

Marists Without Vows  
St Barnabas  
22 May 2010, morning

## I. From Daily Life to the Lord Jesus

Why would you want to be Marists? Why would you want to spend time learning what being Marist entails and then devote energy to the exercises of Marist life? You are, I take it, believers in Jesus Christ and you try and make sure your deeds match your belief. What will being Marists add to that? Indeed, it is not a matter of adding to that. Being Marists is simply one way, among many others, of becoming Christians. Are we not Christians already? You know as well as I do that baptism will remain an empty shell unless belief in Jesus as Lord eventually shapes all my doings. My task today is to see with you how the Marist recipe can help us bridge the gap between our faith and our daily life. To help us visualize our itinerary for the day, I propose that we divide our world into three fields: one is daily life, what we do from morning to evening and from evening to morning; another is the realm of faith, what we don't see: God, the risen Lord, the holy Spirit. In between is what I call the Marist recipe to connect the two. I invite you to explore each of these worlds, in an effort to see how they relate to each other.

### 1. Daily Life

Daily life is what fills our day, not only in terms of what we do, but also in terms of what we think about. Again, roughly, that can be grouped around three poles, three areas of concern: money, sex, and power.

a) Money. Under this heading, I invite you to look at things you own, or wish you owned, not so much in order to tally up an inventory, but in terms of how you relate to them. You live in a house. It may be paid, thanks to many years of hard work; it may be mortgaged and demand monthly payments. It needs repair, heating, lighting, plumbing. You pay taxes on it. You may have grown up in it, have been living in it for twenty years or a few months. It may be the house of your dreams, or the house of your dreams may still be just that, a dream. It may be a source of comfort or of worry.

And then there is the neighbor's house, which can be a source of pride or of jealousy.

There may be a car. There are the clothes, and the food. All that comes under the heading of money. Make yourselves aware of how you feel about things in your life. Do you have too much? Not enough? More than the neighbor? Less? Are you jealous? envious? disgruntled? grateful? grasping? generous? willing to share?

Many powerful and astute people work hard to influence your feelings, to make you unhappy with what you have and to make you want what you don't have (and can't afford). How far do they succeed? How much access do you allow them to your imagination?

The point here is not to make you feel guilty. Let us just pay attention to the place things hold in our life.

b) Sex. When I say sex, I don't just mean sex. I mean people, beginning with the people closest to us: husband or wife, parents, children. Of course, the bond between husband and wife is sexual, but so is the bond between you and your parents and between you and your children. There is also a sexual dimension to what draws us to people or away from them. People are never just people. They are men or women. And so are we.

Let me, then, take stock of the way I relate to people and of how my feelings about people play out in my daily life. We each have our story. I know none of yours. As I speak, see how your story colors your life. Your relationship with your spouse takes precedence over all others. It may be a story filled with joy, it may also be the story of a failure. It is probably a mixture of good moments and of

more difficult ones.

Who you are now is also the product of how you related to your parents. That can have been a happy story, with parents who fed and clothed you, who taught you healthy ways to take your place in the world. Then, gratitude comes easily, and with it a relaxed and confident approach to people. If, instead, you have had to fend for yourself more than a child should have to, or, worse, if you have been subjected to violence or abuse, overcoming those hurdles would make your life more of a struggle. Resentment and bitterness would come more easily to the surface. It is not so simple, then, to approach people with a smile and open hands.

Other people who are related to you through sex are your own children. Being a parent is an awesome task which for centuries twenty-year old women and men have accomplished brilliantly without ever being taught. Even today, many succeed at it without seeming to try. Happy are you if you are among those. Happier still if you saw your offspring through their teen-age years without mishaps. You may even be enjoying the spectacle of your adult children and the bonus of grandchildren. Still, chances are that none of this came without pain.

You alone know what prevails when you look at your close relations. It can be deep joy or deep sorrow, more likely a mix of both. As we look at people in our lives, we become aware not only of joy or pain, but also of attraction and distance. People occupy an important place in our desires, our likes and dislikes.

c) Power. Power is less obvious as one of the three great forces that pull us hither and thither, but it may be stronger than money or sex. What I call power has to do with how I rate myself with regard to others: am I better or worse, higher or lower, stronger or weaker? It is an instinct we share with animals, but we are far more subtle about it.

Elbowing for room begins early. You may remember, as a child, marking your place at the family table. We are becoming more and more familiar with the curse of bullying at school, an old phenomenon that is taking on new dimensions. We have all read about the Irish teenager who was bullied to death. I read the other day about a mother who is being sued by her sixteen-year old son because she dared intervene to stop his harassing of schoolmates on the internet.

