

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM  
ET DEI GENETRICIS HONOREM

**TIME TO LOOK OUTWARD**

**JOHN HANNAN SM**  
SUPERIOR GENERAL

# TIME TO LOOK OUTWARD

## The Mission of the Society of Mary today

1. In a conversation with a confrere two years ago he said “*We will never get vocations until we are clear about what our mission is as Marists*”. He went on to describe what the mission of the Jesuits is, what that of the Sant’Egidio community is, what the Assumptionists are and do, his meaning being that we Marists are unsure as to what our mission is.
2. Yes, we need to articulate our Marist mission in such a way that when we make concrete choices we can do so confidently, act decisively and invite vocations more confidently.
3. In grappling with this question I have a dual purpose in mind: to enable our younger confreres to have a deeper understanding of what constitutes our mission in the modern world, and to help all of us to prepare for the upcoming provincial chapters and the general chapter in 2017<sup>1</sup>.

### Go beyond ourselves and orientate our efforts outwards

4. Pope Francis urges religious to go outwards, beyond ourselves, and our problems, and to orientate our efforts outwards to the needs of our brothers and sisters, especially those on the periphery. The first chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* is entitled *The Church’s Missionary Transformation*. It is from this context that I wish to approach the subject of mission.
5. The last general chapter devoted a section to *Mission and Ministries*. It contains four decisions:
  - to try to strengthen our presence in Asia;
  - to reinvigorate our education apostolate;
  - to develop a city centre network “*to address the needs of an increasingly secular world*”;
  - to establish mechanisms to promote ministry in justice, peace and the integrity of creation.<sup>2</sup>

**Go out beyond ourselves, and our problems, and orientate our efforts outwards to the needs of our brothers and sisters, especially the poor**

6. The chapter also published for our ongoing reflection the *Declaration on Mission of the 2001 General Chapter* to accompany its statements and decisions<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Be United with a Common Purpose*, N.182-X111, 7. Par 15

<sup>2</sup> *Statements and Decisions of the General Chapter 2009* (SD), nn. 19 – 22

<sup>3</sup> Cf. SD, Appendix.

7. It is fair to say that the centre of gravity of the general chapter of 2009 and of our work in the years since has been addressing the urgent internal issues pertaining to the Society (*ad intra*), more so than the needs of the Church and the world (*ad extra*).
8. We have been busy implementing the orientations of that chapter. We have invested a lot of effort working at initial formation, the government of the Society, its finances, the renewal of its members, the allocation of human and financial resources, diminishment and its effects. This remains a work in progress. At the same time there is a growing awareness that, while addressing these issues is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure the growth of our Society.
9. In general terms, you could say that since the last general chapter we have been focusing on chapters two, three and four of our Constitutions –*Admission and Incorporation of New Members, Forming a Communion for Mission, and Government*. I would suggest that there is “something else” that is needed now in terms of “creative fidelity” to the mission of our Society. I believe that, if we want to experience something of the energy and zeal of the first Marists, we need to turn again to Chapter One of the Constitutions entitled *Nature and Foundations of the Society*.

#### **Beginning of the End or End of the Beginning?**

10. Over the past six years our membership has dropped by approximately 20%, and this will continue. Our ageing and overstretch are familiar. How are we to read all this? In a recent article, Br Seán Sammon, former Superior General of the Marist Brothers, outlines a perspective of hope.

*“As congregations grew smaller in size and older in age, with few, if any, candidates entering and their place and purpose in the church less clear, a number of groups began to wonder if their way of life was dying. It may come as a surprise to some to learn that this is exactly where religious life should be today in the process of renewal. Like it or not, breakdown and disintegration appear to be the means God uses to prepare congregations and their members for deep and thorough transformation”.*<sup>4</sup>

**Breakdown and disintegration appear to be the means God uses to prepare congregations and their members for deep and thorough transformation**

11. Seán confronts his readers with three historical possibilities for religious congregations in times of crisis: extinction, minimal survival and renewal. Some smaller religious congregations in our day have decided, serenely and probably correctly, that in the divine plan their day is coming to an end and within a generation they will be extinct. Even in terms of demographics this may not happen

<sup>4</sup> Seán Sammon, “Looking for Opportunity in a Misunderstood Vocation Crisis,” *America*, 14 September 2015.

to the Society of Mary, even within the lifetime of the youngest member of the congregation. We really face two options: minimal survival or a renewed relaunching. Minimal survival would mean a small unexceptional presence in the Church. For a renewal, according to Seán, we must:

- be courageous in responding to the real challenges facing our world and Church today;
- have a membership willing to allow itself the experience of personal and congregational conversion;
- rediscover the vision of our founder<sup>5</sup>.

