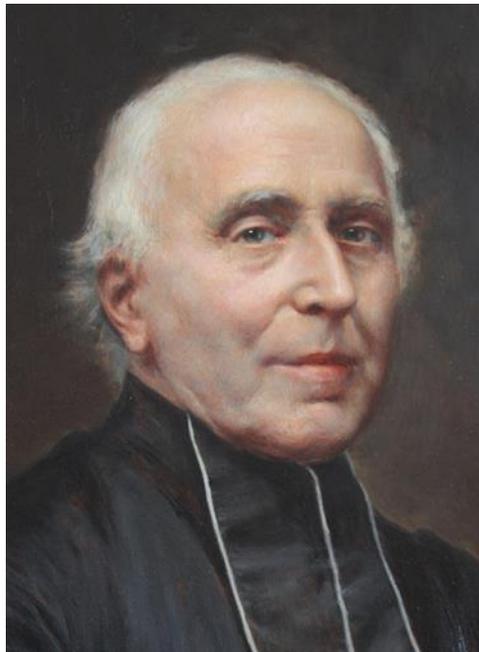


*Grace in Jean-Claude Colin:*

*A Pastoral Perspective Relevant Today?*



*Thomas Ryan SM*

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

Anyone who writes on the Founder and Marist spirituality is indebted to so many others.

I would like to thank Larry Duffy, sm for his reading and helpful comments on a draft of this essay and to Ron Nissen for making it available on the District website.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of a gifted scholar and Marist who contributed so much to the Church and to the Society of Mary until he passed away while this manuscript was in preparation.

I dedicate this collection to the late Justin Taylor, sm.



Thomas Ryan sm

March 2026

On Sunday December 28, 2025, there was a farewell thanksgiving Eucharist at St Patrick's inner-city shrine, Church Hill, Sydney, Australia. It marked the end of an era for the Church in Sydney and beyond. The commemorative plaque unveiled to mark the occasion reads:

In memory of the 162 Marists who served at St Patrick's, September 1868 to December 2025. The Founder of the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers), Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) wanted Marists to be present in the Church as if living Mary's life, instruments of God's mercy, hidden and unknown. The plaque was donated in deep gratitude by the parishioners of St Patrick's, December 2025.

What lay behind (or beneath) this 'Marist' presence and care that has meant so much to so many over 153 years? As one of those Marists who 'served' at St. Patrick's, I am conscious that no one can be a judge in their own case (or cause). Nevertheless, the occasion, given its significance historically, does raise issues about the particular form of Marist ministry and pastoral presence suggested above.<sup>1</sup>

As has been said, a spirituality is something that is caught rather than taught. So too with culture – a set of 'felt' meanings by which a society or group directs its life at the level of the head, the heart, and the hands.<sup>2</sup> In what way can the Society of Mary look to its Founder Jean-Claude Colin as a guide about this (or any) aspect of its spirituality, or its culture?

I would like to suggest one answer that is centred on the word 'grace' – its presence and power in people's lives and how this was a pastoral benchmark for Colin. Investigating how that was the case might help illuminate the world behind the commemorative plaque noted earlier.

So, to begin.

## THE TASK

Threading its way quietly through Jean-Claude Colin's convictions and spirituality is the word 'grace'. Such can also be said of God's hidden presence and action in the world and in people's lives—explored and discussed so well in relation to the Marist axiom 'hidden and unknown' by the late Patrick Bearsley sm.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to explore the word 'grace' and see how it could be an interpretative tool that opens possibilities not only within Colin's personal experience of God (and its pastoral outcomes) but also of how his insights relate to the evolving understandings, since his time, of the presence and workings of grace in people's lives.

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<sup>1</sup> See also my earlier discussion of J-C Colin, St. Alphonsus Liguori and Pope Francis in 'Conscience, Sin and Divine Mercy: Footprints from the Past, *The Australasian Catholic Record* 98, No. 2 (April 2021): 65-74.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture and Cover-Up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2019), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Bearsley S.M., 'From Asceticism to Kenosis: The Evolution in Marist Understanding of the "Unknown and Hidden"', *Forum Novum* 5:1 (May 2000), 69-93.

The Index of *A Founder Speaks* offers a dozen references to the word ‘grace’. There are variations in meaning, depending on the context and of Colin’s purpose(s) at the time. Overall, grace is central to his view of the divine-human relationship and in the work of salvation in and through Christ.

