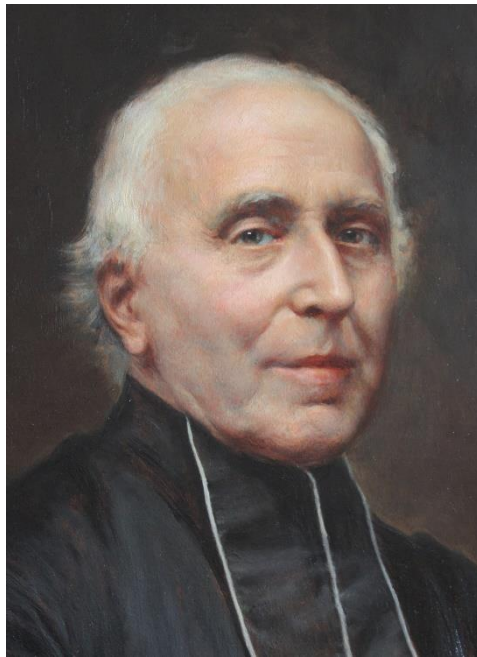


# The Value of the Person: Jean-Claude Colin in Conversation



An essay written on the occasion of the sesquicentenary,  
Nov. 15, 2025, the 150<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary of the death of  
Jean-Claude Colin sm

*Thomas Ryan sm*

## Introduction

The anniversary of Jean-Claude Colin's death one hundred and fifty years ago prompts these questions:

In what way did Jean-Claude Colin view the human person?

How did he engage with his times in that regard?

To what extent did Colin anticipate the modern world's appreciation of human dignity (the person as a centre of value) and its implications in our attitudes and behaviour, especially, in the Christian life and in engagement with the people and the world of today?

If we place Colin in conversation with other contemporary sources—ecclesial, theological, philosophical, feminist and otherwise—what emerges?

Responding to these questions is the aim of this essay.

## Clarifying the Tasks

At the outset, we need to lay down a basic structure that underpins this discussion. The first task, then, is to clarify a) the context; b) a foundational issue and c) the point of departure.

### *Context*

On October 11<sup>th</sup>. 1962, just over seventy- five years after the death of Jean-Claude Colin (Nov. 1885), Pope St John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council.

His speech set the tone for the Council and, as emerged later, for the Church's future. He says:

Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own and even beyond their expectations, are directed towards the fulfilment of God's superior and inscrutable designs.

He goes on to speak of how humanity in the modern age is:

'...ever more deeply convinced of the paramount dignity of the human person and of his perfections, as well as of the duties which that implies'.<sup>1</sup>

This focus on the 'paramount dignity' of the human person and on how such dignity is fully 'realised', namely, brought to fulfilment, is a significant signpost. It is one of the key markers for the transition between the world of Jean-Claude Colin and the modern era. It is also associated with the 'new order of human relations' and its underpinnings, namely, how the human person is understood and valued. When the person is so viewed and done so,

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<sup>1</sup> *Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council*, in Walter M Abbot SJ ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (The America Press, 1965), 710-719, at 712-3 and 716. Another rendition offers a more contemporary slant: 'It is more and more widely understood that personal dignity and true self-realization are of vital importance and worth every effort to achieve'. <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3233>. Accessed Oct 15<sup>th</sup>. 2024.

importantly, within the setting of relationships, it suggests a shift in ‘imaginaries’—between that of Colin’s world, the one emerging that he was trying to engage, and its more expanded form in the third millennium. Which points us towards our next task.

### *A Foundational Consideration: The Imaginary*

In four conferences for a retreat at Valpré, Lyon in 1988, Jean Coste approaches four key images found in Colin by drawing on developments in historical method.<sup>2</sup> Factual realities must be complemented by the ‘imaginings’ of those who helped shape the situation and provided energy to the dynamics at work in that historical context and in its development.

The imaginary is ‘a space for the global and symbolic representation of a certain number of realities’.<sup>3</sup> The three orders (or estates) prior to the French Revolution (clergy, nobility, and workers/peasant farmers/bourgeoisie) can be traced back to the feudal period. While being quantifiable politico-socio-economic realities, these orders are the products of the imagination which, importantly, leads people to view themselves and behave in certain ways.<sup>4</sup>

Coste draws on the work of members of the Annales school of history and medieval historians such as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff. For all that, a similar appeal to, and use of, the imaginary is characteristic of the writings of contemporary social philosopher Charles Taylor.

In *The Secular Age*, Taylor offers an account of how, from the sixteenth century through a major transition in the eighteenth century, the ‘modern social imaginary’ emerges. Of this term he says:

I am thinking . . . of the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor argues that the modern social imaginary finds its embodiment in three key practices: the modern economy, the public sphere, and the practice of popular sovereignty.

At the heart of this transition, Taylor argues, is an understanding of the good, a form of ethics which he describes as the ‘order of mutual benefit’.<sup>6</sup> In the modern moral order, individuals are no longer embedded in the medieval hierarchical order. They now come together and, through the pursuit of their own legitimate individual goals, help to benefit the good of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean-Claude Colin* (Maristica: via Poerio 63, 99152 Roma, 1998), 296-476. The images are in turn: a) The whole world Marist; b) I was the Support of the Church; c) From Inside the House of Nazareth; d) Unknown and Hidden.

