

SELECTED COMMENTS OF FR JEAN COSTE

- ◇ A RESPONSE TO THE FOUR OBJECTIONS
TO FR COLIN'S CAUSE
(1993 GENERAL CHAPTER)
- ◇ FINAL REMARKS
(1993 GENERAL CHAPTER)
- ◇ SPEAKING TO FR COLIN
(1990 BICENTENARY)



◇ **A RESPONSE TO THE
FOUR OBJECTIONS
TO FR COLIN'S
CAUSE
(1993 GENERAL
CHAPTER)**

I have been asked to summarize for you the objections formulated by the last preparatory congregation of 1941, objections to which no answer has yet been given. They are four in number.

The first objection

The first arises from the declaration at variance with the truth made by Father Colin at the end of his life with regard to Courveille's signatures on the letters written to Rome at the beginnings of the Society.

Four times, in fact, in 1868-1870, Colin, speaking of those letters to Rome, said that they were written by his brother and himself and out of prudence they thought it good to add Courveille's signature without his knowing it (OM 3, docc. 804, 9; 819, 44; 827, 7; 839, 8).

During the period of the beginnings, three letters were in fact sent to Rome by the Marist aspirants: the **first** was sent to the Pope in February 1819 through M. Gillibert (docc. 69, 1, and 689, 1), and it has not come down to us; the **second** was addressed to the prefect of the

Congregation for Bishops and Regulars in November 1819 and received no reply (docc. 69, 1, and 689, 2).

It is certain that it reached Rome, because it was registered (OM 4, p. 1015), but the file corresponding to the month of November 1819 is now missing from the Vatican archives; the third is none other than the letter to Pius VII of 25 January 1822, which had as reply the Latin letter of 9 March 1822, the first pontifical act in favour of the Society of Mary.

This **third** letter, as distinct from the two preceding ones, is preserved in the Vatican archives.

The signature of Courveille which it bears was submitted to two experts, one French and one Italian, in 1955 and both vouched for its authenticity.

In this case at least Father Colin's declarations directly contradict a scientifically proven fact.

An awkward influence on the study of the question was the fact that until 1941 everybody, both those involved in the postulation and the promoter of the faith, accepted as a fact that Colin in his declarations was referring to this letter, without noticing that in reality Colin always spoke of letters in the plural.

In other words, what in the case of the letter of the 25 January 1822 is clearly a falsehood, could be true for other letters, in particular the lost

letter of November 1819.

Personally, after all my research, I have arrived at the conviction that Colin did not lie, and that what he said did in some way correspond to the reality.

It is clear, however, that such a conviction would have no value in a tribunal, and so we are left without any reply to this first objection, since we cannot obviously fall back on Grimal's thesis, that Colin simply forgot...

The second objection

The second objection in order of importance is that of the difficulties Colin had with the vicars apostolic, or more accurately, with the sacred Congregation of Propaganda with regard to the problems with the vicars apostolic.

In fact, even if there is question also of Mgr Bataillon and Mgr Viard, the only serious difficulties are the relations with Mgr Pompallier.

The facts of which Colin was accused go back to two periods: 1841 and 1847. For 1841, the superior general was accused of delay in forwarding to the bishop a decree which Propaganda had asked him to send, and of having drafted a letter to him in which he spoke of breaking off relations and withdrawal of the Marists.

In 1847 Pompallier was in Rome and Colin was accused of trying to

prevent him from returning to New Zealand by revealing to the Pope the bishop's tendency to abuse strong drink, and his refusal to attend a meeting of reconciliation with him, in spite of the express invitation of the Cardinal Prefect.

Behind these particular facts, what can be seen is the basic difference between the two men: on the one hand, the bishop, full of his own authority and claiming to be the only superior of the Marists of his diocese; and, on the other hand, the superior general conscious of his responsibility for his religious and determined to do everything possible to safeguard their religious and community life.

For this second question, unlike the previous one, it cannot be said that the documentary research has been completed.

On this subject there is an excellent thesis by Father Roach, limited, however, to the relations between Colin and Pompallier until 1848, and the unfinished work he did in Rome in 1967 and 1970, of which he must still have the materials.

Much remains to be done. My impression is that, once the overall study has been completed, the reply to the specific objections should not present major difficulties.

The third objection

The third objection relates to Colin's relations with his successor, Fr Favre.

He is accused of his vehement protest against the latter in 1863 in the presence of Father Dupont (OM 3, doc. 803) and the accusations made against him in 1868-1869, when Colin's return to the ancient rule met with temporary opposition from the second superior general.

The main documents relating to this matter are to be found, if not published, at least indicated, in OM 3, pp. 149-173, and to take them up to write an historical report would require no great effort.

Certainly Colin overstepped the limits in some of his declarations, but the way the founder and the new general were united in the end puts the whole affair in a light which should relativize the incriminating statements.

