

## Elements and Characteristics of Marist Education

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I must admit that it has been difficult for me to write something for an imagined audience. I only know the faces of some Marists with whom I have shared some of my years as a student in Rome, and other Marists whom I have met at different chapters or international meetings have a face which speaks to me. As for the rest of you, I only know that you are Marists - teachers, members of administrations and leadership teams of Marist schools in North America, Canada and Mexico. But, merely the name of Marist that we bear or that our schools bear makes this feel completely familiar to me, *as we share the same spiritual home and form part of the same family.*

I realize that it is a difficult and risky task to come from a distant country like Spain to speak to Marists, teachers, members of administrations and leadership of Marist schools in North America, Canada and Mexico located in such diverse and different areas about your people, your world, your ecclesiology and your needs and concerns. What has prompted me to come before you is the desire to contribute in some way to the endeavor of allowing the Marist spirit to inspire and nourish the life and educational principles of those who teach in, manage or direct Marist schools or other types of education. I have felt great encouragement when I think that if one teacher is won over to the cause then many students will also be won over. And, when "a whole village," as an African proverb declares, allows itself to be enriched by the one same spirit and share the same educational principles then the effort is effective.<sup>1</sup> Now here in Quebec, to some extent, we are the "village" formed by people that come from different places and situations and who have different educational responsibilities, and we come here to be together, to share and to imagine how we can grow together. Could this be a "little Pentecost" for Marist education?

### **My reflections revolve around the "Characteristics of Marist Education"**

The recent publication of the pamphlet *Characteristics of Marist Education*, issued by the current general administration at the request of

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<sup>1</sup> "It takes a whole village to raise a child." African proverb, cf. J.A. Marina, *Aprender a vivir*, Ariel, 2004, p. 193.

the 2004 Forum on Education, provides us with a good opportunity to open up together, at this Workshop on Education, what is the Marist spirit at work in the field of education and lived by teachers and translated into pedagogical principles as a way of organizing and managing schools, and as a style of teaching students.

The text "Characteristics of Marist Education" published in May of 2006 is available on several Marist websites and in a variety of languages (English, French, Italian and Spanish). I will try to offer some reflections that will help us to read and then to make use of this new instrument towards adapting and transmitting the spirit and attitudes that should inspire our job as teachers in schools or in other forms of education or in the proclamation of the Word or in catechetical instruction.

#### **The objective and intent of "Characteristics of Marist Education"**

The aim of this booklet about the 'Marist ethos' in education has been none other than an attempt to reply in some way to what was asked for by the 2004 Forum in Rome and then taken up by the present general administration. It is an attempt, in other words, to present the rationale for a style of teaching, making clear what characterizes this Marist style of teaching and educating. The purpose of the booklet is none other than to grant access in a few pages to Marist values and educational principles that have inspired and continue to nourish the style of teaching and organizing of a Marist school. This brief booklet can be a useful means to begin, or to awaken or to revive the Marist teaching flame in those who are beginning as well as in those who have spent many years in the classroom or in other less institutional settings and also in those who exercise other forms of ministry.

#### **The path followed in writing "Characteristics of Marist Education"**

If we want to say anything Marist about education we need no other source than what our founder Jean Claude Colin said and wrote from his own experience in the field of education or concerning education in general. Those who were asked to put together the booklet "Characteristics of Marist Education" understood that, like Moses constructing the tent that was to shelter the Ark of the Covenant,<sup>2</sup> they had to have the design (that God had given) in front of them. I say this

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<sup>2</sup> "This dwelling ... you shall make exactly according to the pattern that I will now show you" (Ex 25:9).

not because we are being asked to simply reproduce something, which would be as mindless as it is useless or ineffectual. The challenge for us is to re-create an educational response for our time and place. It is about facilitating an encounter between Marist educators of today with the Founder, so as to allow themselves to be nourished by his singular inspiration and to allow him and his inspiration to continue to bear fruit today in Marist schools that already exist and in those that may yet come to be. To evoke what the Founder of the Marists did and said almost 200 years ago is the best way to mobilize and encourage Marist teachers and schools to make our way forward from where we are here and now.

### **Keeping a safe distance**

One of the basic concerns of those who put together the little booklet, *Characteristics of Marist Education*, was to try to keep a safe distance between Colin's "yesterday" and our "today," with the way our schools and those who teach in them are today.

When it comes to what Colin said to Marist teachers of his day and what he did in the education ministry almost 200 years ago, what can we say to Marist teachers today, to staff, to personnel, to administrators and leaders? When it comes to what he said and wrote for religious, what can we say and how can we say it today to inspire in a similar way our lay teachers, leaders, and administrators? How can we today share what Colin outlined for colleagues who were virtually all believers, with colleagues of varying degrees of Christian commitment?