<sup>3</sup> Coste, *A Marian Vision*, 300.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 171.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 165-71.

whole society. Independent individuals, a community of citizens and democratic government are central in all this.

The person viewed as independent, self-directing, self-interpreting, a meaning-seeker, sharing in a community with a claim to rights and to participate in the government of a community—these are central to the contemporary imaginary of the modern world.<sup>7</sup> This further clarifies the context of this discussion on the person and its relationship to Jean-Claude Colin.

Which brings us to the need to refine the point of departure...

### ***Point of Departure***

Amongst phrases used by Jean-Claude Colin that are guideposts in our Marist heritage and its spiritual lexicon, one stands out: ‘hidden and, as it were unknown in the world’.<sup>8</sup> Both the historical sources and the evolving understanding of ‘hidden and unknown’ have been carefully investigated elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

These few words have acted as a lens through which the spirituality associated with Colin and the Society of Mary (and its pastoral implications) has been interpreted and understood. Jean Coste explains that, in speaking about Mary, the Church, the world, and the Society of Mary and how they are related, Colin drew on ‘a whole complex of symbolic representations invoking and inferring a certain type of behaviour’. Coste concludes that ‘unknown and hidden’.. [is].. ‘the superimage which unifies the whole’.<sup>10</sup>

Coste’s next comment is significant. In talking of a theme or image used by Colin (citing Nazareth but it could also be ‘hidden and known’), Coste notes that:

it would be regrettable if the image of [used by] Father Colin were not ... taken up again and reread specifically from your very own perspective, our very own, that is, from a contemporary perspective.<sup>11</sup>

We take our cue from these words, especially, ‘a contemporary perspective’, together with those expressed by Pope St John XXIII and the shift in imaginaries explained above. Our

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<sup>7</sup> These aspects are explored in depth in Taylor’s earlier work *The Sources of the Self: The Search for Modern Identity*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/10/19/charles-taylor-has-reimagined-identity-and-morality-for-a-secular-age/>

<sup>8</sup> *Origines Maristes* 3, doc 819: 122 and 839:47 (henceforth OM); Jean-Claude Colin, *A Founder Speaks* (Rome: Via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1975), 57:1 (henceforth FS), where this phrase is described as Colin’s ‘favourite expression’.

<sup>9</sup> For instance: Justin Taylor, *A Marist Reset and Other Reflections* (Rome, 2018), 91–95; J Coste, ‘N. 8—The Marist Way in the Apostolate: Ignoti et Quasi Occulti’, in *Acta Societatis Mariae*, 5/24 (1958): 45–91; Patrick Bearsley, SM, ‘From Asceticism to Kenosis: The Evolution in Marist Understanding of the “Unknown and Hidden”’, in *Forum Novum* 5/1 (2000): 69–94.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Coste, *A Marian Vision*, 302.

<sup>11</sup> Coste, *A Marian Vision*, 298.

purpose here is limited to, and guided by, our primary concern in this discussion, namely, Colin's understanding of the worth and dignity of the person.

If we were to try and find a foundation beneath 'hidden and unknown' (and other key phrases and images used by Colin), one, importantly, that relates directly to the person, where would we start?

In other words, how could Colin's appreciation of the person act as a hermeneutical lens and investigative tool in approaching 'hidden and unknown' and other key phrases and images used by Colin?

This is the question that we will begin to address, a task which might help to clarify some implications for the Society of Mary as it approaches its next General Chapter.

## **The Person for Colin**

We begin by going back further than one hundred and fifty years and listen to these words made in November 1846. They are Colin's remarks made in the refectory, no doubt at the end of the meal:

Souls are so precious, Messieurs, that we must devote all our attention to them. It was they who brought the Son of God to the earth. He did not shrink from leaving the bosom of the Father to seek them out on the earth, and he has confided to us a part of his mission . . . souls in France are just as precious in the sight of God as those in Oceania <sup>12</sup>

Jean Coste notes that this passage is not simply part of a casual chat nor 'a literary spiritual theorising' but rather 'a firm expression of personal conviction'. <sup>13</sup>

What is the text saying?

Colin seems to be unapologetic in speaking of 'souls' as being 'so precious'. Synonyms such as 'prized', 'treasured', and 'cherished', readily come to mind. 'Precious' here, then, suggests the value of the human being as created in God's image.

But one small word adds something more; the word 'so'. The phrase 'so precious', with its implied superlative, suggests not just that a human being is valuable but, even more, is form of absolute value—a benchmark, even, for our behaviour (an aspect to be pursued later).

Further, his language ('soul') is not a form of a Cartesian dualism, a 'the ghost in the machine' view of the person, as if all that mattered was the spiritual dimension of thought and reason. In many other places, Colin indicates his appreciation of the person as an embodied, imaginative, and affective reality. For instance, such aspects need to be considered by the preacher in the art of effective preaching, if there is to be a level of persuasion. Further, they

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<sup>12</sup> FS 132:16 and 25.