### Mary and Her Society

12. According to Jean Coste, Jean-Claude Colin intuited that something new was going on in the world, a new emerging culture, and that a new missionary need was emerging with it. He was convinced that Mary herself wanted to respond to this need. This conviction is at the heart of our identity as a religious congregation.

**Jean Claude Colin and the first Marists were convinced that Mary herself wanted to respond to a new missionary need.**

13. We now know what this new emerging culture is: Colin called it *the age of unbelief*; we call it a *secularised world*. Coste raised the intriguing possibility that the real Marist missionary engagement with this new world has yet to come.<sup>6</sup> We may be tempted to see our present ills as resembling the aches and pains of a person whose life is approaching its end. I suggest we see them as the growing pains of someone negotiating not an era of change but, as Pope Francis put it, a change of era.<sup>7</sup> I am convinced it is our duty to plan and act in such a way that this possibility can be realised, if it is God's will.

**You can say today we are not living an era of change but a change of era.**

14. Nowadays when we talk about secularisation we're talking about a worldwide phenomenon, and not something to be found exclusively in the "developed" world, for example, Australia, Canada, or Europe. When he reflected on possible causes for a decline in vocations in Oceania at last year's meeting of ARC (major superiors and the general administration) in La Neylière, the provincial listed a number of points. One of them was "*The digital age has arrived in the Pacific.*" Modern technology is part of this new emerging world culture where the 'virtual community' takes on a greater importance - even for religious - than might appear at first sight. But

---

<sup>5</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *A Certain Idea of the Society of Mary: Jean-Claude Colin*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis' message to the Italian Church: *Imitate Jesus in Humility, Service* – Florence 10 November 2015.

secularisation is a process that is deeper and broader than that. And no one fully understands it. One thing is clear – it is deepening and spreading. We’ve got to take steps to understand this emerging culture, to equip ourselves and especially our young men appropriately, in order to evangelise it under the banner of Mary. That is a core aspect of our mission – that is what we exist for.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Society is more than a spirituality**

15. Towards the end of his life, Jean Coste began to fear that he may have been responsible for an overemphasis on the “spirit” or “spirituality” of the Society of Mary at the expense of the concrete body and its works. There is a word for the separation of spirit and body he said – death.<sup>9</sup> We have an abundance of excellent written material. We are blessed with world-class studies on our origins and identity. We have excellent historical research such as that of Jean Coste himself and other first rate works that make our spirituality accessible.
16. Much of this research fed into our present Constitutions. Chapter One expresses the nature and purpose of the Society of Mary which is our vocation; what we are called to be and to do. I believe that the way forward is to focus prayerfully on these texts, and in their light to discern as best we can where the Lord is leading the Society of Mary in the years ahead. Part of this discernment is to read the signs of the times.

**Chapter One of our Constitutions expresses the nature and purpose of the Society of Mary simply in a few pages.**

### **Some voices that disturb our complacency**

17. What can we learn from the option of many young Catholics for some contemplative institutes and new movements? Sometimes older religious say that these young people are looking for security in a time of change, or that they are not typical of their generation. Could it be that the best of them are looking for what the first recruits to the Marists saw in the Society of Mary – *“a high and heroic task: a mountain to climb, a wall to breach, a battle to win”*? These words come from a young Catholic contrasting the outlook of her generation with that of her parents. But she doesn’t see an unbridgeable gap between the perspectives of her generation and those of an older generation to which the majority of us in the Society of Mary at the moment belong?

*“Pope Francis is a God-given bridge between these generations, acknowledging the necessary genius of each. The Church must go out of itself*

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary*.

<sup>9</sup> *A Certain Idea*, 38

*to meet people where they are. But the gift it has is the unchanging and ever-new Gospel of Jesus Christ.* <sup>10</sup>

18. The missionary conversion that Pope Francis is urging on the whole Church implies a well-informed and astute selection of insertion points for our ministries. Such choices have to be made.

**Our mission is the answer to the question, what are we for? Our ministries are the concrete works we engage in to respond to this call.**

19. But the change Pope Francis is urging on us in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato si* is something more holistic. We turn to the poor and those without the light of the gospel, and indeed to planet earth, our “*common home*”, knowing that in doing this we turn to the Lord in a new way. For us Marists, it means a renewed pursuit of personal holiness in responding to a shared vocation in the Society to evangelisation, in the communion of the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Bearing Mary’s name – the key to what Marists do**

