrayed by Luke in the first chapters of the Book of Acts. In fact, Fr Colin is far from being the only one to take the church of Acts as a model; it is also central to the Rule of St Augustine and is a reference for many founders and reformers. But what was this Church really

like?

A careful reading of Acts leads to the conclusion that the emergence of a Christian mission came about only gradually. The first two chapters form a synthesis that can be summed up in two phases. First, after the Ascension, the initial reflex of the apostles is to wait passively for the return of Jesus Messiah, who will come to establish his kingdom and restore the rights of all. An outlook such as that is certainly not directed towards any sort of mission. Second phase, the Holy Spirit comes on them; that opens the prospect of a universal mission of conversion – necessarily a long-term programme.

Notwithstanding this missionary prospect, the reader of Acts may well be struck by the stability of the community of disciples in Jerusalem. The Risen Lord had given them this commission: ‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and right to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).’ However, they don’t show any haste to begin missionary activity, although Peter does seize two opportunities to preach to crowds that gather (Acts 2 and 3) and ‘the apostles gave testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus’ (4:33). The Book of Acts suggests the picture of a community following its own way of life and on the whole occupied with its own affairs. Even more surprising: the event of Pentecost doesn’t change things, at least not immediately. Instead of leaving on mission under the impulse of the Spirit, the apostles stay – with Mary – in the heart of the Jerusalem community. **At the same time, according to Acts 5:13, the community had an appreciable impact on its environment: ‘... the people held them in high honour.’**

According to Acts 8:1, a violent persecution broke out after Stephen’s martyrdom and caused many believers (but not the apostles) to flee Jerusalem. This was the origin of different missions, although no strategy was established in advance. Here we have both facts and a thesis, which interprets the facts. The thesis is quickly stated and recurs throughout Acts, namely that the mission makes progress only thanks to persecutions. The first case, directed against Jesus, allowed Scripture to be fulfilled, thanks to Judas and the Jewish and Roman authorities, who did not know what they were doing. The second case brought about an exile from Jerusalem that turned into a mission to Jews and to Samaritans, then to the Gentiles as far as Rome.

Reading the narrative of Acts, you get the impression nothing would have happened without the events surrounding the death of Stephen. In this sense Paul was already helping the primitive community to develop even before his conversion. The

facts thus interpreted by Acts were certainly less clear in reality, even may be less significant: a repression of Messianic agitation in Jerusalem, perhaps noteworthy at the time, but difficult to date, probably on the occasion of a pilgrimage. Without these events, however, the Church might still be in Jerusalem waiting for the return of Messiah Jesus.

4. Cor unum et anima una

The feature of the earliest Church in Jerusalem that is most emphasized in the first chapters of Acts is the quality of its community life. This life is summed up in Acts 2:42 under four headings: the preaching of the Apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. ‘Fellowship’ is not just a good feeling of togetherness: the apostles and their companions have a common life and share their material goods (cf. 2:44-45 and 4:32-35). The first believers practised, perhaps following more than one detailed model, a real sharing of material goods and a kind of social welfare system. Luke sees them as fulfilling in this way the demands of the Covenant, that there should be no needy people among them (cf. Acts 4:34, referring to Deut 15:4); at the same time they were fulfilling the duties of friendship as conceived by the Greeks – ‘among friends all is common.’ The community of goods would have been one of the most attractive features of the primitive Church for its contemporaries (cf. Brian J. Capper, ‘The Church as the New Covenant of Effective Economics: The Social Origins of Mutually Supportive Christian Community’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 2 (2002) 83–102.)

The quality of common life of the first believers is expressed in the phrase that we read in Acts 4:32: ‘one heart and one soul’. This phrase comes frequently to the lips of Jean-Claude Colin, generally in its Latin form: *cor unum et anima una*. We have already seen some examples. Luke in Acts makes it clear that this unity is not simply wishful thinking or vague sentiment. Nor does it exist automatically. It doesn’t just happen. On the contrary, unity has to be constructed, sometimes painfully. Furthermore, the unity of which Luke writes is not simply uniformity. Finally, as we saw in the first talk, the unity of the first believers is constructed around and even by Mary. By exercising a role of mediation or even reconciliation, Mary ‘supports’ the newborn Church. This is the paradigm of the ‘work of Mary’, in which Marists are called to take part.

