

Marists Without Vows  
St Barbabas  
22 May 2010, afternoon

## II. From the Lord Jesus to Daily Life

### 1. Jesus is Lord

How will Marist spirituality help us make the link between our belief in Jesus as Lord and our daily life? Let us start where we left off: the dead body of Jesus has been laid in a brand new grave hewn out of rock; a stone has been rolled over the entrance. All this took place just before the sabbath began, and now early in the morning at the beginning of the new week, three women are on their way to the tomb to embalm the body. Nothing goes as expected. The stone has already been rolled away. The tomb is open. Instead of the body, they are confronted with a young man dressed in white who tells them: «You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one. He has risen; he is not here. Go and tell his disciples and Peter: He goes before you in Galilee; you will see him there, as he told you» (see Mk 16, 1-7).

Until then, for these women as well as for his disciples and for all those who found themselves on his way, Jesus had been a human being in flesh and bones. They have seen him dead, as happens to all of us, one way or another. He is no longer to be seen or heard. The beloved presence is now a gaping hole. All we should do is mourn. Instead, the young man says: He goes before you in Galilee. Will everything be as it was before? As though he had not really died?

At first, a baby feels secure only when it can touch its mother, or at least see her, or at least hear her. Little by little, it learns that, even if she is not within earshot, she will be back soon, or some time. Tragically, the mother may disappear for good, and children don't get over that. Jesus disappeared for good, and his disciples were orphans. But they were also, in a way, like the child who learns to deal with its mother's absence. It learns that she is there even though it cannot see or hear her.

In the days after the death of Jesus, the women and the disciples learned to cope with the absence of Jesus, but they also learned to recognize that he was with them in a different way. They well knew he was dead, but they also gradually came to glimpse that this death opened onto a new life. What this new life is they could not fathom, but they were given hints. The accounts we have of Jesus showing himself to some of them tell us what those hints were: Mary Magdalen, in tears, is looking for his body; she asks the gardener: Tell me where you hid it. The gardener says: Mary! And she knows it is Jesus. But Jesus says: Do not touch me. Go and tell my brothers that I am on my way up to my Father. Thomas wants to make sure Jesus is really the one who died on the cross; Jesus says: Thrust your hand into my side and become a man of faith. And Thomas says: My Lord and my God! Cleopas and his companion are on their way to Emmaus, dejected because Jesus is dead. A presence walks with them and teaches them that the death of Jesus is actually the way God reveals himself. Jesus reads Scripture and breaks bread with them.

What are these accounts trying to convey to us? They are teaching us how Jesus makes himself present. There is no denying that Jesus died, but the believers learn to read that death as life. Not life as we know it, but real life nonetheless. A new kind of life. To get a sense of what this looks like, we need to look at the church being born. The starting point is the holy Spirit that comes down on the disciples, and the women, Mary among them, and the brothers of Jesus, and enables them to witness that Jesus is alive. With the help of the same Spirit, many accept their witness and become believers. What took place then is what continues to take place to this day: the believers come together and do two things: they go over the deeds and words of Jesus and they break bread.

Recalling what Jesus did and said produced the four gospels. Each time we hear a gospel passage proclaimed in church on Sunday, we would do well to remember that it is the work of men and women who came together after the death of Jesus and worked to recall the doings and sayings of Jesus before his death. They worked under the guidance of the holy Spirit with a view to shaping a

way of life for believers. What did Jesus teach, and what does it mean to say that God put his seal on his teaching by raising him from the dead? As they gradually put in writing the product of their work of recalling, the believers also re-read the hebrew Scriptures in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In turn, reading the hebrew Scriptures helped them see how God reveals himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through this reading, this liturgy of the word, the church comes into being, the church is born.

The church also comes into being through its liturgy of thanksgiving as believers come together to bless God the Father for his gift of his Son Jesus, whom the holy Spirit makes present in the sharing of bread and wine.

How the church came to be at the beginning is how it comes to be now, through reading the death of Jesus as his entrance into his new life with the Father, and through believers being baptized through that same death into their new life with God. For the early Christians as well as for us, the challenge then is to witness to this death and resurrection through our behavior. This has proven to be a real struggle. It is what life according to the holy Spirit is about. It is what we call the spiritual life. This is where spiritual traditions come into play.

## 2. Marist Tradition and the New Life

Marist tradition is a rich treasure. It holds the experience of thousands of believers over close to two hundred years in many parts of the world. An important part of it resides in the rule that Colin worked on for fifty years. The rule is the product of Colin's thinking and praying, but also of the thinking and praying of the early Marists who tried to live according to it. The rule also shaped the lives of the men and women who adopted it. The rule is much more than a written set of regulations. It is the record of the lives of the early Marists in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it is also what gave direction to the lives of Marist men and women who took the Marist vision to Futuna and Wallis, New Zealand and Australia, England and Ireland, Louisiana and New England, and to so many other places over the years.

