The Society of Mary – Work of Mary

The Essence of Marist Spirituality - Part One

Fr. Colin was convinced that the Society of Mary is a religious congregation that God wants. It is also part of a more significant work: to proclaim and build God's kingdom. God wants the Society of Mary to contribute to the building up of this kingdom in a particular way: in the spirit of Mary. The spirit of Mary and the work of Mary go hand in hand. Just as the body is lifeless without the spirit, so, too, is the work of Mary lifeless without the spirit of Mary to animate it.

How does Fr. Colin describe the spirit of Mary? In Article 49 of the 1872 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, which was painstakingly written by Fr. Colin and reflects his mature thinking about the Society, it is written, "*…let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…"*

What exactly is the work of Mary? In one sense, the Society of Mary is itself a work of Mary. The name, Society of Mary, says it all. Fr. Colin and the early Marists believed this name was reserved for this particular time in history and a specific purpose. Fr. Colin also believed that Marists are called by a gracious choice of hers to join her Society and to participate in her work. He spent years writing the Constitutions, which he believed came from Mary. While a young curate in Cerdon, France, Fr. Colin would labor late at night writing the Constitutions. He would write sections and then place them under a statue of Mary in the parish church. Weeks later, he retrieved and reread them. He trusted that Mary herself would inspire changes he would make to the text.

Furthermore, he believed that Mary remained the perpetual superior of the Society of Mary. This was symbolized by a statue of Mary that would be placed outside the room of the local superior. That Fr. Colin saw the Society of Mary as a work of hers is indisputable.

He also believed it was providential that the Society of Mary arose in 19th Century France. That was a particularly tumultuous time in French history. It was a time of revolution, both political and societal. Looking back, we can trace the beginnings of secularism to this period called the Enlightenment.

It was an age of unbridled optimism in human reason and human achievement. It was humankind coming of age, which meant throwing off the shackles of political oppression and religious domination. The Church had become too closely aligned with the political powers of its time, and it shared in the fate of those powers when people rose in rebellion. New powers or forces were unleashed, and they continue to impact us even today. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

How did Fr. Colin view his times? Let's listen to some of his descriptions. He characterized it as an age of pride and unbelief, false learning and ignorance, superficial tastes, and a century of excess whose judgment is made according to the flesh. The flesh here is to be understood in its biblical meaning: that which is contrary to or opposed to God's purposes. Fr. Colin would say these are evil days: "As the end of time draws nearer, the faith is disappearing. Would you not say that we are in the days of which our Lord said, 'Do you think the Son of Man will then find much faith on the earth!'…The human race appears to me today to be like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten by a worm. That worm is the unbelief, the indifference which has made the world pagan a second time."

Yes, this is a very negative view of our situation and ignores the good that can be found then and today. But when a doctor diagnoses a patient and discovers she has cancer, he doesn't focus on how the other

parts of the body are functioning well or how well the patient looks. He zeroes in on the cancer, how to treat it, and ultimately how to defeat it. After all, who wants to be a good-looking corpse? Fr. Colin is a spiritual doctor and has accurately named the cancer that has afflicted the soul and invaded the body of humanity. He called it unbelief and indifference.

Who would disagree that those two words—unbelief, and indifference—characterize our times? Brandon Vogt,[1] the author of the book *Return: How to Draw Your Child Back to Church*, writes, "The statistics are troubling: 6.5 people leave the Catholic Church for everyone that joins, and 50% of young people who were raised Catholic are no longer Catholic today. The Catholic Church is hemorrhaging young people."[2]

This downward trend finds expression in another way. According to the 2021 Pew Research Center survey of the religious composition of the United States, the secularizing shifts evident in American society show no signs of slowing. "The number of people with no religious affiliation grew steadily from 19% in 2011 to 29% in 2021."[3] At the same time, the number of Americans who identify as being Christians has dropped from 75% in 2011 to 63% in 2021.[4]

Citing a 2018 Pew Research Center Survey, "Sixty-nine percent of U.S. Catholics say they believe in God 'as described in the Bible,' while 28% say they believe in another 'higher power.' Two percent of U.S. Catholics say they do not believe in God or in a higher power."[5]

I am purposefully not speaking about the good in our age or the traces of grace that abound. I highlight the unbelief and indifference of our times to emphasize that we live in times very similar to those in which Fr. Colin lived. However, I want to emphasize that despite this rather dire assessment of his times, Fr. Colin remained confident, jovial, and lighthearted. He was an engaging personality who enjoyed the camaraderie that community life had to offer. He was not a proponent of "doom and gloom."

At the same time, Fr. Colin understood that the Society of Mary was founded precisely for this age of unbelief and indifference. And that should give us courage. Like fish that need water to swim, we Marists swim in these waters of unbelief and indifference. We were equipped precisely to navigate this environment and its climate.

Okay, but what is the Society of Mary to do?

That's the topic for the following meditation.

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[1] Brandon Vogt is the Senior Content Director at Bishop Robert Barron's Word on Fire Catholic Ministries. He's the author of 10 books, several of which have been #1 Amazon bestsellers and have earned First Place awards from both the Catholic Press Association and the Association of Catholic Publishers. Brandon hosts the weekly "Word on Fire Show" podcast with Bishop Barron and "The Burrowshire Podcast" with Fr. Blake Britton. He also runs several websites, including StrangeNotions.com and ChurchFathers.org. Brandon's work has been featured by NPR, FoxNews, CBS, EWTN, Vatican Radio, Our Sunday Visitor, National Review, and Christianity Today. He is on the board of the Society of G.K. Chesterton and serves as President of the Central Florida Chesterton Society. Brandon lives with his wife and seven children on Burrowshire, a small farm outside Orlando, Florida, with chickens, goats, pigs, rabbits, ducks, and a garden.

[2] Go to https://www.wordonfire.org/return/.

[3] Go to https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/12/15/pew-poll-america-growing-secular-faith-242044.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Go to https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/04/25/us-catholics-disagree-about-what-it-means-believe-god.