In a similar way, the students we teach today are not the same as in Colin's day. Nor are families sensitive to the same values, nor do they have the same expectations from a Christian point of view. Nor is the Church the same that Colin knew. We have to know how to keep a safe distance, just as we hope good and careful drivers do. We have to learn how to be inspired by a model without giving in to the temptation to simply copy it, since copies are usually not very useful and are often counterproductive. How are we to allow the spirit that drove Colin and the first Marists to effectively inspire our teachers today and to influence our students?

### **A place for all the various levels of reading the Founder**

A way to consider what our Founder did and said in the field of education, but in an updated context, would be to explore his various kinds of approach to Marist education starting with his "Instructions to

the Staff of the Minor Seminary of Belley [*Les Avis*]” and moving through to his speeches and talks when he visited Marist communities. We can approach Colin as:

- a) an astute and talented educator, with a highly developed “nose” for education, as his “Instructions” clearly show.
- b) a spiritual man, with a supernatural view of people and events which puts things in their true place and which teaches us to regard everything in the light of faith in which every person fully realizes his or her vocation as a person and in whose light a teacher’s dignity and a student’s dignity appear in their full force.

Circumstances will indicate which is the most helpful approach to achieve that point where all those who teach and make up a school community will have a rightful place, will be able to nurture their lives as teachers, and will be able to work together to form our students, which is both a human reality and a supernatural calling. A Marist school, with its unmistakable evangelizing mission, strives to achieve this mission by an exquisite appreciation of what is human and a delicate attention to what can humanize as the best path to reach God. The Marist school knows that the mission must start at home among its own.

### **What characterizes Marist Education**

I do not intend to simply repeat what is already written down in the booklet “Characteristics of Marist Education” which all of you have at your disposal. I will simply say something, from my point of view, about what might have a particular resonance today and thus deserve our special attention.

#### *1. A certain point of view about educators and their task*

In these times which are so favorable to discouragement, dejection and teacher burn-out, I think that Colin’s point of view about the teacher and the student offers us welcome elements of recovery and spiritual recharging. While not failing to recognize the great difficulty of the teacher’s task (“the most difficult”), we are called to remember that it is “the greatest ministry,” the noblest task.<sup>3</sup> How educators perceive their task is a critical question. How and how carefully they

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<sup>3</sup> “How great it is to form a man (woman) and how difficult it can also be”, in *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 36, 1; F. Drouilly, *Les avis de Jean-Claude Colin, au personnel du petit séminaire de Belley*, Rome, 1990, p. 1 (= *Avis*).

prepare and train for their role tells us so much about how they see themselves and their students.

Calling to mind Father Colin's approach, teachers feel ennobled in their task, energized and empowered so as not to shrink in the face of adversity, which is enormous as our Founder acknowledged. The act of teaching involves great human nobility. In the words of Father Colin, it is to collaborate in creation, in promoting the growth of the person in every dimension. It is a noble act because one is working with noble material, the person. And if the task is seen from the point of view of faith, a Christian educator collaborates so that students discover their dignity as children of God and they learn to live as such.<sup>4</sup> If we pursue evangelization, the renewal of people and the renewal of their faith as our Founder reminds us, that means to "tend to the root" in order to save the whole plant.<sup>5</sup>

### *2. A way of being, of coming across to students*

In these times which are so favorable for us to look on students as irritating, hostile and even inimical creatures, let us learn from Colin that the success or failure of our endeavors as teachers will depend on our knowing how to come across to our students. They can intuit how their teacher views them, and they react accordingly. So, to know how to be neither for them or against them, but to journey alongside them, listening, learning, teaching, admonishing, and if necessary being firm and even blunt. Father Colin gives us guidelines that one Marist said call us to be both "round and square" in our way of coming across to our students, both to exercise authority as well as earn their respect.

When we feel menaced by relentless standardization and soulless programming of everything, Colin invites us to view our students as persons in all their fullness, in all their richness, and to work toward the integral formation of all by starting with the special uniqueness of each one.

In these times which are difficult for the development of the spirit, Marist educators remember that spiritual values are the goal. Perhaps not the first goal we can reach, but certainly it is what explains why Marists work in education ministry.

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<sup>4</sup> "There is nothing greater. A child experiences a second creation", in *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 13, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 172, 19.

When suspicion grows and we sense growing rejection, and when we notice a kind of allergic reaction to faith, Colin suggests that we find ways to shatter this tendency and find space to propose celebration and joy. When we discover that the majority describe themselves as believers but non-practicing, we have to select carefully and wisely, as Colin recommends, any religious activities we might want to propose, ensuring that they are of high quality.