Colin worked on rules for the men, priests and brothers, who make up the Society of Mary as it was approved by Pope Gregory XVI in 1836. He also worked on rules for the Marist Sisters, who only received papal approval much later (1884). The Marist Missionary Sisters (approved by the Holy See in 1931) took much of their inspiration from Colin. An aspect of the Marist plan that blocked its approval in Rome from the beginning was the third order, which Colin preferred to call the confraternity for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, which is now usually referred to as the Marist laity, and which I think would be described more accurately as unwowed Marists. Here, today, let us settle for Marist laity.

Why did Colin's notion of Marist laity create such difficulties in Rome and why did Colin insist so much on it as part of the Marist vision? What created a problem in Rome was the novelty of it. And Colin insisted on it because without it the Marist thing would not be Mary's thing. That Rome did not like it because it was new does not come as a surprise. Like any institution, Rome dislikes innovation; as the oldest institution on earth, it dislikes innovation with a special intensity. Still, it is fair to say that it eventually recognizes plans that have merit.

It is more interesting to explore why Colin was so attached to this confraternity of the Mother of God for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just. Father Lawrence Duffy's account of Colin's vision was published in *Forum Novum* in 1994, but it is still valid, and it helps get a sense of Colin's feelings about this elusive vision of his. Several aspects of this vision stand out: it goes back to the period of inspired fervor at Cerdon; it stayed in the background throughout Colin's years as superior general; it re-emerged at the end of Colin's life. The same can be said about several other of Colin's ideas and this is an invitation to pay closer attention to them. As Jean Coste made us aware, such ideas usually put us on the road to the heart of Colin's understanding of the Society of Mary.

What is special about Colin's vision of Marist laity? Three things stand out: the reference to the person of Mary, the concern about sinners, the attention paid to the local church.

a) The importance given to Mary does not come as a surprise. After all, we are talking about a society that bears her name. Still, Mary as upholding the church at its birth and at the end of time was not a popular image in Colin's time any more than it is now. So little is known about Mary in the newborn church that it is not easy to say anything beyond the fact that she was among the disciples and women and brothers of Jesus in the upper room. Still, the saying that Colin repeated so often about Mary upholding the church inevitably links Mary with the church, and not only with the church but with the church as it comes to birth, and not only with that church, but with the church at the end of time. This naturally leads to the notion that Marists are called to begin the church over again. This is a very vague notion, but also a very bold one, that many people would gladly pick up today. Still, while Colin was well aware of the flaws and shortcomings of the church of his time, he was not a rebel, not even a reformer. A founder, yes. A man who could make a vision take shape in a body of people.

Colin's vision did take shape, at least partly, in the Society of Mary, in the Marist Sisters, and, I would dare say, in the Marist Missionary Sisters in so far as their constitutions reflect Colin's spirituality. Can we say that his vision of Marist laity took shape in a body of people? At first sight, it seems hard to say yes. The groups of Marist laity seem so dispersed and so disparate. But they exist, in many lands and in a great variety of shapes. You can get a twenty-year old sample in *Like a Bridge*. A more recent survey is in order. In any case, the vision of Colin is at work.

How will you contribute to making it more productive? By directing your attention to Mary upholding the church at its birth and working out how you are Mary upholding the church now, at the end of time. This means taking a close look at how the church came into being two thousand years ago and how it comes into being now. It means doing what the first believers did: having before you the image of Jesus dead on the cross, knowing in your hearts that his death ushered him into life, and with that, patiently, always with the power of the holy Spirit, and with Mary his mother among you, recalling what Jesus did and said, seeing how that led to his death but also how his words and his deeds revealed who God is, learning to make sense of those sayings and events by going back to the scriptures and discovering how God works.

This sounds simpler than it is. In the end, it means coming to terms with the death of Jesus as a sign of God's victory over death and over all that we associate with death and that we can call evil. Christians can be accused of simply fooling themselves by calling life what is nothing but death. It is a real challenge. We can only face it with the help of the Spirit, but we also need to do our work, namely to read Scripture and decipher God's ways, as Mary did: go over these things in our heart.