<sup>13</sup> Coste's comment beneath the main heading of FS, 132, p. 372.

are integral to the practice of the virtues in that they engage both our bodies and our emotions. Most importantly, they are encapsulated in the Marist axiom: ‘to think as Mary, judge as Mary, to feel and act as Mary in all things’.<sup>14</sup>

Having laid down a foundation, Colin moves on to explain, in succinct language, its main (and necessary) outcome. Given their profound worth, ‘Souls’ (persons) attract ‘all our attention’ to the point of inducing a deep and ongoing concern, namely, of ‘devotion’—and that this is a ‘must’. The appreciation of the person, then, inescapably leads to a moral imperative, a call to recognition of the individual human being which underpins and drives how we respond and act.

Such a pattern is true of the Trinitarian God. Each person emerges from the creative action of God, an expression of divine love. The divine attention, drawn, in love, to ‘souls’ as ‘so precious’, responds through the divine ‘self-emptying’ (Phil 2:7). This was a process true within the divine life of the Word, in his giving of himself in love to his Father. It was also true within history, in the Word giving of himself in love to humanity in the Incarnation.

Here, there are two considerations. The unique aspect is evident in that it is in Jesus that ‘the fullness of the divinity dwells bodily’ (Col 2:9). Alternatively, the solidarity perspective is revealed in that God’s Son did not ‘cling to’ (‘exploit’) his divinity but took ‘the form of a slave, being born in human likeness’ (Phil 2:7). Jesus, the divine Word, embraced, and identified with slaves, whose status was the most dishonourable and shame-laden yet, who, in God’s eyes, never lose their value and honour.

This universal aspect is intimated in Colin’s later statement in which he emphasises that there are no exceptions; all souls are precious, in France or Oceania, in any time or place. In the light of that, Colin sums up the implications for us: Jesus ‘has confided to us a part of his mission... to seek them (souls) out on earth’. This suggests the redemptive aspect of Christ’s mission in seeking out humanity, ‘so precious’ but also so needy; to overcome sin and save humankind from the effects of sin and evil. The attitudes and practices needed to share that mission with Jesus are distilled in the Marist axiom noted above. We will explore what that involves later.

We have here, then, a very compressed understanding of the value of the human person, one built around a deeply felt conviction on Colin’s part, a form of affective knowledge. It could well be described both as a condensed theological anthropology and, on the other, as a compact theology of salvation (soteriology). It provides the underpinnings for the pastoral approach Colin adopts in his ministry and wants fellow Marists to share, hence, the basis of a unifying perspective.

### ***Attention and Devotion at Work***

The moral imperative and its associated call to recognise, appreciate and respond to ‘souls’ is captured in Colin’s words above: a form of devotion, of dedication and concern for their

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<sup>14</sup> See the extensive discussion in my study *The Reasoning Heart: Jean-Claude Colin and the Marist Spirit* (Adelaide, SA: AFT Press, 2021).

welfare. This is integral in bringing God's love and mercy to each person and leading each person to God—a share in the mission of Christ. Colin's reflections in 1846 (noted above at the dinner table) emerged from his time in the Bugey regions (1825-29) where he and his companions were preaching missions (he preferred the term 'catechists' to 'missioners').

Consistent with what we have said so far, Colin started to move to a further key insight during his four years preaching missions in the Bugey area. The presence of the Three Estates system (imaginary) was still part of the social fabric and communal memory with the associated standing and rights for the clergy (e.g., to impose a tithe—a 10% levy).<sup>15</sup>

Colin is very sensitive about this. He notes how an appeal to clerical status and recourse to a domineering and authoritarian attitude would only further alienate people, given their previous (and not so recent) experience of the clergy (and the Church). It was also one of the three 'no's' he would highlight for Marists (against prestige and privilege). From his sensitivity (if not hypersensitivity) there emerged in him a counter-cultural perspective in both the social and the religious (Catholic) sense. He was, in a way, anticipating the modern imaginary (summarised by Pope John XXIII, as noted earlier).

Early, then, in this time in the Bugey region, Colin became more conscious of how he (and his fellow Marists) were just as human as the faithful in the pews. As priests and in their ministry, they were not there to pull rank. This common ground influenced their style of preaching, confessional work, and pastoral approach. Further, overall, they shared the living conditions of the people to whom they were preaching.<sup>16</sup> Colin says:

And after all, what difference is there between them and us. They are our brothers. The only difference between them and us is that we speak and these poor folks don't have the right to reply'.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, people should always be treated with respect, sensitivity, gentleness, and reassurance. Generally, Colin's approach was to try to be respectful of the freedom of those who do not attend the mission.<sup>18</sup> There were to be no denunciations from the pulpit 'not even for bar-owners who kept their establishments open during the time of the sermons'.<sup>19</sup>

The overall approach is captured in a type of apostolic rule of thumb, but one laden with spiritual and theological implications. For divine grace to touch people:

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<sup>15</sup> The nobility made up the second level; the peasant farmers and bourgeoisie (wealthy business class) as the third estate (approximately 90% + of the total population).