But what form of ‘grace’ are we talking about? It is an ‘habitual’ gift with which we participate in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4)—in the intimacy of life of the Trinity, normally through Baptism (hence, sanctifying or ‘deifying’). It is a bearer of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that enhance the infused theological and moral virtues (habits and dispositions) shaping how we understand, respond, and behave. It required a free response and, as form of life, must grow towards maturity. Such *habitual grace* is distinguished from *actual* graces which are specific forms of God’s intervention (as when we pray for a particular grace or assistance from God, e.g., courage, patience).<sup>4</sup>

Colin refers to special or actual graces for a specific purpose, e.g., work in education; formation of priests and religious; converting ‘souls’; the call to (and persevering in) religious life; times of difficulty and need for Mary’s intercession, especially in an age that, through the ‘withering’ of the heart, neglects God, hence, grace.<sup>5</sup> The aligning of ‘graces’ and the ‘heart’ leads us to examine Colin’s approach to grace as a habit, a virtuous participation in the divine life. ‘Life’ is the key word here.

## COLIN’S MAIN USE OF THE TERM ‘GRACE’

Three references to ‘grace’ guide us. Their central theme is repentance and the sacrament of reconciliation, viewed in the light of two incidents that form the context of Colin’s discussion.<sup>6</sup>

It was only gradually that Colin moved away from the more rigorist views of his seminary formation. By 1833 we find Colin recommending Alphonsus Ligouri and his pastoral approach.<sup>7</sup> Later (1848), Colin observes of himself that he never refused anyone (absolution) during a mission. Colin’s rationale for this approach is indicative of his underlying theology of grace (and of its power):

The justification of a man requires only a moment, when that moment is seized and to it is joined the grace of the sacrament.

He goes on to cite Prov. 8: 17: ‘I love those who love me’. Colin then observes that he would give absolution even if he knew the person ‘would fall into sin the next day’ since he believed

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<sup>4</sup> This paragraph is based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1994), 483-5.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Claude Colin, *A Founder Speaks* (Rome: Via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1975), 44:7; 141: 20; 56:5; 44:8. 74:2. 56: 5; (henceforth FS).

<sup>6</sup> I draw on the extended treatment in my earlier work *The Reasoning Heart: Jean-Claude Colin and the Marist Spirit* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press), 2021), 101-112.

<sup>7</sup> FS 186: 1 and 2, 538. Such an approach had earlier received the approval of Rome. See *Origines Maristes* 2, n. 675, p. 515 (henceforth OM).

‘the person was sorry’.<sup>8</sup> Colin explains this further. To say to someone that you cannot absolve them, is to ‘resist grace’. The very fact that a person approaches for absolution is a ‘sign they need it; it’s the first step of good will’.<sup>9</sup>

Which brings us to a test case. In Clermont-Ferrand lived a certain Count de Montlosier who had written extensively against the Jesuits. When he was dying, he wanted to make his confession but the bishop required a written retraction. The Count refused but was willing to withdraw his views by word of mouth. This was not sufficient. When he died in December 1838, he did not receive the funeral rites of the Church.

The incident became a burning issue in its day, with attacks on the Bishop for refusing a Church burial and polemic against the Government in its attempt to have the Bishop censured for his refusal. What is very interesting is Colin’s position on the matter. It is consistent with Liguorian principles but also flagged an approach to sacramental ministry ahead of its time.

In speaking about the incident (a week or two after Montlosier’s death), Fr. Colin expressed his unease with how the Count was treated:

You see, a person at the very moment of entering eternity was *being pushed beyond his capacity*, and perhaps he might otherwise have been saved.<sup>10</sup>

This link between divine grace and the capacity of the person to respond (its extent and scope) is a central conviction for Colin (to be pursued later).

In response to Colin’s expression of ‘unease’, a young theologian (student?) objected: ‘how could he have received absolution? Does a man have contrition when he refuses to retract?’ Colin replied:

He did not refuse entirely...he only refused to sign, to put it in writing, to make it public. *To have contrition, a man is not obliged to acts of heroism.*<sup>11</sup>

Colin’s final sentence is both insightful and indicative of his pastoral sensitivity. He considered Montlosier’s attitude of repentance was necessary but also sufficient. Importantly, it was a start, one that was essential and, importantly, one which could develop further. In that (limited) sense, it was an ‘imperfect’ response, but one that allowed the gift of divine grace to be at work. Colin suggests that ‘possibly they should not have placed such a high price on the granting of absolution’ and that it be handled in stages. In suggesting this, Colin is alluding to his own approach to a similar case a few months earlier—to which we now turn.

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<sup>8</sup> Again, Colin appeals to the example of St. Alphonsus Liguori ‘who absolved all those whose confessions he heard’. FS 186: 2, 538.

