

INTRODUCTION

A Foster Father

Life has a sense of humour of its own. The man whose ideal it was to live the life of Mary, found himself twice in the role of Joseph.

Jean-Claude Colin, born on 7 August 1790 in a hamlet near the village of Saint-Bonnet-le-Troncy (Rhône), having lost both parents at the age of four, was brought up by an unmarried uncle and his housekeeper. He received his first schooling, at the age of ten, from a nun expelled from her convent during the French Revolution and followed his older brother Pierre to the minor seminary when he was fourteen. In spite of his delicate health he did well in his studies and was accepted into the major seminary of Saint-Irénée in Lyon in 1813. Shy and of scrupulous temperament, he might have remained no more than the nice, little country priest described by Mayet, ‘always looking around where to stand so as to take in as little space as possible’.¹ However, in 1814 an older student, Jean-Claude Courveille, entered the same seminary and gave a new direction to Colin’s life.

Jean-Claude Courveille², born in 1787 in Usson-en-Forez (Loire), was a kind of visionary, who, in 1811 or 1812, had passed through what he considered a supernatural experience. He was convinced he had been entrusted from on high with the task of founding a *Society of Mary*, reminiscent of the *Society of Jesus* which was disbanded by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 (the Order was re-established in 1814 by Pius VII). ‘*I was the support of the new-born Church; I shall be also at the end of time*’, was the message of the Mother of God as Courveille passed it on to his followers. On Mary’s behalf, the members of the new Society, *Marists* as he called them, were to be the Jesuits of the post-revolutionary Church. The Enlightenment and the Revolution had thrown France into an age of ‘impiety and incredulity’ so destructive of the traditional faith, that for Courveille and many of his contemporaries it was of their very days that Jesus had said: ‘But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?’.³

Courveille must have been an impressive man. No sooner had he entered the major seminary than he was encouraged to recruit followers. The withdrawn little Colin did not immediately attract his attention. He only joined a little later, on the invitation of a friend, Étienne Déclas, hoping in this way to find ‘a life removed from the world, in which Mary, his heavenly mother, would play a major role. It was all he had dreamt of from his boyhood on’.⁴ He never looked back.

¹ For the biographical data of Colin cf. *Origines Maristes* (OM) IV, pp. 236 - 241. For Mayet’s description, see OM II, doc. 537 [23]: ‘À première vue il paraissait être un de ces bons petits vieux curés de campagne, tout simples, tout timides, ne sachant où se mettre pour tenir moins de place, et tout pleins de bonté en même temps’.

² OM IV, pp. 253 - 257; Donal Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist*, pp. 126 - 142.

³ Luke 18, 8. Acta Societatis Mariae (ASM), 1959, pp. 262 - 281; pp. 418 - 451; 1960/1962, pp. 52 - 87 & 178 - 197. J. Coste (ed.), *A Founder Speaks* (FS), docs 4 [2] & 117 [2]. J. Coste, *Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time*, Forum Novum (FN), vol. 3, July 1996, pp. 245 - 263.

⁴ Donal Kerr, op. cit. p. 134.

Firmly led by Courveille, a band of some twelve young men solemnly committed themselves on 23 July 1816, the day after some of them had been ordained priests, in the chapel of Our Lady of Fourvière, Lyon, to found their *Society of Mary*. Although dispersed over the vast diocese of Lyon, and, after its division (1822) over Lyon and Belley, aspirant Marists acknowledged Courveille as their leader. Jean-Claude Colin, his older brother Pierre who joined the group when Jean-Claude became his curate at Cerdon, Marcellin Champagnat who had started his branch of teaching brothers in 1817, Jeanne-Marie Chavoin who had moved to Cerdon in 1817 and had brought the first group of Marist Sisters together, as well as various lay-associates, they all deferred to Courveille. But it gradually became clear that the man lacked the spiritual depth and the leadership qualities needed. In 1826 he disgraced himself and had to withdraw to another diocese.⁵

Four years later the personality of Jean-Claude Colin had emerged to the point that the group of *Marist* diocesan priests chose him (in an unofficial election and unknown to their bishops) unanimously to be their central superior, which does not mean they always deferred to him in practice.⁶ In that capacity he went to Rome in 1833/1834 to obtain papal approval for the Society. In 1836, once the branch of the priests was officially approved, they elected him their first superior general.⁷ The Society of Mary had not been his initiative, the original vision had not been his, nor had he given the Society its name, but in the end he became the acknowledged founder. For the Society of Mary he will always and rightly be ‘Father Founder’: *le Père Fondateur*.

In 1835, it happened again. Without Colin having a say in it, at first even unknown to him, other people involved the fledgling Society into a missionary adventure of frightening dimensions in an unknown mission field on the other side of the world. One of the crucial aspects of the venture, its leadership, was to all practical purposes settled before Colin even heard of it. But within a year the responsibility for the Pacific missions lay squarely in his hands and he was the official steersman on a voyage he had neither chosen nor planned. But within a few years, one of the early missionaries, writing about the Pacific Islanders called them: ‘your children’. And as a later Pacific Church historian put it: ‘Like Abraham, Jean-Claude Colin became the father in the faith of a multitude of Oceanians’.⁸

⁵ Farrell, *Achievement from the Depths*, p. 115. On Courveille in relation to different people and groups during that period, cf. OM IV, p. 547 & Synopse historique, OM IV, p. 547, nrs. 212 - 215.

⁶ Kerr, op. cit. pp. 246 – 247 and OM I, doc. 358 [2] with footnote p.827, n.1.

⁷ Kerr, op. cit. pp. 259 – 278 & pp. 293 - 299.

⁸ Bataillon to Colin from the island of Wallis in 1838, *Lettres reçues de l’Océanie*, (LRO), doc. 28 [2]: *ces pauvres peuples qui sont en quelque sort vos enfants*. Anon. (Jeantin), *Le Très Révérend Père Colin*, vol. III, p. 419 turns this into *Père des Océaniens*. Georges Delbos, *L’Eglise Catholique en Nouvelle Calédonie*, p. 24: *à l’image d’Abraham, le Père Jean-Claude Colin devenait le père dans la foi d’une multitude d’Océaniens*.