When we move from the school to the adult world of work, we come upon harassment, another name for persecution of the weak by the strong. Animals lock horns. Humans do as well, except that they have more tools at their disposal. Whether these are words or guns, the end result is often the same: wounds or even death.

Is the struggle for power part of your life? I would be surprised if it were not. You may be, or have been, the underdog. You might have been, or tempted to be, the persecutor or the avenger. Any time anger rises up in us, it is usually a sign that we are caught up in a struggle for power. Again, I am not inviting blame or praise. I am simply inviting us to take stock of the currents that are constantly at work in our lives. These currents have names: I just mentioned anger. Resentment, bitterness, jealousy, envy, are variations. Nor are they all negative: strength, courage, determination, patience, are also ways of dealing with power.

This first part of our exercise was an attempt to touch that part of our world that we could call its weekday dimension, its ordinariness, the stuff of daily living. In the second part, I invite you to a tour of the Marist world. At some point of your lives, you have become aware of the Marist world and you have become or are planning to become part of it. What is it?

## 2. The Marist World

Marist reality is best understood as we see it being born. I choose three dates: 1816, 1822, 1833. Three places: the major seminary of Lyons, the village of Cerdon, the little town of Belley, but with a view towards Rome. In all three places, a character who plays a key role, but not alone. The character is Jean-Claude Colin. In 1816, in Lyons, he is overshadowed by Jean-Claude Courveille; in 1822, at Cerdon, he is accompanied and encouraged by the foundress of the Marist Sisters, Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn; in 1833, at Belley, he is working to escape the stifling authority of Bishop Devie by appealing to the higher authority of Pope Gregory XVI.

### a) Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time

The Marist story begins at the major seminary of Lyons in 1816. True, because the first committed Marist group took shape there and then. But that group did not sprout overnight. The story began elsewhere four years earlier: in 1812, at the shrine of Le Puy, Jean-Claude Courveille heard Mary in his heart, saying that, just like there had been a Society of Jesus at the time of the Reformation, so she wanted a society of Mary after the French Revolution. At the major seminary of Lyons, Courveille told his story. Out of a couple of hundred seminarians, a dozen joined him. Among them Étienne Déclas, Étienne Terrailon, Marcellin Champagnat, and Jean-Claude Colin. On 23 July 1816, the day after they were ordained priests, they signed a pledge to make Mary's wish happen. They committed themselves to founding the Society of Mary, the Mariists.

"Mary said: I upheld the church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time." "Those words, Colin said later, were always before us. They served as a foundation and an encouragement. We worked along that line, so to speak." Those are strong words. They invite us to look closely at the image of Mary upholding the church at its birth and at the end of time. It is the image that gave life to the Society of Mary. It defines what the Society is about.

The early Marists felt the time they lived in were the end times. We do not relate easily to such a feeling. When the fire alarm sounds, we act quickly and without thought. But emergencies are short-lived. Yet, Christians are end-time people, and have been so for two thousand years. At the beginning, it was easy enough to be on the alert for the coming of Christ in his glory. As time went on, it became more difficult. People tended to settle down. The French Revolution was a reminder that the world could crumble quickly. "We have here no lasting dwelling." The sense of urgency is an essential ingredient of the Marist enterprise.

The church at its birth is another. Marists see themselves as starting the church over again, or even as the church starting again. They keep before their minds the image of the church being born, as the Acts of the Apostles tell the story. They also look around them and see the church in ruins: buildings destroyed, but, more to the point, belief lying dead in people's hearts. Hence, the urgency for the seminarians in Lyons to go out and preach the good news of Christ's saving death and of his resurrection. The flock is dispersed, parishes are without priests, children are left without guidance. Like their companions, the Marist aspirants are fired with zeal to save souls, not only in France, but to the ends of the earth.

Unlike their companions, the Marists are aware of a hidden presence in the church being born and they know they are called to make that presence felt in the church being born again: "I upheld the church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time." Not much is said of Mary at the birth of the church, and we may wonder what alerted the Marists to her key role at that point. Courveille's story of his experience at Le Puy is clearly the starting point: by all accounts, the group first gathered around him. At the same time, the least conspicuous member of the group, Jean-Claude Colin, picked up the insight and ran with it. Out of Courveille's long and convoluted story he drew the brief and strong saying: "I upheld the church at its birth; I shall do so again at the end of time," and he spent years exploring how Mary's wish could be realized through the women and men who decided to make it their life's task.