b) Sinners. When Colin talks of beginning the church over again, Mary is not far from his mind, not just as someone who was there at the beginning, but as what the church should be like. In the awkward name he gives the confraternity for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just, the key word is sinners. A church modelled on Mary is a church where sinners hold a special place. Colin was marked by his experience of preaching parish missions. This involved two main activities: preaching and hearing confessions. Preaching in order to bring people to the confessional. Preaching meant instructing people, helping them see how they were sinners, and offering them the remedy of the sacrament of penance. In the pulpit, mercy held an important place: people would go to confession with the hope of being forgiven. In the confessional, however, the priest was bound by the teaching he had received at the seminary, and Colin often found himself torn between his principles and the person who knelt behind the grate. Out of this experience came instructions to Marist priests, but also the confraternity for the conversion of sinners and the perseverance of the just. The confraternity is a way of bringing sinners into the ambit of Mary's mercy. We may ask: should we not speak of God's mercy? Indeed, we should. In Colin's time, it was easier to associate mercy with Jesus, and especially his mother, than with God. This is not an excuse for us to downplay God's mercy. On the contrary. Colin's closeness to Mary mother of mercy made him more keenly aware of the need for mercy in the church, and our own link to Mary awakens us to God's mercy. We, too, like Colin, like Mary, feel anguish at the thought of sinners, of anyone out of reach of God's love. Would registering them as members of the confraternity, writing their name in a book, somehow bring them under the umbrella of Mary's protection? Perhaps foolishly, Colin

thought so.

c) The local church. A third awkward feature of Colin's confraternity was how he saw it relating to the local church, the parish and the diocese. He toyed with the idea of the register being in the hands not of Marists but of the parish priest. He even saw the confraternity as outside the Society of Mary. The Marists are not into this for themselves. They will work to set it up, they will help it in any way they can, but they will not own it. The Marist priests stand in a similar relation to the bishop. They are to act in such a way that the bishop can feel that the Society of Mary is somehow his. This is not an easy feat. Religious are usually perceived as a foreign body in a diocese. They may do much good, but they have their own organization, their own rule, their own goals. Marists also have their own organization and their own rule, but an important part of their rule is precisely that they are to behave in such a way that the bishop does not perceive them as a foreign body. The way they promote Marist laity comes under that rule. And that same rule applies to the lay Marists themselves. They too are to work in such a way that the local community perceives them not as a foreign body but as their own. Such a concern has to do with Mary herself. In the annals of the local church, Marists are to take no more room than Mary does in the Acts of the apostles. We know she is there, but nothing more. Does this mean her presence was not felt? Colin's instinct, trained by a long line of bishops and theologians, told him no. Nor do we need to resort to our imagination to figure out what she did. We can read the gospel. You remember? The gospel is the work of the church at its birth. Indeed, the gospel is the church being born. Mary does not take up much room there, but she is there, the mother, standing outside the house where Jesus is teaching, asking to see him and hearing him say: Who is my mother? What an image! How easily she could have felt dismissed. We are not told how she felt. But we know she was with the disciples in the upper room after the death of Jesus, the Spirit came down upon her, and enabled her to believe, as the disciples did, that God had raised Jesus from the dead and seated him to his right. For her, too, Jesus is Lord. And nothing else matters. Where she stands in people's minds is the last of her concerns. So it is with Marists. Their concern is for the local church, the place where people learn to recognize Jesus as Lord.

During his years as superior general, Colin spoke of his dream of Marist laity, but it remained a dream. Shortly before he died, a younger Marist priest took time to listen to him and tried, in vain, to make Colin's dream come true. At least, Alphonse Cozon left notes that eventually found their audience a hundred years later, at the congress of Marist laity held in Rome in 1979. Frank McKay's book, *The Marist Laity*, and Girard and Duffy's *Like a Bridge*, are part of the effort to put to work the vision that Cozon described in words that we should know by heart:

In the mind of the Founder, the Third Order ought not to be confined within the limits of the Society. It ought to be, in a sense, a work outside the Society, to which the Society ought to communicate its own spirit, the spirit of the blessed Virgin. Its development, therefore, ought not to be restricted to the Society; we are not to retain it in our hands, but only let it pass through them. Thus it is not a part of the mechanism in the Society's clockwork; it should not revolve around us, so to speak, like a planet around its constellation, but should shine out into the church. It is no longer a valuable way to help the Society, but rather a means of extending the Society's action throughout the world, so that the same thrust, going forth from Mary, passing through the Fathers and the members of the Third Order, may spread out and lose itself in the Church, without any personal consideration.' (LM, doc. 431, § 20)

### 3. Daily Life

Marist tradition is the prism through which the light of the risen Lord transforms our daily life. The source of the light is always the mystery whereby the death of Jesus on the cross becomes the door that opens onto the life of God. Our daily living, the chores that keep us busy, getting up, getting dressed, getting breakfast, getting the children ready for school, getting to work, the planning, the shopping, the chatting, all that fills the hours of each day, the weeks that become

months. Let us call that the stuff of daily living. It is like the soil under our feet. We walk on it (where else would we walk?), but we barely pay attention to it. It is the tissue out of which our lives are cut. It can be cotton, wool, silk. It can be rough, warm, fine. We can also think of it as dough, that heavy mixture of flour and water, a shapeless lump.