<sup>16</sup> Justin Taylor, SM, *Jean-Claude Colin: Reluctant Founder 1790-1875* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2018), 270 (henceforth *RF*).

<sup>17</sup> OM 2, doc 516: 6.

<sup>18</sup> FS 102: 21.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *RF*, 252 citing OM 2, 664 and noting how Colin described himself as their 'friend' and joking that he had their customers.



we must win souls by submitting ourselves to them.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Colin was not suggesting a strategy of feigned subservience to get people ‘on side’ or to convince them. Underlying this particular phrase was a conviction that their ministry was, ultimately, the work of God.<sup>21</sup> It continues the self-emptying of Jesus in the Incarnation, his identifying with all of humankind, blessed yet broken, his giving of himself in his death on the cross—the work of divine salvation. It means bringing a frame of mind, a disposition of the heart, that allows the Holy Spirit to work through human instruments, who, in a sense, disappear in the process so that ‘good’ is done.<sup>22</sup>

From this, Tony McCosker concludes:

It is through the process of submitting himself to others that the missionary becomes aware of both his own humanity and the mercy of God.<sup>23</sup>

Such an approach mirrors that of Mary: being moved and responding in a manner that is an affirming and enabling presence to each person.

But can we find anything more specific about Colin, the value of the person and how it was applied in practice? We can consider one example.

### *Children as ‘Precious’: A Case Study*

What emerges from the documentary evidence is that Colin had a great love for children and was gifted in dealing with them. A feature of the ‘Marist’ mission, for instance, was how it began with instructing the children with the catechism, about the mission, and with confessions for those ready to make their first communion. He involved them as ‘little missionaries’ – to be good and pray for their parents. He was conscious of how involving the children was also a point of entry into each family (and their involvement in the mission). Then, and now, parents will do anything for their children!!

His method of engaging with the children is pedagogically illuminating: in his use of role plays; in the interchange of question and answers; in eliciting their views on an issue; in encouraging them to try to solve cases of conscience. His attitude and behaviour confirmed how interacting with the children, with interest and compassion, opens up their hearts (and also the hearts of the parents who are present).

He was also aware how children can be restless and fidgety, sometimes with short attention span. He did not expect them to behave as adults; he was tolerant and realistic. When called on, he always tried to give a child his immediate attention. He was adaptable with them. The

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<sup>20</sup> FS 102:33.

<sup>21</sup> Bearsley, ‘From Asceticism to Kenosis’, 79.

<sup>22</sup> FS 57:1; 90:1;

<sup>23</sup> Tony McCosker SM, *The Bugey Mission Experience: Some Implications for Initial Formation* (Marist Studies Centre, Rome, April 11, 1988), 6.



key point was to win their trust and help them to be ‘open and frank’. In other words, he took children seriously but not solemnly, and they responded in kind.<sup>24</sup>

Colin’s ability to relate well with the young has been evaluated at the professional level. A big factor, for Colin, was distinguishing the person from their behaviour—a key point in the assessment of his leadership style made by behavioural psychologist Raymond Carey. This was combined with Colin’s sensitivity, his ability to win people’s trust and his non-judgmental approach. It was these attitudes that were so fruitful in dealing with, for instance, teenage boys and young men as they struggled with, at times, compulsive behaviour (e.g., in sexual matters, or in theft).

For instance, there was one case of a young boy who was helped by Colin to overcome kleptomania. An assessment of Colin’s approach from the perspective of behavioural psychology concluded that it was ‘remarkable’. Carey continues:

Colin employed what in our day would be considered state of the art techniques for treating self-initiating behavioural disorders.

He used negative reinforcement (rather than punishment). This helped prepare the boy to learn that the urges to steal can be modified and controlled. Finally, he continued to praise the boy, hence, instilling confidence that he could always tell Colin about the problem and would not lose his esteem.<sup>25</sup> To say that Colin was good with children was not based on vague personality traits. It was grounded in his actual behaviour and its results.

In considering how Colin viewed the worth of the person, we find it is, clearly, a deep conviction on his part. In speaking of souls as ‘so precious’, he alludes to the scriptural testimony about how it is precisely this two-word value statement that motivates the self-emptying of God in Jesus in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Importantly, for Colin, this entails continuing that same frame of mind and disposition of the heart in sharing in the mission of Christ today—as Colin strives to do in his early work in Bugey. Taking the human person seriously also involves a readiness to acknowledge human limitation and the need to adapt—exemplified in Colin’s attitude to, and dealings with, children and youth.

Overall, for Colin, by putting oneself in the place of those one is speaking to or relating with, one comes, like Jesus, to ‘learn to understand the human heart’ and its profound ‘depths’.<sup>26</sup> These words suggest a further aspect in how Colin viewed and valued the human person. This involves attending to words that precede those used by Colin to explain why souls are ‘so precious’: ‘Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5).

That is our next task.