<sup>9</sup> OM 2 no. 675, p. 515, author’s translation.

<sup>10</sup> FS 14:4 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> FS 14: 5, 69 (emphasis added).

A certain General, well known for not practising his Catholic religion, asked that communion for the dying be brought to him privately (after dark) rather than publicly (the common practice). Colin considered the man demonstrated sufficient good will and, with the Bishop's support, did as requested. Before the General died, he had not only received the sacraments; he openly blessed his son and asked for prayers from the household servants.<sup>12</sup>

Colin maintains that, as with the General, if less had been asked of Count Montlosier:

maybe he himself would have done much more than they wanted. They should perhaps have continued to hear his confession, to bring him into contact with the workings of grace. *When grace begins to work in the heart it does so very powerfully.*<sup>13</sup>

Colin's words reflect his deep conviction that grace is a sharing of a *life* (with God). But, importantly, he was conscious how living things need to grow and that, while such growth is driven by a life-force, it is also a step-by-step process. While Colin appreciates the power of divine grace, he also anticipates what more than a century later Pope St John Paul II referred to as the 'law of gradualness'.

This perspective is mirrored in the overall attitude that Colin saw as essential in relation to the sacrament of reconciliation—encapsulated in a retreat in 1846. It is marked by a profound respect for the person and a sensitivity in helping each person to be open (once again) to the power of God's grace, in this instance through the doorway of mercy: 'show great kindness'; 'do not rebuff them or appear surprised...'

... remember that you hold the place of Jesus Christ, and our Lord Jesus Christ knew the profound depths of the human heart, he welcomed all sinners with gentleness...listen, then, quietly...and with kindness'.<sup>14</sup>

Later (1848), Fr. Colin, acknowledging how people need time to grow.

... let us have compassion on poor sinners. Let us not ask of them *more enlightenment than they could be expected to have*. Let us form a true idea of their position, and then we will absolve them more readily.<sup>15</sup>

And later:

.... when grace seeks it out [the soul] and good will responds, it is like a little glimmer of light in the depths...it is impossible that the poor sinner who is at such a depth could enjoy the same enlightenment as you.... *receive him back into grace*, ask little of him *and grace will do the rest. Little by little day will dawn upon him as he goes forward.*

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<sup>12</sup> Justin Taylor, SM, *Jean-Claude Colin: Reluctant Founder 1790–1875* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2018), 497.

<sup>13</sup> FS, 14:7 (italics added); 70.

<sup>14</sup> FS 116: 11, 337-8.

<sup>15</sup> FS 163:1, 467 (emphasis added). See also FS 95; 116:11; 132: 17-24.

‘Ask little .. and grace will do the rest’. Again, a benchmark of pastoral attitude and practice for Colin.

Finally, focus on God, clarifying how ‘grace will do the rest’:

*It is God, God alone, who changes them [souls] by his grace. We, by putting ourselves into the picture, we can only be an obstacle to the working of grace.*<sup>16</sup>

## GRACE AS LIFE AND ITS GROWTH

The overall thrust in these passages from Colin that refer to the ‘life of grace’ as a habit are in relation to repentance and, in one instance, to the individual person’s salvation. What about grace as form of life that develops in the long term?

Reference was made earlier (definitions) to the link between and Holy Spirit and grace—in the infused virtues and the gifts. Is this reflected in Colin?

We find one passage linking grace with the Holy Spirit which is in the context of a retreat where he speaks of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each person’s ‘heart’ and in their midst (Mt 18:20).<sup>17</sup> The Spirit’s action in the group is closely associated with the presence of Jesus, especially as the Risen Lord. Colin’s comments here are reflected in his strong views elsewhere on steps needed in any process of group discernment (i.e., Chapters and meetings of the council).<sup>18</sup>

Overall, a shared divine life is seen by Colin principally in relation to the person of Jesus; of ‘putting on the mind of Christ’, namely, cultivating the virtues.<sup>19</sup> Foundational for Colin (and for Marists) was the practice of ‘honouring’ the ‘mysteries’ or ‘states’ of Jesus and Mary and sharing in their distinctive graces. (e.g., Jesus’ Agony in the Garden).<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Colin resorts to a range of Scriptural images to convey the sense of sharing a life with Jesus: being ‘clothed’; ‘grafted onto a branch; close union and peace of soul; Christ working through us.’<sup>21</sup>

## TO SUM UP

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<sup>16</sup> FS161:3 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Claude Colin, *A Founder Acts* (Rome: Via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1983), 265: 2, 6–7 (henceforth FA).