### b) No to greed, no to ambition, no to making noise

By 1822, Colin had been in Cerdon for six years, as a curate to his older brother Pierre. He had spent a precious part of his time writing a rule for the Marists, so that Mary's wish would become a reality through the actual behavior of the women and men who, at the end of time, would set about starting the church over again. Where would you start if you decided to heed Mary's wish to be present in the church now as she was at the beginning? Colin felt that Marists should begin by banishing from their lives anything that looked like greed, pride, or ambition. His rule prescribed that, if the superior had harbored thoughts of greed for more than fifteen minutes, he should summon the council and confess his fault, and how long he had lingered in it. The same with pride.

And Marists were to remain hidden and unknown.

Whatever was bugging Colin? What made him think that being free from greed would make Marists better suited to begin the church afresh? He did have a personal reason to be attuned to greed as an evil, having encountered it in a brother of his (not Pierre), but more importantly he saw it as the worm that had begun eating away at the church from the beginning and that was still at work in his time. You remember how, at the beginning of the church, when the first Christians were putting their goods in common, Ananias and his wife Sapphira had lied about the proceeds of a field they had sold and were struck dead on the spot (Acts 5, 1-11). In Colin's time, the church lay in ruins, in great part as a result of the immense wealth it had piled up since the middle ages and which the French Revolution had taken away from it. But greed had not died with the French Revolution. It was still poisoning the lives of both the priests and the peasants who had to support them. Colin saw that the gospel did not have a chance as long as greed or, for that matter, pride and ambition stood in the way. Hence his determination that neither of those would not take root in the hearts of Marists. As he put it: let "all means be taken to expel this covetousness completely from the house of blessed Mary, who always abhorred this spirit of covetousness throughout her life" (h, 5).

The 1822 rule underwent plenty of rewriting over the next fifty years. Having to confess publicly that one had entertained thoughts of greed for more than fifteen minutes did not survive the test of experience, but even today Marists are reminded solemnly that, following in the footsteps of Mary, they must be "entirely removed from the spirit of the world, from any greed for earthly goods, and be totally emptied of all self-concern" (C, 50).

### c) The Whole World Marist

In 1833, Colin traveled to Rome to submit to Pope Gregory XVI the plan of a four-branch Society of Mary. Colin met the pope and received his blessing, but the people who dealt with his requests were two cardinals, one of whom, Castracane, came to know Colin more closely. Two things stand out in the way they related to each other: Castracane objected strenuously to what he considered outlandish aspects of the Marist plan, but as he got to know Colin he grew to like and respect him deeply. Castracane had a particularly hard time with Colin's idea of the Marist third order, or, as he called it, the confraternity for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just.

It is worth our while to take cognizance of the two paragraphs where Colin described this confraternity:

The general aim of the Society is to contribute in the best possible way, both by its prayers and its efforts, to the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, and to gather, so to speak, all the members of Christ, whatever their age, sex or standing, under the protection of the Blessed Mary Immaculate, Mother of God; and to revive their faith and piety and nourish them with the doctrine of the Roman Church, so that at the end of time as at the beginning, all the faithful may with God's help be one heart and one mind in the bosom of the Roman Church, and that all, walking worthily before God and under Mary's guidance, may attain eternal life. For this reason entry into the Society is open even to laypersons living in the world in the confraternity or third order of the Virgin Mary.

Therefore, those belonging to this Confraternity live in the world and do not take vows; they perform certain devotional exercises suitable for all, and thus linked to the Society, participate in all the spiritual goods of the whole Society. Sinners as well as the just are admitted to the Confraternity, as long as they are Catholics; for them to share in the prayers and other spiritual goods of the Society, it is enough if their names are inscribed in the book of the Confraternity kept by the religious priests of the Society of Mary (s, 109-110).

Five years after his trip to Rome, in a family atmosphere at table, Colin gave Marists an account of his encounters with Cardinal Castracane:

Oh! I laugh when I think of the good-natured and simple manner in which I behaved. I just went and put into my request for approval of our confraternity of the third order that there would appear at the end of time what had taken place at the beginning: One heart and one mind. That, through this means, all the faithful, all those who would remain on God's side would be of one heart and one mind. Cardinal Castracane burst out laughing and said: In the end, then, the whole world will be Marist? I told him: Yes, your Eminence; the Pope as well; we want him at our head. Well, right there and then I got three briefs for the third order (OM, doc. 427, § 2).