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<sup>24</sup> For these three paragraphs, see, FS 102: 21-24; 36:5; 36:7.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond P. Carey, Ph. D ‘Jean-Claude Colin from the Perspective of Behavioral Psychology’, *The Study of Marist Spirituality - Colloquium held in Rome Sept. 24-28, 1984* (Rome: via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1984), 71-83, at 78-9.

<sup>26</sup> FS 148: 2 and 116: 11.

## The Person for Colin and ‘the Mind of Christ’

Any understanding of the profound ‘depths’ of the human heart necessarily entails that one ‘be of the same mind’ (of Christ), sharing in the humility and love of Christ (Phil 2:2). In Paul’s usage, the Greek *phroneim* (mind) goes beyond rational reflection to include the “mindset” that issues in a determined pattern of behaviour’.<sup>27</sup> As Fallon expresses in more explicit terms, such behaviour emerges from being ‘in tune with each other in thinking, feelings, and attitudes’.<sup>28</sup>

This language clearly points to the practice of the virtues. It provides the basis for further considerations that underlie how Colin views the person.

### *Virtues: a Working Understanding*

What are virtues? They are good habits. They are ‘characteristic ways of behaving that make both the person and actions good and also enable persons to fulfil the purpose of their lives’. There is an ease to acting in a good way, almost as if it is second nature. The three questions about an ethics of virtue are these: ‘Who are we? Who ought we to become? and ‘How do we get there?’<sup>29</sup> We need to remember that our context is one of faith and the workings of grace. Virtue, in a true sense according to Thomas Aquinas, is a supernatural or ‘infused’ habit whereby God (the Holy Spirit) works ‘in us without us’, not in the sense that a person is not free but that it is primarily and action of the Holy Spirit with which we cooperate.<sup>30</sup>

William Spohn offers some pointers in answering the three questions (above), pertinent to our discussion here. Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God and, hence, our principal benchmark when it comes to Christian moral reflection and the practice of the virtues:

His story enables us to recognize *which* features of experience are significant, guides *how* we act, and forms *who we are* in the community of faith.

In other words, moral experience involves *perception*—noticing which features of experience are significant and relevant. Further, it entails moral *dispositions* that guide us in how we should be engaged, respond, and disposed to act. The final aspect is *identity*: about who we are and seek to become. What we have in this triad is an interweaving of the head, heart, and hands around the hub of identity. Virtues have their home here.

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<sup>27</sup> Brendan Byrne, SJ., ‘The Letter to the Philippians’, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R Brown, J Fitzmyer, and R Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 791-797, at 792.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Fallon, MSC, ‘Philippians’ in *New Testament Letters, St Paul* (Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Press, 2004), 613.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Harrington SJ & James Keenan SJ, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2002), 23. Also, Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1.2.55.4.

Our basic identity has a great influence on what we perceive, and our main moral dispositions influence both what we see and who we think ourselves to be.<sup>31</sup> What is the relationship between an identity centred on sharing the spirit of Mary and our perceptions and dispositions, in how we think, judge, feel and act as being ‘of the same mind as Christ’?

### *Jesus: Soundings from Colin*

Justin Taylor points out that Jean Coste regretted that he did not write an article about Jesus in Colinian spirituality. Coste seemed to fear that many Marists had (or wanted) an exclusive focus on Mary. But, in reality, Colin often encourages Marists to unite themselves with Jesus, to be imbued with his ‘mindset’, especially in their ministry as priests.<sup>32</sup>

Taylor has explored how Jean-Claude Colin was influenced by the French School of spirituality and, in particular, concerning one aspect:

The Founder recommended to Marists the practice of ‘honouring’ the ‘mysteries’ or ‘states’ of Jesus and Mary, that is, of uniting themselves or ‘adhering’ to the interior attitude or disposition at the heart of some act, such as Jesus’ Agony in the Garden or Mary’s care of the new-born Church; the act itself is past, but the ‘mystery’ remains, with its distinctive grace, in which we can share’.<sup>33</sup>

Consider these examples that approach ‘putting on the mind of Christ’ with a range of emphases consistent with the virtues approach outlined above.

First one of a mode of being ‘clothed’ that denotes a closeness that influences ones identity to the point of identification:

You must clothe yourself in our Lord. Do everything through him, as if you were body of his body, soul of his soul.<sup>34</sup>

Second, close union with Jesus brings an inner tranquillity while also shaping ones perceptions (about others and oneself) and guiding ones resultant behaviour:

Since your life is one of action, in putting on our Lord you will always be at peace and your soul, indeed, will always be caught up as in the fondest prayer. You cannot undertake many spiritual exercises, but if you keep in close union with our Lord, that will serve as everything for you. You will see everything in him, your pupils, your work, yourself – and that is very important.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> William C Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum), 2..

<sup>32</sup> Justin Taylor, *To Be a Marist: Retreat Talks 2007-2008*: 94.

<sup>33</sup> Justin Taylor, SM, *The Spirit of the Society of Mary: Nine Lectures at the Annual Retreat for the Australian Province of the Marist Fathers*, 2005, volume 6, 1.

<sup>34</sup> FS 45:1.