<sup>18</sup> FA 396:3; 303:1.

<sup>19</sup> FS 141: 1. See also my *The Value of the Person: Jean-Claude Colin in Conversation*. [https://maristfathers.org.au/images/0625\\_The\\_Value\\_of\\_the\\_Person\\_and\\_J-C\\_Colin\\_TRyan.pdf](https://maristfathers.org.au/images/0625_The_Value_of_the_Person_and_J-C_Colin_TRyan.pdf), 11-12.

<sup>20</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>21</sup> FS respectively 45:1; 45:2; 56:4; 56:4; 102:27; 102:27.

In considering ‘grace’ in Colin, then, his principal focus in the passages from *A Founder Speaks* is that of repentance, of Marists being instruments in bringing people back into a share in the divine life. The ongoing fostering of that life on a day-to-day basis is couched more in terms of the virtues and centred on ‘putting on the mind’ of Christ (his identity, his views, his dispositions, his appreciation, and judgment). *A Founder Acts* also offers evidence of how, for Colin, the Holy Spirit’s role is associated with Jesus as Saviour and Risen Lord, especially, in situations of group discernment. In this, as in sharing in the ministry of salvation, it also requires that we ‘disappear’ so that God (in grace) can do the work.

Further, Colin is not offering a theological treatise with definitions, analysis of concepts and a more abstract form of discussion. What emerges is a view of grace as a living reality for him and for other human beings (in a faith context), with the various levels of response (and resistance) that are a reality within each person—with God, with others, with society and the world. This is enhanced by its embodied quality given the role of the virtues—embracing the cognitive, affective, volitional, emotional, and corporeal. These factors enable grace to be very much a divine gift for sharing a life of relationships.

Further, Colin’s frame of reference was that of faith and sharing in the mission of Christ within the Church. Do we get any indications (or even intimations) from Colin on how he would view, and respond to, the world of today, where unbelief is so common and, as has been said, God is missing but not missed? The next section of this essay tries to address that question.

## A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Again, we look to Marist historian Jean Coste (as in the earlier essay on the person). In 1988, he observed that it would be regrettable if a theme or the image of [used by] Father Colin was not to be ... ‘taken up again and reread specifically from your very own perspective, our very own, that is, from a contemporary perspective’.<sup>22</sup>

That is our task now.

Consider Colin’s views in his early missions in Bugey. A clerical stance with implied superiority was the last (and worst) approach to take. People should always be treated with respect, sensitivity, gentleness, and reassurance (as ‘precious’—explored in the previous essay on the person). Underlying this is working axiom that has theological grounding. For divine grace to touch them Colin says:

we must win souls by submitting ourselves to them.<sup>23</sup>

In what is clearly God’s work, these few words, for Colin, capture 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 and, that Marists give ‘greatest

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church: Jean-Claude Colin* (Maristica: via Poerio 63, 99152 Roma, 1998), 298.

<sup>23</sup> FS 102:33.

play to the mercy of God'.<sup>24</sup> Such is a practical expression of identifying with Jesus in his self-emptying in the Incarnation for the sake of our salvation. It is also feeling and reacting as Mary; being moved and responding in a manner that is an affirming and enabling presence to each person.

Taking our cue from Coste's comments above on a contemporary perspective, further light is thrown on Colin's approach in a recent study by James F. Keenan SJ.<sup>25</sup> He proposes a foundation for contemporary ethics (with Christian references, e.g., the parable of the Good Samaritan, that could resonate with many people whether secular or religious). Keenan argues that vulnerability is not primarily about our proneness to being hurt or wounded. It is, essentially, the human capacity to be moved, namely, *affective receptivity*—foundational for recognising and responding to others (to the person as a centre of value). Conscience guides our actions once we are moved to recognise others. Its Christian expression is found in Discipleship. This offers the distinctive point of departure for vulnerability and mutual recognition to be at work in the form of Christian virtue ethics, which offers both personal and collective dimensions to the embodied expression of a graced identity.

We can find clear points of connection between Colin and Keenan. For our purposes, let us focus on Colin's working axiom as it is expressed above.

'Submitting ourselves' to 'souls' implies being vulnerable, being affectively receptive to who and where they are (with the possibility of being rejected?). That gesture of submission is motivated by the desire to recognise them and respond accordingly, namely, to give room for divine grace (and its power) to be renewed or enhanced in a person's life. 'Win' in this context is not about conquest. It is rather 'win them over', namely, that the person is prompted to being willingly receptive to God's presence and action through being treated with a non-threatening and accepting attitude. In other words, the person has been recognised! On that basis, as Colin remarked elsewhere: 'ask little of him *and grace will do the rest*'.