5. What sort of model?

So what sort of model does the new-born Church – taken by itself – offer the Society of Mary? It seems to me that it is the model of a community that possesses an intense life of prayer and brotherhood, but which is not precisely ‘missionary’ in the sense of existing for the sake of mission. It is a community from which members go out to proclaim the Gospel, to preach, to heal – and to which they return.

This is perhaps the model lived at Cerdon and Belley at the time of the missions in the Bugey, the model of the Hermitage in the early days of Champagnat and Courveille. It is also the model reflected in the ‘primitive rule’ and in certain numbers of the 1872 Constitutions in which Colin ‘returned to his earliest ideas’, such as n. 217 (see Coste and Lessard, *Autour de la Règle*, I, doc. 22,71). This number, which is partly inspired by Mary of Agreda, evokes the example of the blessed Virgin Mary, who ‘left her solitude briefly only at God’s command or for the service of her neighbour’, and prescribes that Marists are not to ‘leave the community house except out of obedience’ in precise circumstances or for precise reasons, including the ‘duties of the sacred ministry.’ As Jan Hulshof observes (*Constitutions, New and Old*, p. 72), ‘Colin’s constitutions do not draw a picture of a missionary community... “Mission” is not the key word which determines the life of a Marist community.’ The emphasis is on the internal life of the community – which has, of course, an effect beyond its four walls.

I think this is an excellent example of how Colin challenges our own thinking and our assumptions. What are we to make of the fact that ‘Colin’s Constitutions do not draw a picture of a missionary community’? I emphasize that his ‘idea’ of ‘the life of a Marist community’ belongs to his earliest intuitions; and it is one of the points that he made sure were included in his final version of the Constitutions. I don’t think we can dismiss it as some sort of retreat on his part from a supposedly ‘true’ idea of a Marist missionary community, which he would have abandoned from the fatigue of old age and a desire for solitude.

The general type of community sketched by Colin is one that seems to attract young people, if you look at the new communities that have arisen in the Church in the last thirty or forty years – Sant’ Egidio, Emmanuel, Beatitudes, etc.: with many variations you find the same style everywhere, bringing together believers – often of

every category, married, single, priests, those with vows – in a life of prayer and sharing that ‘overflows’ in ministries of service or evangelisation. Not that we should idealize these groups: they have their problems, too. But perhaps the first Marists would recognise in them certain features of the Society of Mary of their dreams. It is a model that might still serve to renew the Society.

In fact, I have sometimes reflected that, if Fr Colin and the others of the founding group had lived in the latter half of the 20th century, they would have started up something along the lines of one of these communities. So much of the original dream of a ‘tree with many branches’ corresponds to that. As we know, what came about was a number of separate and more or less specialized Congregations of priests, brothers and sisters, and a Third Order attached to the priests’ Congregation. The name ‘Society of Mary’, which originally applied to the whole movement (for want of a better term) came to denote especially, if not exclusively, the priests and the brothers who lived with them. In recent years we have tried to recapture something of the original vision through fostering the ‘Marist family’ and a broader based lay movement.

I have even had a wild dream in which the Society of Mary would be refounded as a ‘new movement’ – even, perhaps, lay led. Admittedly, that wouldn’t solve all the problems of the actual Society. But it might give a chance for ‘Mary’s work’ in the 21st century.

6. A Tension

In any case, it is easy to see that the earliest Church is not the most obvious model for a missionary Congregation *precisely as missionary* – no more than Nazareth for that matter. We have seen (FS 159) that, when speaking of those sent on mission, Fr. Colin refers to the ‘apostles’, whose journeys are recorded in Acts, precisely in contrast to the ‘first Church’, which is the model for those who remain in France. No doubt that’s the reason why he sometimes has recourse to the image of Mary, who – in imitation of Jesus in Matt 28:19 – sends the Marist on mission, while promising to remain with him. Thus, to return to a passage we have already seen (FS 143,2): ‘Yes, Messieurs, *cor unum et anima una*: we shall not be united in body, in the same place, since Mary does not wish it, but very much so in heart and mind.’ Then his thought moves on: ‘I like what was just said (by the retreat preacher). Yes, it

is Mary who gives each one his mission, his task, the position he must fill. Just as her divine Son once entrusted a mission to his apostles, calling them his friends, telling them *Euntes docete omnes gentes* and to go their separate ways, just so does this divine mother, at the end of time, say to us, “Go, proclaim my divine Son to the world. I am with you. Go, we shall still be united.”