The fourth objection

The fourth and last objection refers to Colin's slowness in giving his constitutions to the Society. He is accused of this delay as the true cause of the difficulties that arose in the congregation with regard to the rules.

With regard to the history of the rules, it can be said that the essential documentation is indicated, as in the preceding case, in *Origines maristes* (same volume and pages), to be completed now by the essay *A Founder and his Rule*, the first in the volume *Studies on the Early Ideas of Jean-Claude Colin*, published by the

present speaker in 1989.

Here again, an historical account should not require new research or much time to write.

Basically, it would be easy to show that Colin's attitude in all of this was not due to laziness or negligence, but to much more complex factors, deserving, if not total agreement, at least respect.

These are the four objections as presented in 1941 and still waiting for a reply. It is good to know now, however, that the new policy of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which Father Filippucci will tell you about, tends to give more importance to basic objections than to objections of detail.

From this point of view, Colin's real motives may come out more clearly, but new difficulties could also arise.

The main one, to my mind, is the following: if it is relatively easy to get an idea of what Colin was, said and intended up to 1854, a period well documented by the *Mayet Mémoires* and the correspondence preserved, it is not so easy after 1854, when he resigned.

This period, during which Colin wrote little and had no one regularly beside him to note down his words, is the one to which three of the four objections refer, and this can hardly be the result of chance. In reality, who was the Colin of this period, all alone, inclined more than once to

sourness and judgments moved by passion?

Was he still the same Colin of the origins and of the generalate period who in spite of his defects of character served God with courage and loyalty? Was he still, as in the past, essentially a man of God?

Personally, after many years of study, I am convinced that he was, but others may disagree.

An in depth study of the Colin of his last twenty years of life and what motivated him then remains one of the major tasks the Society must face one day.

◇ FINAL REMARKS (1993 GENERAL CHAPTER)

I should like to conclude with a few remarks on what my twenty-five years of conferences and Marist sessions have shown me with regard to the Society's attitude to the cause of its founder.

1. Almost everywhere, perhaps more so in the southern hemisphere and in Italy, I found a real interest in the cause, as shown by the many questions I was asked in public or in private.

2. Almost everywhere too I frequently met the old, continually repeated tradition, according to which Father Colin is supposed to have said on one occasion "that he did not wish to be canonized".

This is obviously apocryphal, since Colin had far too much good sense ever to say such a thing. But independently of this tradition, I often heard an objection formulated more or less as follows: "Basically, why raise to the altars a man who had no other ambition than to be 'unknown before, unknown afterwards'?"

This argument is more specious than valid: no one can prevent the spiritual value of a man from being recognized after his death, especially in so far as he himself did not seek

the limelight during his lifetime.

3. These continually recurring objections at least had the merit of revealing an undeniable reality, namely a certain resistance on the part of a fair number of Marists to the idea of the founder's being canonized.

Indeed, on the whole it cannot be said that the Society pursues this aim with the same fervor and enthusiasm as I have found in many other congregations, beginning with the Marist Brothers.

This is a fact which, as an historian, I feel bound to mention, without, however, drawing any conclusions from it or exaggerating its importance.

4. Finally, a word of personal witness. Forty years of studying Colin have shown me, more than to many others, the foibles and important defects of the man.

But in spite of that, my affection for him and indeed let me say, my devotion to him, have never ceased to grow.

I do not know whether the Church will ever pronounce on his sanctity, but I am convinced that few men in his time served God better than he, and I do think that, whatever happens, I shall keep that profound conviction to my dying day.

(Jean Coste died a year later, in 1994)

◇ SPEAKING TO FR COLIN (1990 BICENTENARY)

Presented at Monteverde, Rome, 25 June, 1990, the bicentenary year of the birth of Jean-Claude Colin

Jean-Claude Colin, having been asked to speak of you on this bi-centenary, I have said precious little about your person. But did you really expect me to? Something tells me that speeches about Colin never pleased you very much.

On the other hand, you spent your life fighting for a Society in whose future you believed. You traced it with features marked by your time. Forgive us if at times we are very far from it, but what you wanted we still want today.

This body, which you passionately loved, we intend to bring alive. For this we will be helped by that profound vision which encouraged you: that of Mary support of the Church at the beginning and at the end of time.

But our appointment with you is not at the end of time, it is today; today we need to reweave the web of a life in society which expresses not what we ourselves want, but what God and Mary wanted and want from you and from us. All during your life you had a certain idea of the Society of Mary.

Help us, after so many changes, to remain in communion with it, to accept that God can speak to us through the poverty of your person and your work.

Help us to understand that a word spoken yesterday may still resonate in hearts today, that a body born yesterday may find within itself the energies of a new youth.

No, Colin, you are not dead. In keeping with your promise, come out of your tomb from time to time to tear up the papers we write about you and bring us back to the love of your Society.

And, while you rest in that tomb, let