This phrase from Colin about submission/recognition to enable the work of divine grace represents a central aspect of the man, as acknowledged by Cardinal Castracane and noted by Jean Coste. Colin stood out amongst founders as one who 'understood his era' with a certain 'style' and 'way of approaching people'. He sought 'the means to touch, heal and convert the time in which he lived' but also to assume some responsibility in its regard.

He did not turn his back on his era, but he tried to imagine a kind of presence, 'unknown and hidden', which enables us to be there, as close as possible, at the very core of what is in the hearts of men.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> FS 57:1; 90:1; FS 37: 1 & 2; 102:33.

<sup>25</sup> James F Keenan, SJ, *The Moral Life: Eight Lectures* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Coste, *A Marian Vision*, 338.

In considering grace in Colin's thought and spirituality, how does that assist us as Marists to engage with our secularised era, of the very hidden God? In what way is 'grace' the bridge between his world and ours?

### *A Starting Point*

A point of entry can be found in Colin's convictions about the wisdom of Rome and of how its decision are guided by the Holy Spirit?<sup>27</sup> More broadly, he looks to Rome as his personal and pastoral guide:

I am a Roman, and in the confessional I follow the same approach as they, the Romans, do. I am very fond of those principles: *All for souls* and *Salvation before law*.<sup>28</sup>

In Colin's time (and into the twentieth century) moral theology was viewed predominantly in terms of law. John Mahoney reminds us that 'the location of interpersonal morality and of man's religious relationship with God within the categories of justice and of law' has a justified basis in Scripture and reason.<sup>29</sup> These phrases above indicate how Colin, like Liguori, worked from within that framework and, in the process, tried to transcend it. How?

The aim of any law is to achieve a goal, namely, some form of the good or benefit for a community. In this case, the purpose of the moral law, as mediated by the Church, is the good of the individual and the community in rightly ordered relationships. Its ultimate goal is the 'right relationship' with God and eternal life, namely, salvation. For Colin, human beings are so 'precious' that:

... they brought the Son of God to the earth...to seek them out...and he has confided to us a part in his mission.<sup>30</sup>

This is the context, then, of Colin's phrases, namely, 'all for souls' and 'salvation before the law'. However, as Church tradition and theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and, later, Alphonsus Liguori acknowledge, law (even natural law and moral norms) cannot cater for all the variables in life.<sup>31</sup> Situations arise that are not envisaged by the law as formulated. When this is the case, in both canon law and moral theology, appeal is made to the principle (and virtue) of 'epikeia', described as 'sweet reasonableness'. This is not a strategy to find loopholes to the law. It is about measuring a situation (and the law) against a higher law (implied in 'salvation of souls').

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<sup>27</sup> FS 111:7. This is in the context of religious congregations with specific reference to the Marist 'family'.

<sup>28</sup> FS 94:4 (emphasis in original).

<sup>29</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 252.

<sup>30</sup> FS 132: 16, 377.

<sup>31</sup> Mahoney, *The Making*, 253.

And so, when Colin says he ‘will try to save him without it’ (the law) and ‘salvation before the law’ we can detect two things.

First, his ‘eye’ is always on *this* person, this ‘precious’ (soul), on discerning how God and grace are at work in this individual’s life, hence, person-centred. The ‘higher law’ against which the ‘law’ is measured is God’s love for each human being. Second, one could well argue that, in some ways, Colin foreshadows the more personalist moral theology of the mid-twentieth century?<sup>32</sup>

Second, while he, with Liguori, shared the individualistic approach to sin found in the manualist tradition, nevertheless, both saw the moral life in a broader context. Colin drew on a broader French heritage that framed the moral life (and its struggles) in a setting of spirituality. Discipleship with Jesus, in a Marian mode, is central for him. The faithful, whatever their level or of education or way of life, were capable of more than just avoiding the potholes of grave sin. They could live a life based on response to a divine call. The depth of that belief for Colin is found in his incorporation of laity into his vision of the Marist project from its very beginnings

Our considerations above suggest that Colin was trying to transcend the limitations of the theological models within which he lived and worked. One could well ask whether, in a groping way, Colin anticipated the evolving understandings within the twentieth century Church of God’s saving action and the workings of divine grace in people’s lives, especially in one marked by unbelief?

Such a question guides the next (and final) phase of this discussion.

## **HIDDEN GOD AND GRACE IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD**

Our world, since Colin’s time, is marked by an increasing pattern of non-belief and the predominance of a secular mindset. The more recent sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has been, understandably, a significant factor in a decline in its credibility.