<sup>35</sup> FS 45: 2.

Third, in a text of Colin speaking to the General Chapter of 1842, he draws on the language of relationship, of invitation and response within which companionship with Jesus is situated. From here arise the dispositions and motivations that emerge in a collaboration with Jesus, a joint enterprise—all with the guidance of Mary to show us the will of her Son.

But when we know the one who is calling us, when we know that God is everywhere with us—*Ego ero tecum* (Ex 3:12 or Deut 31:23)—what, then, should we fear? Is not that the most worthy object of our desires, that life which gives us a share in the mission of the Incarnate Word? Let us then put on Jesus Christ, to that end working with all our heart so that Jesus Christ will work with us. We must put the man in us aside, and so ask ourselves when we are in the pulpit, Who am I to announce to these souls the good news, to distribute among them the bread of the word of God? Why have I entered this pulpit? It is to beget them for Jesus Christ. To obtain God's blessing on our ministry, let us pray the blessed Virgin to guide us in all things. Let us say to her, "Blessed Virgin, show me the will of your divine Son." Having done that, let us have no more fear...<sup>36</sup>

As Taylor notes:

Here we have the expected reference to Mary, but as the one who shows us the will of her Son: we recall her last recorded words in John 2:5, 'Do whatever he tells you.' It is in his mission that we share; we identify ourselves with him.<sup>37</sup>

The original text of Colin actually concludes with the words (after 'no more fear') ... 'even if we had to die as a witness to our faith. *Mihi mori lucrum*'. 'For to me ... dying is gain (Phil 1:21) are consonant with the divine self-emptying (Phil 2:7) that Colin appeals to when he speaks of souls as 'so precious'.

Similarly, consider Colin speaking about the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

In the confessional we need to put aside our human nature. In one phrase which says everything, we must put on Jesus Christ. We are not there in the capacity of a mere man. Who, as a man, has the right to probe into the secrets of the heart? Who has the power to forgive sins? God, and he alone. We must therefore be close to God, with one ear to our penitent and the other to Jesus Christ. It is he who is listening through us. Let us put on Christ's feeling for sinners, for the Samaritan woman, for Mary Magdalene. Jesus Christ is my model. Christ is to speak with my lips.<sup>38</sup>

On another occasion Fr Colin speaks of union with Christ in terms suggested by John 15:1-6:

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<sup>36</sup> FS 56:4.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, *To Be a Marist*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> FS 102.27.

Missioners, all Marists, must be men who are grafted into Christ, and follow no will but his, just as the shoot springing from the main branch has no life of its own, other than the sap which comes to it from the vine. If it is cut off from that sap, from that vine it dies, and so it is the same with us.’<sup>39</sup>

As Taylor sums up: these quotations clearly indicate that Colinian spirituality is not *exclusively* Marian. To live Mary’s life, to breathe her spirit and imitate her virtues offers a way to live the Gospel but it is the Gospel of Jesus and a sharing in the mind of Christ. Mary does not replace Jesus. Union with Jesus Christ is central and essential.<sup>40</sup>

Colin reminds us earlier in his work at Bugey, by putting oneself in the place of those one is speaking to, one comes, like Jesus, to ‘learn to understand the human heart’ and its profound ‘depths’.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Marists are called to give ‘greatest play to the mercy of God’.<sup>42</sup>

We have considered the value of the person for Colin, its grounding in God’s love and in the mystery of the Incarnation and in the divine self-emptying for the sake of humanity and the world. These theological realities underpin and guide the exercise of the apostolate especially through the attitudes and dispositions shaped and informed by the ‘mind of Christ’ transposed and lived in a Marian manner. For our purposes, such are the needed elements in any approach to the value of the person, to appreciate why and how souls are ‘precious’.<sup>43</sup>

But what can we learn since the time of Colin?

That is the next phase of this discussion.

## **Value of the Person: Listening to the Church’s leaders**

The central place of the person in the theology and life of the Church since the time of Colin is adumbrated with the words of Pope St. John XXIII earlier in this discussion. We can see how this variation of the word ‘precious’ (as used by Colin) is a developing pattern emerging in the hundred and fifty years since his death.

Colin’s description of souls as ‘precious’ is tantamount to the language of human dignity. Nevertheless, growing jealousy of ‘liberty and independence’ in Colin’s lifetime was indicative of a movement about human rights (and underlying personhood) that was to weave an uneasy path to the second Vatican Council.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> FS 134.1.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *To Be a Marist*, 95.

<sup>41</sup> FS 148: 2 and 116: 11.

<sup>42</sup> FS 37: 1 and 2.

<sup>43</sup> They also provide the context within which ‘hidden and unknown’ (the unifying ‘superimage’ suggested by Coste) must be understood. It is a phrase that encapsulates Colin’s experience of God and of life, a conviction that is embedded in the Scriptures and, crucially, in the theology of the incarnation and of Christ’s ministry.

<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting landmarks such as the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1949) and later the *Convention on the Rights of Children* (1989).