20. If we want to recapture Jean-Claude Colin’s understanding of Marist mission, we have to grasp that:

*“It is the very fact of bearing Mary’s name that determines the Society’s apostolic choices: to go everywhere seeking out sinners, to give them all one’s time, leaving others to care for souls who are doing well, to undertake what others will not do, to refuse parishes, where one is bound to people who are already Christian, and chaplaincies, which limit the soul’s horizon.”* <sup>12</sup>

***It is the very fact of bearing Mary’s name that determines the Society’s apostolic choices...***

21. During the Generalate of Jean-Claude Colin, he received a number of letters enquiring about the new Society of Mary. A glance at the replies he and his collaborators gave provides us with snapshots of what the first Marists saw as their typical ministries. In 1839 Fr. Colin replied himself: we have a lot in common with the Jesuits: education, foreign missions, and a variety of ministries, especially with the poor. A year later, he signed a reply drafted by Denis Maitrepierre: we work in missions in unbelieving countries and in Catholic countries, and the education of the young in schools.<sup>13</sup> This second reply indicates how he understood the whole spread of ministries in Europe and in Oceania as “missionary”. The Society of Jesus provides the basic standard for ministries. They are priestly for the most part, but with a variety, mobility and adaptability that is not usually required of diocesan clergy:

<sup>10</sup> Carmody Grey, “The Future Is Not Where The Older Generation Seems To Think It Is,” *The Tablet*, 12 December 2015, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Constitutions 7: the three traditional ‘ends’ of the Society.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Coste: *A Certain Idea*, 22

<sup>13</sup> *Colin Sup* Vol 1, doc. 103 [4]; doc. 189 [4]

*'Indeed their vocation is to go from place to place for the greater service of God and to spend themselves working for the salvation of the neighbour by preaching God's word, hearing confessions, catechising the uneducated and the young, exhorting and welcoming the faithful to pious exercises, visiting prisoners and the sick in hospitals, and doing other such works of charity.'*<sup>14</sup>

**Jean-Claude Colin understood the whole spread of ministries in Europe and in Oceania as "missionary".**

22. A further reflection on chapter one of our present Constitutions confirms that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. They express the vision of Jean-Claude Colin in contemporary terms. Three numbers in particular express our mission concretely:

*12. Their call is to be truly missionary: they are to go from place to place, announcing the word of God, reconciling, catechizing, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, and doing the works of mercy. They attend especially to the most neglected, the poor, and those who suffer injustice. They are ready to carry out these tasks anywhere and at any time.*

*13. Guided by the Gospel, the doctrine of the Church and the insights of Father Colin on education, they devote themselves to all forms of education, especially among the young.*

*14. Marists are called to establish the Church where it does not exist and to renew existing communities rather than to participate in its activities in places where it is already established with sufficient resources. The Society is no longer true to its calling whenever it becomes so caught up in particular works as to cease to be available for more urgent needs to which it may be called by its mission.*

**We are called to be truly missionary**

### **Mary's Family and Mary's Army**

23. Marist missionary zeal is paradoxically a combination of mercy, maternal care, and a fighting spirit, with courage and strength. The Society of Mary is at the same time Mary's family and her army.

*'This very name sufficiently indicates the banner under which it desires to serve in fighting the battles of the Lord.'*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Claude Colin, *Constitutions Society of Mary 1872*, n. 4

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Claude Colin, *Constitutions of the Society of Mary, 1872*, 1

*“There is a Marian “style” to the Church’s work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong that need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves.”*<sup>16</sup>

*‘The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.’*<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

24. Reading Chapter One of our Constitutions, we see what our mission is. I hope this document will be a useful resource for reflection, for individual Marists and communities, as we look outwards at the needs of today’s world.
25. Our mission will evolve. We will seek to develop a more global vision, to focus more on the poor, to be more prompt in answering urgent needs, to work untiringly with the laity and other branches of the Marist family. We will increasingly be called to evangelise in a pluralist and inter-religious environment. All of us can add other important orientations, if we are to evangelise a changed era.
26. What new works should we – can we – undertake? What works should we invest in? Which particular ministries should we hand over to others? Something more is needed. A younger Marist put it like this: *“...we are gripped by something bigger than ourselves that defines our mission as Marists, yet if we don’t have some outstanding works that define that presence then people will just lose interest, lacking a driving force and enthusiasm”*.
27. We are called, by a gracious choice, to do great things, evangelising a changed and changing era, under the banner of Mary. Let us allow ourselves to be convinced that we are indeed her army and her family called to fight the battles of the Lord. May the Lord strengthen us in our endeavour.
28. I wish to express my gratitude to Kevin Duffy and the other members of the general administration who contributed to the writing of this letter and to the readers of the draft for their generous assistance.

John Hannan

Rome, Easter Sunday, 27 March 2016

---

<sup>16</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 288

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.114