For all that, the Church’s ability (and call) to adapt is encapsulated in the second Vatican Council. Its focus was on reading ‘the signs of the times’, engaging with the changing world—continued with subsequent events and leaders since that time. One could well suggest that we find reflected in the Church the pattern of being receptive, of recognition and of response to the modern world and, in particular, how it discloses signs of God’s presence and action, specifically in human lives whether at the personal, social, or cultural levels<sup>33</sup>. Its ‘hidden’ mode can be described as mystery but also as grace—our task here.

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<sup>32</sup> And, of course, well after Colin’s death, we find what points to its ecclesial expression in canon 1752, the final code of the Code of Canon Law (1983) which is part- imperative and part- exhortation: ‘Let the supreme law be the salvation of souls’.

<sup>33</sup> And, naturally, we need to use discernment today for what Colin was trying to do.

We return to two phrases used by Colin. The first has been discussed earlier, namely, in Colin's pastoral advice for dealing with 'sinners' in the sacrament of reconciliation:

..... Let us not ask of them *more enlightenment than they could be expected to have*.<sup>34</sup>

An expected level of 'enlightenment' is, in fact, applicable to Colin himself, one related to another phrase, as illustrated in an incident during his mission days.<sup>35</sup> It involved a married woman whose husband insisted on contraceptive practices. Colin delayed giving her absolution. When the husband ceased to make such demands, Colin speaks of his happiness in being able to admit this lady to the sacraments.

But he also came to appreciate how his more rigid approach earlier was unwarranted. He arrived at a better appreciation how the woman's freedom in the situation was impaired, hence, she was, almost certainly, not guilty of grave sin. In other words, Colin came to realise he had made an 'honest mistake' (*une erreur innocente*). Fortunately, he had the resources to learn from his experience.

He had done his best. God does not expect any more than that, other than being open to learn from one's mistakes, especially if they are made in 'good faith'. Colin, himself, speaks along those lines. Once he is composed and at peace, he can say to God:

My God, if I am [mistaken], I took all the precautions that I know so as not to be.<sup>36</sup>

So, his experience of making an 'honest mistake' (and learning from it) joins hands with his other two convictions from personal experience, namely, a) '... ask little .. and grace will do the rest and b) of having reasonable 'expectations' of what a person should know and appreciate.

How might these three phrases apply in a broader historical, and cultural context? For our purposes, it is the issue of unbelief, rejection of the Church and how these are related to God's saving plan—God's grace present and active in our world? In addressing such issues, we turn to how the Church reflects these phrases in engaging with the modern reality.<sup>37</sup>

## **CHURCH TEACHING, CONSCIENCE AND 'GOOD FAITH'**

Colin's particular phrases discussed above anticipate developments eighty or so years after his death. The second Vatican Council reflects an expanding theology concerning the scope of divine grace. God's universal saving will (embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus)

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<sup>34</sup> FS 163:1, 467 (emphasis added).

<sup>35</sup> Discussed in more detail in *The Reasoning Heart*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> FA 303:3.

<sup>37</sup> What follows captures the key aspects relevant to our discussion. It draws on a more extensive treatment in Thomas Ryan SM *The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls Publications, 2022), 132-155.

‘holds true not only for Christians, but for all men [sic] of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way’.<sup>38</sup> Such grace is the work of the Holy Spirit, operative beyond the confines of the Church and, in fact, for all people of every time and place. It is embodied in the personal commitment to conscience which, for Denis Edwards, is one of Vatican II’s most ‘decisive and most important clarifications’.<sup>39</sup>

Colin’s phrases are our concern, namely, the relationship between grace, acting ‘in good faith’ and ‘more enlightenment than they could be expected to have’. How do the Holy Spirit, grace, and what is known as ‘the invincibly erroneous (ignorant) conscience’ relate to Christ and the Church?<sup>40</sup>

Vatican II’s teaching on the above heading can be summarized as follows.

A person can be saved who does not ‘know’ Christ’s gospel nor the Church ‘*through no fault of their own*’. They sincerely seek God (or a transcendent reality), and under the influence of grace, try to live in accord with the call of conscience. The same is true of anyone who has not reached an ‘explicit knowledge of God’ but with the help of divine grace, strives to live a good life. Finally, the foundation for these sentences is that the *Holy Spirit*, ‘in a way known only to God *offers to every man* [sic] the possibility of being *associated with this paschal mystery*’.<sup>41</sup>

The focus of the paragraph above is on people for whom the gospel of Jesus Christ and his Church have either not been part of their life experience (from culture, family, religious tradition) or, if it has, they are unable to appreciate its significance in their lives. The nub of this is found in the phrase ‘through no fault of their own’. It is something beyond their control very often; a matter of upbringing, of being in a certain place, at a certain time. This can also embrace those whose horizon of meaning does not include God or, even, positively excludes the existence of a divine being, such as those who identify as atheists (or as secular, sometimes, agnostic).