It suffices to highlight some key aspects about the human person that have emerged from the Church's life (and beyond, as in response to human rights' insights noted above), as found in the second Vatican Council and the Popes since that time. Such an approach offers a context for questions that might arise for the General Chapter of the Society of Mary in the latter part of 2025. A full discussion is beyond our purpose here

'Personhood' is a key issue in both individual and social life, particularly, in the more pluralistic and secular societies of the modern world. In the 1960s it was a topic of significant concern for the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council resulting in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, namely, *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH). Personal dignity finds its primary expression, first, in *conscience* and associated *freedom*.

This declaration's significance can only be appreciated in its broader context, namely, the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, 'The Dignity of the Human Person'. Human dignity is manifest first in 'authentic freedom' which is 'an exceptional sign of the divine image'. In article 2 of DH are found three interwoven ideas: the dignity of the human person; on which is built the duty to seek the truth; and the freedom (and rights) essential in appropriating truth through the mediation of conscience. At the Council itself, on Dec. 7, 1965, when the final tally was announced (2,308 in favour, 70 against), the bishops responded with applause. The next day, the London Times referred to the vote as 'a great event in the history of Catholicism and in the history of freedom'.

This offers the foundation for the second aspect, namely, the lapidary statement found later in *Veritatis Splendor* of Pope St. John Paul II, namely:

The Church puts herself always and only at the *service* of conscience... <sup>45</sup>

The Pope here is clearly referring to the individual person but also the Church's teaching role, to how the teaching is personally owned and appropriated but also to other aspects of the Church's life which help nourish our awareness of God and of the world around us. Further, the Church serves conscience in terms of fostering both 'freedom of conscience' and, importantly, 'virtuous attitudes'.<sup>46</sup>

A third aspect to the person is highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI, namely, how each of us is integrally *relational*. Authentic human development finds its model and source in the interchange of love within the Trinity. It calls for development of the whole person and all of creation in a 'dance' of love. Importantly, it implies that we both exercise and engage in a 'deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation.'<sup>47</sup> Further, given that the body is the visible expression of the person (as God's image), it is consequently the place (epitomised in Christ incarnate) where, in the context of relationships, the divine is 'portrayed, uttered, and

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<sup>45</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, (Homebush, NSW, St. Paul's Publications, 1993), par 64 (emphasis added).

<sup>46</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, par. 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, par. 53. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html). Accessed June 20, 2025.



rendered accessible to our gaze’ but also the means through which he ‘imparts to man and the visible world their ultimate and innermost meaning.’<sup>48</sup>

The fourth quality of the person specifies further the relational quality, namely, the person as a *dialogical* being. Pope St. Paul VI, in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), outlined a vision of the Catholic Church engaging in dialogue with the world through concentric circles. The framework presents the Church surrounded by four distinct circles representing different interlocutors: humanity, believers in God, non-Catholic Christians, and Catholics themselves.

This approach, influenced by the Second Vatican Council, emphasized the Church's commitment to open and honest communication with all, fostering understanding and promoting unity, but also a suggestion of the Church's openness to truth and goodness wherever it exists. The goal of dialogue, according to Pope Paul VI, is not simply to convert others, but to foster mutual understanding, respect, and ultimately, greater unity. This underlines the importance of the ‘spirit of poverty’ and the ‘spirit of charity’ in the Church's engagement with the world. It is an attitude and practice of listening and learning, of receiving and giving.

This approach from Pope Paul VI is a pointer to a development within the Church in understanding the nature and workings of grace. Edwards reminds us that in the work of salvation in and through Christ:

We must not forget that the Holy Spirit is *always and everywhere* graciously present in self-offering love to human beings.<sup>49</sup>

In the Church's worship, we find acknowledged that in a hidden, mysterious way, non-believers are associated with the paschal mystery and how ‘all who seek (God) with a sincere heart’ ‘take part’ in the offering of Jesus to the Father (*Eucharistic Prayer* 4). The Church prays not just *for* them but *with* them. The Church better appreciates how there are people who, as Lonergan notes, ‘by their good lives, reveal an implicit love of God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads’.<sup>50</sup>

Three other aspects of the person are later highlighted by Pope Francis. In *Laudato Si'* (2015), ‘care for our common home’ captures a more expansive view of the human person, namely, that of *stewardship*. We have a responsibility towards the created world that is exercised in partnership with God and through the solidarity of global humanity. Later, in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), in the context of the global pandemic, Francis appeals to ‘social

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<sup>48</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology* (Ignatius Press, 1986), 52.

<sup>49</sup> Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 50, italics in original. See also Aquinas in his comment that ‘all truth, whatever its source, is of the Holy Spirit’ (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2. 109. 1 ad 1).

<sup>50</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; New York, Herder & Herder, 1972), 278.