There is a noticeable tension here between the ideal of the *cor unum* and the missionary impulsion. This may very well be the origin of the problem of the missions in Oceania in Colin’s time, that is to say a conflict between the needs of the mission – keenly felt by the Vicars Apostolic – and the demands of religious life in community, as perceived by the Founder. Colin, we know, resisted the bishops’ policy of spreading the missionaries as widely as possible and insisted that they should be able to live in community and follow the Rule. Perhaps we should see in this conflict more than just an historical contingency, something that might not have happened, if, for instance, there had not also been a clash of personalities.

On the contrary, I believe, we touch here once again a tension that is deeply rooted in Fr. Colin’s thought, a tension that is characteristic of him and distinguishes him from other founders of the time. In fact the Society of Mary, in Colin’s mind, is far from being just a copy of the Society of Jesus. The model of the earliest Church – which Colin liked to imagine in terms of the house of Mary – has to be married with that of the apostles sent on mission. The same Constitutions of 1872 that contain the text we saw a moment ago, restricting the movements of Marist religious outside their community house, also have texts such as n. 4, which says that ‘their vocation is to go from place to place for the greater service of God and to spend themselves working for the salvation of the neighbour... They must show themselves most ready ... to undertake such works in any corner of the world where results can be expected and for as long as obedience requires.’ This number also goes back to the ‘primitive rule’.

The tension between community life and mission is obvious and uncomfortable; but eliminating or devaluing one of its elements is not the way to resolve it. Turning the Society of Mary into a quasi-monastic order is no solution (but let us not be too quick to reject as ‘monastic’ and therefore ‘not for us’ concrete practices of common life and prayer). On the other hand, emphasizing mission in a one-sided way that reduces community life to a minimum or even practically excludes it, results in a Society of Mary that is far from the Founder’s intentions. In particular – despite the impression that one might get from the title of ch. 3 of our Constitutions,

‘Forming a Communion for Mission’ – I do not think that a purely utilitarian view of community life is adequate. Here, if anywhere, we need ‘creative fidelity’ as we try to do justice – not simply in theory but in lived practice – to Fr. Colin’s insight of a Society that would imitate both the new-born Church of Jerusalem in its intense sharing of life and prayer and also the apostles going ‘from place to place’ to bring God’s salvation to all.

7. Renewal of community life today

I believe that we Marists are being called very specially and urgently at this moment to renew – perhaps reform – our community life. The model of the earliest Church *cor unum et anima una* summons us to this task. Marists themselves see it as a priority.

I don’t know if you remember the report drawn up by a so-called ‘redaction committee’ in preparation for the General Chapter of 2001. This report brought together the responses of Marists all over the Society to a certain number of questions designed to reveal how we were feeling about our Society, its inner life and its mission. It reflected a profound dissatisfaction among Marists all over the world concerning the quality of our community life. Clearly the realities we were experiencing often disappointed what we considered to be our justifiable expectations. Put simply, Marist community life was not living up to its promises. I have a hunch – unprovable for lack of hard data – that this has been a major factor, in one way or another, in the decision of many confreres to leave our ranks. It is a problem that our Marist leadership has put before us with concrete proposals for change.

The renewal of community life must surely be an important and urgent concern for us all. And it needs direct and focused attention. I don’t believe it is a problem that would fix itself if only we individual Marists were better Christians and religious. Because we have to admit that this deep and widespread dissatisfaction with community life was being felt at a time when unprecedented numbers of individual religious had experienced spiritual and personal renewal – often more than once. I’m not for a moment calling into question the quality of this renewal or its positive results for the Marists concerned. But I’m convinced that renewal of *individuals* is not going automatically to bring about renewal of *communities*. For that we need targeted action. I mean, we have to pass beyond exhortations and statements of intent, to take

concrete and measurable steps in order to bring about change, real, visible change in the way we live.