What is common to both groups? It is the key index of behaviour: striving to live a ‘good life’; ‘striving’, under the impulse of grace, to live according to God’s will as it is revealed through ‘the dictates of conscience’.

These three statements, then, encapsulate three issues: the relationship between nature and grace (‘offers to every man’, ‘moved by grace’), between truth and goodness (‘sincerely seek

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<sup>38</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22. in Walter M. Abbot, S.J. ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (The America Press, 1965), 221.

<sup>39</sup> Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 56.

<sup>40</sup> We recall the adage ‘outside the Church no salvation’ and Augustine’s distinction between baptism of water, of blood (martyrdom) and of desire (signalling implicit openness to God’s saving grace)). We will return to this briefly later in this essay.

<sup>41</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16 (emphases added) in Abbot, S.J. ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*.

God’, ‘strive to live a good life’) and that between the Spirit and Christ in the work of salvation (‘associated with the paschal mystery’). These provide markers in this discussion.

If God’s universal desire to save is at work as grace, namely, the divine self-gift prompting a response and a pattern of self-transcendence in one’s life, it raises the question of truth and goodness. In non-believers of ‘good faith’, how can their ‘honestly mistaken’ conscience concerning what is true be reconciled with their response to the good? What is the role of the Holy Spirit, Christ, and the Church in this process?

### *CONSCIENCE THAT IS HONESTLY MISTAKEN*

As we have seen, the Church’s teaching is clear: the commitment to follow one’s conscience (and live out its call) has salvific standing, namely, it is a path to God and to being saved in Christ. A significant consequence of this is reflected in a sentence of Pope St. John Paul II, namely, that:

The Church puts herself always and only at the service of conscience...<sup>42</sup>

This raises the question about the person who is ‘honestly’ mistaken, and acts ‘in good faith’. Vatican II says that, in the case of someone who genuinely seeks truth and goodness, it can happen that ‘conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity’.<sup>43</sup> Pope St. John Paul II expands this by saying that conscience maintains its dignity because:

even when it directs us to act in a way not in conformity with the objective moral order, it continues to speak in the name of that *truth about the good* which the subject is called *to seek sincerely*.<sup>44</sup>

We need to tease this out.

Conscience seeks to know the truth in order to act. The Church assures us that a person must allow the truth to persuade ‘by virtue of its own truth’ and ‘quietly and with power’.<sup>45</sup> Further, assent to the truth must be given freely—an expression of authentic freedom. We cannot be force-fed with the truth nor press-ganged into giving our assent.

The quote above highlights two things. First, its concern is a person who judges the truth about a situation in a way that is mistaken (with regard to an objective standard). Such maintains its ‘dignity’ (must be followed) only if the person’s basic attitude is one of trying to live a good life. The person is seeking the truth about what is good ‘sincerely’.

Second, the dignity of conscience, as expressing one’s freedom, finds its axis and driving force in the will, our capacity to desire, love and choose. When someone is misguided or

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<sup>42</sup> *Veritatis Splendor* (Homebush, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 1993), par. 64.

<sup>43</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* n.16 cited in *Veritatis Splendor* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1993), n. 62.

<sup>44</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 62 (emphasis added).

<sup>45</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae* (*Declaration on Religious Freedom*), n. 1.

mistaken, ‘with my heart in the right place’, reflecting a life basically directed towards what is good, in such a situation ‘honestly mistaken’ and acting ‘in good faith’ have moral standing.

A person, then, is obliged to follow their conscience even if they are honestly and sincerely mistaken (from invincible ignorance). This is the meaning of the phrase that conscience ‘does not lose its dignity’. The assumption behind it is that the person is, before God, genuinely seeking what is true and good and acting in accord with it.

By inference, this is the action of grace in the person. The Church is stating a conviction that there are people who, by their good lives, ‘reveal an implicit love of God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads’.<sup>46</sup> It takes dramatized form in the parable in Matt 25: 31-46 about seeing (and not seeing) the ‘Lord’: when you did it (or did not do it) ‘to the least of those who are members of my family, you did [or did not do] it to me’ (NRSV).