Actually, the story is not that simple. Colin did get three briefs, and, as we can see in the text he submitted, he spoke of gathering all the faithful so that they would be one heart and one mind. But the briefs were rather a consolation prize and they only applied to the third order in one place. Still, the dream was and is an essential part of the Marist endeavor. The aim of the Society of Mary as a whole and of the lay members in particular is to bring the news of God's love to the whole world by enrolling everybody in the ranks of Mary's family. Becoming a member is easy: it is enough that your name be written in the book.

### 3. The Death of Jesus

The book, of course, is the register of the Marist fraternity. But it calls to mind the book of life of the lamb, which comes up several times in the book of Revelation (Ap 3, 5; 23, 8; 21, 27). This last passage comes at the end of the vision of the new Jerusalem, the spouse of the Lamb, coming down from heaven. Only those will enter it who are inscribed in the book of life of the Lamb. The new Jerusalem represents what the church is meant to be as a result of the death of Jesus. Indeed, the book of Revelation as a whole is an affirmation of what the death of Jesus is meant to make happen, namely the birth of a people of God that will, in the end, include all nations and where everyone will worship the Lamb that was slain.

The book of Revelation uses its own symbolic language to say what Peter proclaimed after the holy Spirit had descended upon him and the women and men who were in the upper room. Peter told the people in Jerusalem: You have suppressed Jesus by having him crucified, but God raised him, freeing him from the pains of death (Acts 2, 23-24). Paul said the same thing in other words: Christ lowered himself, becoming obedient unto death, death on a cross; that is why God raised him and gave him the name that is above every name (Phil 2, 8-10).

Whenever we speak of the church being born, we are sent back to that hill outside Jerusalem where three naked men are hanging, nailed to a piece of wood on which they are exposed to the contempt of the crowd. They have been executed in the cruel and demeaning manner reserved for slaves. The disciples of Jesus have run away; Peter has disowned him. The last words Jesus uttered were: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The silence that fell after he breathed his last could not have been more stark. There, you would think, is the end of all that Jesus stood for. Hope died with him on the cross. How could anyone again believe in God?

But that is not where the story ends. In Mark's gospel, for instance, we are told that, after Jesus breathed his last, the veil of the temple was split in two from top to bottom. And the centurion, standing in front, when he saw how Jesus had died, said: In truth this man was a son of God. Also, there were women looking from a distance: Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph, and Salome.

The last image that the women will have with them is that of a tortured body hanging on the cross, a crown of thorns on his head, a board above his head bearing the words Jesus of Nazareth king of the Jews. They will never lose sight of that image, but they will learn to read it. As they go back over all that led to that moment, all that Jesus did and said as he began proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near, in Galilee and later in Jerusalem, how he infuriated the scribes and Pharisees by calling them hypocrites, the women and the disciples keep hearing a phrase: in accordance with the Scriptures (1 C 15, 4). What made no sense, that Jesus should die in this way, began to make sense once you remembered what had been written in the law and the prophets. What seemed to say loud and clear that God is absent from the world shows instead that what took

place is how God makes himself present. Learning how to read the death of Christ as the place where God's love shows itself is how the church came to be. Believers are first of all readers. By reading over and over again the accounts of Noah and the deluge, of Abraham and his son Isaac, of Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, of Moses leading his people out of the slavery of Egypt, they learned to see in the story of Jesus the same love that was at work in those stories. As they read the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Daniel, they gradually saw the figure of Christ taking shape. As they prayed the psalms, they began to hear Christ praying them.

As the disciples of Jesus and the women came together to remind themselves of what Jesus had said and done in the light of all that God had done for his people, they did so under the guidance of the Spirit of God himself. They were the church being born. Colin and the whole Marist tradition call our attention to a quiet presence among them, one who had known Christ more intimately than any of them, was more fully under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and had been the most careful reader of God's writing, the woman who kept pondering all these things in her heart.

My hope, as we work together today, is to establish a link, a vital and enriching link, between the everyday world, Marist spirituality, and our christian faith. Our everyday world takes up most of the room in our minds and hearts: concerns with money and things, the joys and pains of our dealings with the people closest to us, what we hope to accomplish through our work. Marist spirituality offers you a way of bringing this stuff of daily life under the light of your belief in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We have spent a bit of time exploring these three worlds and relating them to each other. I invite you to spend some time in prayer, doing what Mary did: turning these things over and over in your heart to see what you make of them. We will pursue our work this afternoon.

Gaston Lessard, s. m.