What does Marist tradition do? What happens when people keep reminding themselves that they bear the name of Mary, the mother of the Lord, that they belong to her family, and that they should therefore do as she did, uphold the church being born? In theory, at least, our lives should be transformed by the same power that was at work in the newborn church. The soil we tread all day long should not remain the trampled ground of an abandoned lot. It should be a garden where carrots, beans, potatoes grow to feed the family, adorned with roses and pansies. Rather than just plain cotton or wool, it should be a work of haute couture that enhances the bearing of the one wearing it, or a provocative T-shirt with a message. The lump of dough should rise, be shaped into a loaf, come out of the oven with a golden crust and a delightful crumb.

How does that take place? Let us look again at the basic realities we started with this morning: money, sex, and power. Marist spirituality guides us as we work so that our belief in the risen Lord will do to our lives what it did to the lives of the first believers. Colin's insights and instructions invite us to make happen in our lives what the letters of Paul, the gospels, and the Acts of the apostles tell us took place in the lives of Christ's disciples, foremost among them his mother Mary.

a) Money. By money, I mean things, the objects that surround us, our clothes, our house, our car. In their enthusiasm, the first Christians put their goods in common. The experiment was not a success. Combined with a famine, it made the Jerusalem faithful destitute, and Paul organized help from the other churches. Still, the idea of ridding oneself of all possessions kept surfacing. It was a way of saying: the real world is not what I can see and touch; it is the world of the risen Lord. Francis standing naked before the bishop of Assisi may be the most extreme instance of this conviction, but we have seen how Colin wanted Marists to be foreign to greed. In the article on the spirit of the Society, he quotes Paul's advice to the Corinthians: «buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing, and those who make use of the world as though they were not using it, for the world as we know it is passing away» (1 Cor 7, 30-31; 1872 Constitutions, n. 50). And you may have noticed the little phrase that concludes Cozon's paragraph on the third order: «without any personal consideration». It is an invitation to Marists never to consider Marist laity as a source of revenue for themselves. A reminder that all Marists, vowed or unwowed, are not centered on themselves, whether as individuals or as a group. Like Mary upholding the church, they are centered on the church being born as it witnesses to the risen Lord. They don't cling to things, they use them, they share them, they are free of them. They are in sympathy with the teaching of Jesus: «Look at the birds of the sky. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?... Learn a lesson from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work; they do not spin. Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was arrayed like one of these» (Mt 7, 26-29). Of course, you do need to sow and reap and spin. But you don't allow it to take up all the room.

b) Sex. The sad fact is that it fills the lives of too many people. It is distressing to read of people who fill their hard disks and their lives with pornography. Still, some other addictions are more destructive. What interests us here is more ordinary. It has to do with how we relate to people, especially those closest to us, in the light of our new life as baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus. How does my being a Marist help me bring my faith to bear on my dealings with my family, my friends, my colleagues? Our clue is in the image of Mary in the newborn church. One of the earliest traits of the newborn church is that they were of one heart and one mind. Even before the coming of the holy Spirit, we are told that they persevered unanimously in prayer; unanimous means of one mind. As for all founders of congregations, for Colin union among the members was an absolute requisite. Without charity, there can be no such thing as a Christian or a Marist. «This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another» (Jn 13, 35). The problem with charity is not that we don't believe in it. It is that we find it easier to love the neighbor in China than the one who sits at table with us. Take comfort; we are all in the same fix, whether we are vowed or not. But do not let yourselves off the hook. Paul tells us: If «I have not love, I am nothing»

(1 Cor 13, 2). And Colin made love of neighbor a cornerstone of the Society of Mary.

c) Power is even more attractive than sex, as the expression lust for power tells us. The image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples says all that Christians need to know about power. The death of Jesus on the cross speaks even louder. Marist spirituality provides us with the tools we need first to become aware of our thirst for power, and then to free ourselves of it. On the day that he was elected superior general, Colin did not wash the feet of the first Marists, but he did wait on them at the meal. And he was a great teacher of humility. Admittedly not the most popular virtue. But we need not apologize for talking about it. It leads us straight to the heart of Mary herself and of the Christian mystery. Mary, who prays in the upper room with the apostles, the women, and the brothers of Jesus, and on whose lips Luke's gospel places the song of humility itself, the Magnificat. The Christian mystery, which is spelled out for us in an early hymn that Paul quotes in his letter to the Philippians, and that will serve as our conclusion. Paul invites the Philippians to feel among themselves what was in Christ Jesus:

His state was divine,  
 yet he did not cling  
 to his equality with God  
 but emptied himself  
 to assume the condition of a slave,  
 and became as all men are,  
 he was humbler yet,  
 even to accepting death,  
 death on a cross.  
 But God raised him high  
 and gave him the name  
 which is above all other names  
 so that *all beings*  
 in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,  
*should bend the knee* at the name of Jesus  
 and that every tongue should acclaim  
 Jesus Christ as Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

Gaston Lessard, s. m.