In this parable, the benchmark for the Son of Man implies the receptive/recognition/response dynamic found in Colin that has both guided our discussion and provided a bridge between Colin’s world and ours. It not only expresses the worth of every human being as a measure of moral action and the focus of grace. It is an imaginative expression of God’s perspective on a) acting ‘in good faith’ and b) not asking for ‘more enlightenment than they could be expected to have’.

How does all this relate to the Church? In contemporary theology, the Church is viewed as the sign and instrument of God’s Reign. In that sense, the axiom ‘outside the Church no salvation’ takes on a more expansive and positive meaning. As Ladislav Boros notes, a universal negative proposition (*extra ecclesiam, nulla salus*) can be expressed affirmatively (*ubi salus, ibi ecclesia*)—wherever God’s saving action is evident in the Reign of God (and its fruits), the Church is somehow present.<sup>47</sup> The Spirit’s offer of grace to all people points inescapably, even if mysteriously, both to Christ and to the Church. Perhaps this is evident today in how ‘religious and its multiple manifestations has revived as a vital force’ (much to the surprise of secularists).<sup>48</sup> It is also a salutary reminder of the need to proclaim the Gospel of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

## FINAL OBSERVATIONS

This investigation of grace and its place in the spirituality and pastoral practice of Jean-Claude Colin rests, as we know, on a handful of phrases used by him. Such a project, if it is

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<sup>46</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 278.

<sup>47</sup> Ladislav Boros, *Living in Hope* (London: Search Press, 1971), 47-8.

<sup>48</sup> See Gerald A Arbuckle, ‘The Global Surge in Religiosity: Pastoral Lessons’, *The Australasian Catholic Record* 102:4 (2025: 458-474, at 458).

<sup>49</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16 in Abbot, S.J. ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*.

to be relevant in today's world, needed an interpretative window or model through which the material can be engaged. Hopefully, in so doing, further light is thrown on the topic.

For this interpretative lens, we had recourse to that offered by James Keenan, namely, receptive/recognition/response in relation to a person or situation. This found its primary anchor in one specific sentence of Colin; 'we must win souls by submitting ourselves to them'. This was amplified by other phrases which clarified the workings of grace in human situations and, at the same time, illustrated both its power and flexibility. This grounded a discussion of how grace in Colin is related to later developments in the Church, as reflected in the second Vatican Council, with particular reference to the salvation of the non-believer. In so doing, three things have emerged.

First, Colin's mindset is expressed in four images a) The whole world Marist; b) I was the Support of the Church; c) From Inside the House of Nazareth; d) Unknown and Hidden (the unifying super-image). In Edward Keel's view, this pattern reflects how, when it came to the Marist reality as the central part of 'Colin's religious experience', a case could be made that it was, 'at its core symbolic'.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps, it could be also argued that Colin's entries on grace, overall, are anchored in his personal dealings with individual people, with its dynamic of receptive/recognition/ response. They present less as symbolic and more as both relational and indicative of hands-on learning on Colin's part.

Second, the discussion brought to mind a parallel between Colin and the reflections on his own personal journey of the late John Thornhill SM. John came to recognise that a theological interpretation that awakens and fosters faith awareness (like effective preaching) must be guided by the 'existential imagination'—as captured by Carl Rogers: 'what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element that would, if it were shared and expressed, speak most deeply to others'.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, in the light of this investigation, it is perhaps not unwarranted to suggest that grace, for Colin, is, in reality, the underground water-course that irrigates what is cited in the plaque at St Patrick's Church Hill: of Marists as 'living Mary's life, instruments of God's mercy, hidden and unknown'. It is a centrifugal force that emanates from sharing in the life of the Trinity. It is the basis of growth and an adaptable resource in our relationships—receptive to, recognising, and responding to God, to other people, within the Church and, with the Church, to the world in which we live.

As so, at a time when unbelief is so common, grace remains as a hidden presence made visible by its fruits—in good lives, concern for others, for creation and for the world around us. It might be salutary to return to the nineteenth century's Jean-Claude Colin and his two

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<sup>50</sup> Edwin Keel, SM., 'Jean-Claude Colin: Poet and Prophet: A Study of the Poetic and Mythic in his Language,' *The Study of Marist Spirituality: A colloquium held in Rome September 24-28, 1984* (Rome, via Alessandro Poerio, 63, 1984), 143-193, at 143.

<sup>51</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1961, 26 cited in John Thornhill, SM., *The Church, The Gospel, and Culture: A Theological Quest* (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2024), 13.

phrases: *let us not ask of people more enlightenment than they could be expected to have;*  
and, importantly, *when grace begins to work in the heart it does so very powerfully.*

Relevant today?

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