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Something never thought of

A clear picture emerges from Mayet's Memoirs. As far as Jean-Claude Colin was concerned, and as far as the founding Marists understood, the project they were initiating was to be something new, and the Society of Mary was not to be modelled on any other religious Congregation. It was not to take up something that was already being done by others; it was to begin something new. This "new" thing came from a key fact and a key image shared from the start by those pioneers. The key fact was their conviction that they were the first group in the history of the Church to have been called by the name of Mary, to have been called "Marist". Historically, this could perhaps be disputed; but for that group of Marists it was an unshakeable conviction: the name "Society of Mary" had been reserved for that century, and for that group: "we are the first of the children of Mary". To be called Marist was a source of hope, and also a challenge to take up a certain way of thinking and acting. That way was summed up in the key image which Colin put to his followers: Mary in the early Church. For the first time in history a Religious Congregation appears in the Church, drawing its inspiration not from Mary in herself, seen as the embodiment of all the great virtues, but Mary seen always in relationship: to Jesus, to the Church, and to the contemporary world. It was a very simple and clear idea: what would happen if a group of people built their way of thinking and acting round the model of Mary's presence in the Church? This indeed was something new, and it enabled Jean-Claude Colin to envisage – and to encourage Marists to build – a new Church, a Church that is different. But then, having taken this idea, he envisaged a structure to make it work: a body of priests,

Religious and lay people. And having envisaged this body, he presented it with a way of acting which would enable a "new church" to take shape. Colin envisaged a way of dealing with the world, not against it; a way which meant pushing the limits of mercy to the utmost extreme to ensure that everyone was able to be gathered into the Church, and no one was excluded, except those who wished to exclude themselves. When Colin presented his idea to Rome, he said that "people had never seen anything like it." And when Cardinal Castracane criticised the project as being something unheard of, he was exactly right. That was the whole point. It had not been heard of before. Perhaps even the founding members themselves had no real idea of what this new project would mean.

The Mayet Memoirs

Father Colin said: "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." - *September 23, 1846*

New structure

The Society of Mary was not to be the sort of clerical congregation that had become the norm since the Reformation. Unlike the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, etc., the Society of Mary had to break through the restraints of that clerical pattern, for the sake of its specific mission.

If we read our founding texts carefully, one idea that we tend to consider marginal proves to be rather central: that the Society of Mary must be a tree of many branches. It was at the heart of the

original Marist vision not to become a clerical organization like the Jesuits, but a much wider movement: and this was intrinsically linked to the specific mission of the Society of Mary. The secularized world cannot effectively be reached through the pre-Enlightenment clerical structures: it takes men and women, priests and laity working harmoniously together. Many evangelizing tasks can be done better by women and lay men than by clerics. The traditional Third Order was a form of lay involvement tied to a particular period; it is good, but it must not blind us to the wider responsibility of the Society of Mary to promote and anticipate a church in which the clergy abandon their privileged role, step back among the People of God, and work with them on a basis of equality. Our First and Perpetual Superior is a lay person, and a woman.

- Jan Snijders, sm

“Here is what we want...”

In 1809 when Jean-Claude Courveille bathed his eyes in the oil from one of the votive lamps in the Cathedral of Le Puy, his blindness was cured. When he returned to this same spot in thanksgiving for the extraordinary cure, he heard “with the ears of his heart” the voice of Our Lady saying: “Here is what I want... a Society which will have my name, which will call itself the Society of Mary, whose members will call themselves Marists.” This is what “singularly struck and “left kind of stupefied” the seminarians at Lyon. It was of this that Jean-Claude Colin told himself: “That suits you!”

“Here is what we want...”

In 1816, in the chapel of Fourviere, before this statue of Our Lady, the twelve seminarians of Lyon were prepared to make their promise: a commitment of themselves in response to Mary’s request. On that occasion they declared: “We have the sincere intention and firm purpose of consecrating ourselves at the first opportunity to founding a congregation of Mary-ists.... and we solemnly promise to spend ourselves and all that we possess in saving souls by every kind of apostolate under the sacred name of the Virgin Mary and with her protection and help.” The Marist vocation comes from a meeting of these two desires: the desire of Mary that something new happen in the Church, and the desire of an individual person to be part of that work.

Men of fire

The seminarians who climbed the hill of Fourviere were caught in a dream. They were convinced that Mary wanted something. She wanted to transform the Church into a Kingdom of Mercy. In God’s providences he was to be the instrument to renew the Church into a servant and pilgrim people. She was to bring a new sensitivity and compassion. A compassion which saw in the skepticism of the time a desire of people to be authentic, to cast off all masks and illusions. A Church which would be gentle with unbelievers because it recognized in their disbelief the possibility of a deeper and sounder foundation for the faith. The men of Fourviere burned with a vision. They were innovators and prophets. They wanted to create something new. For the sake of their vision they were willing to set aside all desire for personal power, for fame, for possessions. The invitation to go to Oceania had not yet been made, the question had not yet been asked, and yet one knew that the answer would be “yes”. They were men available. They were men on fire, the men of Fourviere.

- John Jago, sm

Jean-Claude Colin: founder

At the dawn of the last century he felt that the response to the new needs then arising was to be found in the Virgin Mary, but to express this conviction he did not take up the pen of a theologian or a spiritual writer; nor did he start a new devotion or build a sanctuary to attract crowds, any more than he launched an original form of apostolate. He was convinced that for the work of Mary there was needed a body, a social body whose structure, internal life, and way of acting would be inspired by the place occupied by Mary in the Church of Christ. His irreplaceable contribution was to bring into existence a group of men who would take seriously the fact of bearing Mary’s name and accept the consequences. In a word, his role is that of a founder, namely the one who provides the foundations and brings into existence, even though, as happened in his case, he was not the first to launch the project. Although his was not the original idea, it was he who gave it flesh; a Marian task if ever there was one.

- Jean Coste, sm