### *3. A way of dealing with situations*

When we get to know Colin close up, we see his way of dealing with the art of education and his approach, not regarding it as a series of petty problems but rather as challenges and opportunities for greatness. Father Colin got into education at the request of his bishop. He found himself in a complicated and risky ministry, which included relationships that did not foster life or work in common. That was the college in Belley where Colin underwent his baptism by fire as a superior and educator. From that moment he learned that education means preparing professors and students to respond to the challenges of our intelligence, the challenges of our world, the challenges of young people, and the challenges of our Christian faith and of our Church.

### *4. A way of educating with our lives*

Teachers' competence in their subject matter and the good preparation of teachers and administrators in a school are indispensable for achieving a sense of authority and earning the respect of students, their families, and one's own colleagues. But there can be no education where we do not find authenticity and integrity. There might be much good information sharing, but no real education. Finding inspiration in Colin's insights, we would say that what is pivotally important for education is a life lived in all its authenticity and that educating students toward authenticity should hold a pivotal place in our pedagogical planning. "The students constantly have their eyes on us."<sup>6</sup> Colin reminded teachers.

In these times of compromised integrity, we need good example from others. Good example teaches; one's own personal life teaches. But what teaches best is the favorable environment we can create, a kind of "micro-climate" that allows everyone, teachers and students, to develop to their fullest and their best.

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<sup>6</sup> Avis, p. 86.

### 5. In Mary's way

Better than all others, Mary inspires us to a pedagogy of "uniting opposites and harmonizing differences." Mary is the place where we encounter the meeting of human and divine, with a human being acting and with God acting. And the "Work of Mary," of which education forms a most important part, is open to everyone.<sup>7</sup> It is open to the talented and erudite, as well as to those who struggle, to those who pull ahead and to those who move slowly, to those who possess abundantly and to those who have only problems. Strictness and tolerance can live side by side, as can firmness and sweetness, rules and compassion, justice and mercy, law and freedom, order and flexibility. In Mary we discover the attention and care that allows for personal growth and one's autonomy. She provides us with the grateful memory of a past full of grace and freedom to look to and prepare for the future. She teaches us how to be present without standing in the center, how to help without hindering growth, how to guide without imposing or pushing. In Mary we look and see those who join hands: father and mother join hands, man and woman join hands, the lay person and the religious, the man of the people and the man of God, the citizen of earth and the citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. In Mary we discover the harmony between a high self-esteem ("all generations will call me blessed"<sup>8</sup>) and a lifestyle marked by simplicity, integrity, the primacy of being over seeming, of discretion over imposition, of accompanying without overwhelming, of knowing how to pull back to let the other grow.

If we were to ask ourselves where did Colin find and where can we Marist educators today find the ability to "unite opposites," to be "round and square" at the same time, we find the answer in Mary, our Teacher. Whether she is named or not, it is she who nourishes and sustains the Marist educational project from its very beginning in the college at Belley with its own particular uniqueness right up to our own days. Marist educational principles, like the virtues that should crown the Marist in education - "thinking, judging, feeling and acting like Mary" - are born from putting into practice the attitudes and virtues of "such an exalted Mother" whose name we bear - humility, obedience,

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<sup>7</sup> "It will not be the same in the congregation of the Virgin Mary. She is the Mother of Mercy. Her congregation will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of persons", in *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 2, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:49.

self-denial, love for one another and love of God.<sup>9</sup> The principle “hidden and unknown” (*ignoti et occulti*) that inspires Marist lifestyle and attitudes, equally nurtures the educational attitudes of those who for almost 200 years have worked to put them into practice in their teaching ministry and mission in schools or other types of education and in the ministry of the Word. We can learn much more about this from the booklet *Characteristics of Marist Education*.

#### **Working together to make our dream come true**

It would be a marvelous outcome of *Characteristics of Marist Education* if it could be the instrument that helps create bonds of Marist communion, interchange, and sharing, a witness to internationality and universality. If this Workshop of Marist Education held here in Quebec succeeds in launching projects of collaboration and mutual help especially among all the Marist schools represented here then why could it not do the same with all the Marist schools in the whole world, opening up a new chapter for Marist presence in the field of education aiming to accomplish an integral part of the highest order of the Society of Mary's mission, namely the education of youth in schools.<sup>10</sup> If the Society of Mary wishes to contribute to the renewal of the Church and of the faith in today's secularized world, as was the plan of Colin and the first Marists, then it will have to take very seriously its involvement in the world of education of young people, who are the root of society and the men and women of the future.<sup>11</sup> Good reasons for us to think like Marists and like Educators.

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<sup>9</sup> *Constitutions 1872*, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “One of the first ideas in establishing the Society is education, its first goal is education.”, in *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 172, 23. See, *New Constitutions*, n. 13; *General Chapter of 2001*; *Education Forum of 2004 (Rome)*; *Council of the Society, Mexico, 2005*.

<sup>11</sup> “Re-conquer education to save the faith; tend to the root to save the whole plant.” In *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 172, 19.