*friendship*’ and associated *justice*, highlighting an attitude of fraternity that gives priority to respect for persons and the common good over individuals interests—in social and institutional relationships. Thirdly, we are offered a variation of the phrase ‘souls are precious’ when Pope Francis writes that Jesus is the model who urges each of us:

Never stop at the surface of things, when we have a person before us. We are called to look beyond, to *focus on the heart* in order to see how much generosity everyone is capable of.<sup>51</sup>

This parallels a phrase used in *Amoris Laetitia* (par. 291) to approach discernment used in pastoral situations, namely, ‘illuminated by the gaze of Christ’—one of merciful love. In an earlier interview, the Pope speaks of having a ‘dogmatic certainty’ that:

God is in every person’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else, God is in this person’s life’.<sup>52</sup>

This is a salutary reminder that God’s presence is not passively waiting; it needs an active seeking, to be acknowledged and recognised. Still, while God is always present, individuals have the free will to accept or deny that presence. The quote also implies that God’s presence is not limited to those who are actively religious or living virtuous lives.

On April 8, 2024, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published *Dignitas infinita* (‘Infinite dignity’). The document finds its inspiration in Pope St John Paul II whose thought and was very much concerned with what is the source of human dignity. Ultimately, Christ is at the centre of his thought: ‘Christ, and His love for us, displayed in His sacrificial death on the cross (making the cross not a symbol of criminal death but of sacrificial, pure love), revealing to us the “infinite dignity” of each person, because so profoundly loved. The love of Christ for each of us is the source which gives each of us ‘infinite dignity’.<sup>53</sup>

The word ‘infinite’ means ‘transcending all outward appearances and specific aspects of people’s lives’. ‘In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis wanted to emphasise that this (human) dignity exists ‘beyond all circumstances.’ With this, ‘he summoned all people to defend human dignity in every cultural context and every moment of human existence, regardless of physical, psychological, social, or even *moral* [emphasis added] deficiencies’.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, in a meeting with disabled children and their caregivers at the Vatican on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, Pope Francis said that a person’s value is not dependent on one’s abilities.

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<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul’s Publications, 2015), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Talking with fellow Jesuits Sept. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> <https://insidethevatican.com/magazine/editorial/on-the-infinite-dignityof-man/> Accessed June 20, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. The use of ‘infinite’ with ‘dignity’ could be troublesome for some. ‘Infinite’ suggests ‘without boundaries’ or ‘unlimited’. Perhaps the emphasis seems to be rather on ‘absolute’ (as a value) compared to ‘relative’ with an implied further form as in ‘ultimate value’ (God?).

The Pope's language brings us full circle to where we started these reflections—with Jean - Claude Colin:

Every human person is precious and has value that does not depend on what they have or on their abilities, but on the simple fact that he or she is a person, the image of God'.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, we come to today and the new Pope. In his second general audience (May 2025) when he reflects on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Pope Leo XIV observes that ... 'before being believers, we are called to be human' and that:

...life is made up of encounters, and in these encounters, we emerge for what we are. We find ourselves in front of others, faced with their fragility and weakness, and we can decide what to do: to take care of them or pretend nothing is wrong.<sup>56</sup>

Such 'encounters' and the responses prompted from us, imply the dignity of those on both sides of the 'encounter. It highlights the process of being receptive to, open to recognise, and respond to, the 'other'. Such a view aligns with the developing appreciation of the human person intimated in the documents of Vatican II but more clearly elaborated later in contemporary writing in philosophy (for instance, Judith Butler and Hille Haker) and in a theologian such as James F Keenan SJ.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

From Colin's phrase 'souls are precious' we have made a journey which explored the various ways his insights are significant for him (and for us) but also how they anticipate later developments in understanding the human person as a subject of worth and dignity.

Hopefully, these considerations might assist a reader to be in a better position to respond to the questions that began and guided this essay. It also opens up other avenues of reflection for members of the Society of Mary as it prepares for its General Chapter in September 2025. Perhaps we can close by suggesting one question as a starting point:

In what ways is the Society of Mary called to respond to the needs of people today, not only to believers, but to the secular world and non-believers, in a way that is faithful

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/249870/pope-francis-the-value-of-a-person-is-not-determined-by-ability/> Accessed June 18, 2025.

<sup>56</sup> [https://x.com/EWTNVatican/status/1927650054338154614?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetemb ed%7Ctwterm%5E1927650054338154614%7Ctwgr%5E7e79fa7317095175a0063fa6eb83e52911183f61%7Ct wcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.catholicnewsagency.com%2Fnews%2F264379%2Fpope-leo-xiv-before-being-believers-we-are-called-to-be-human](https://x.com/EWTNVatican/status/1927650054338154614?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetemb ed%7Ctwterm%5E1927650054338154614%7Ctwgr%5E7e79fa7317095175a0063fa6eb83e52911183f61%7Ct wcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.catholicnewsagency.com%2Fnews%2F264379%2Fpope-leo-xiv-before-being-believers-we-are-called-to-be-human) Accessed May 28, 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020; Hille Haker, 'Recognition and Responsibility,' in *Religions* 12 (2021):1-18; In a recent and illuminating discussion, Keenan argues that vulnerability, receptivity, and recognition are foundational to the moral life. See James F Keenan, SJ, *The Moral Life: Eight Lectures* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023).

to Jean-Claude Colin's conviction that souls are 'precious'—that every human being is loved by God and called to share the divine life?

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