



*Jean-Claude Colin,  
Saintly Educator  
for His Times and Ours*

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## Introduction

A recent report from the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) reported that 300 Catholic Schools in the U.S. have closed their doors during the Covid-19 pandemic and that another 150 may close, if the pandemic continues much longer; but Marist educators still have hope for the future.

We Marist Fathers and Brothers continue to see our schools as critical venues for creating future leaders who will preserve and enliven our Catholic faith and preserve our Marist heritage. Following the almost 200-year-old "Instructions" of Marist founder, Jean-Claude Colin, our Marist schools continue to be: first and foremost, incubators of the Catholic faith; second, a culture for teaching good citizenship; and third, a disciplined environment for learning academic subjects. For Fr Colin, the delivery order of these three educational components is essential.

Fr Colin's educational goals are very different from, for instance, the original intent of public education in the U.S., which was established to educate its citizens to be informed (savvy) voters and productive workers for the commonweal. Though their missions are quite different, both public and Catholic schools are all about educating young people, Pre-K through PhD; and both systems are fueled by hard-earned dollars via taxes or tuition.

There should be no wonder, then, why schools, public, private, and Catholic, are hurting in our pandemic-riddled world; there are almost no young people in classrooms and few, if any, budgetary dollars left to fuel educational programs. In the case of Marist schoolteachers, there currently exist no face-to-face classroom settings for teaching faith, citizenship, and academic subjects. At the moment, we are facing lockdowns, face masks, and social distancing; and we may have to endure the same until a vaccine is available on an international scale.

In the United States these days we talk a lot about the **two pandemics** we are confronting as a nation, i.e., the **novel coronavirus** and **poverty exacerbated racism/classism**.

There is an old French adage I would like you to recall: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*". We Americans translate this as "the more things change, the more they stay the same." For me, this statement rings true, and it leads me to write about Fr Jean-Claude Colin, the venerable founder, inspiration, and master teacher of the Marist Fathers and Brothers. My thesis is: Fr Colin was an inspired teacher in his own times and remains an equally inspiring teacher, whose insights on life, faith, and education are, perhaps, more relevant than ever in modern times. In fact, our Marist educational mission comes directly from the words and writings

Statue erected by Fr Colin at the college of Belley in 1833



of Fr Colin, i.e., Working with God, we form Catholic/Christian Persons, Upright Citizens who useful are to society, and Academic Scholars (People of Letters). If understood and practiced well, Fr Colin's formula for educational success continues to work for Marist Fathers and Brothers schools.

Fr Colin (1790-1875) was born just a year after the French Revolution began, which was a time of civil unrest characterized by popular protest, and runaway secularism. It was a time when the Catholic faith had little relevance in the cities and even less relevance in the rural regions of France where there were few or no priests. Churches were shuttered and/or in dire need of repair. Fr Colin's post-revolutionary France bred a general "out of sight, out of mind" regard for religion. Moral relativism reigned and was

characterized by trenchant Enlightenment thinking that each individual person acts as the moral measure of all things. You can be sure that the French revolutionary motto: "Liberty, equality, fraternity" had quite a different meaning for individual French citizens.

If this reminds you a bit of the world generally and, more specifically, the U.S. today, do not be surprised. For as the old saying goes, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." The U.S. today is characterized by its own form of relativistic secularism, civil unrest, popular protests against racism and alleged police brutality. Statistics show less practice of the Catholic faith (only 25% of Catholics attend Church regularly); and, even if faith is practiced, it is often a garden-variety of "pick and choose" what you want to believe, more non-denominationally-oriented, and in many cases somewhat syncretistic, i.e., a *mélange* of religions and philosophies, often espoused together without much logic.

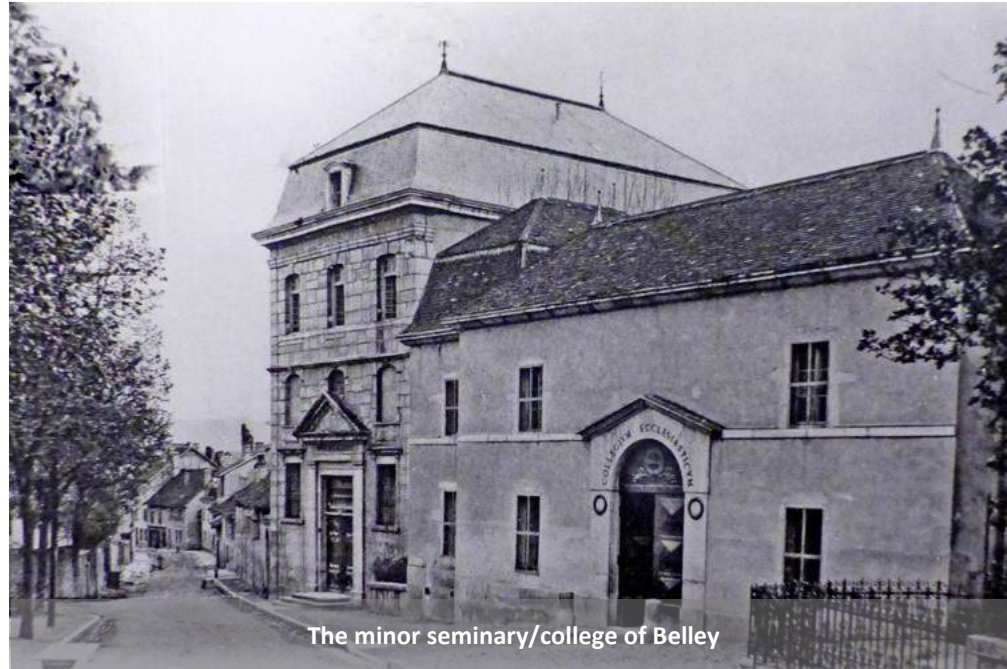
It is in the context of the turbulent times of Fr Colin's 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century, and, perhaps, even more so the turbulent times of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, that his teaching content and methodology ring true and effective. Fr Colin was, indeed, a saintly visionary offering a perennial and effective approach to pedagogy built on solid Catholic teaching which he not only believed, but also personally practiced.

**The First Component: Working with God to form Christian Persons**

Recall that accepting the missions of Oceania was the key to approval of the Society of Mary in 1836. Nonetheless, Fr Colin in his early priesthood preferred home missions, i.e., re-evangelizing French people fallen away from the practice of Catholic faith, and teaching young people, especially in schools. Speaking favorably of the education of youth in France, he once said, “I think a hundred times more highly of the education of youth in our own countries, **which are also pagan** (my emphasis), than I do of the foreign missions.” He also said, “My greatest ambition, one of the first ideas in the founding of the Society, its prime aim, is teaching. I despair of its future. I regard it as lost if it does not work in teaching.”

In his *Instructions to the personnel of the little seminary of Belley (Les avis de Jean-Claude Colin)*, he noted that in a Marist Catholic school the primary goal was passing on the Catholic faith, which as he saw it, came “from the true font of the Roman Church (read Catholic).” His formula was not a mix-and-match religious instruction following the latest fad or philosophy but something rock solid for own his time and future times.

For Fr Colin the Blessed Virgin Mary’s way was the model to follow when forming a relationship with her Son and following God’s law. In Mary,



The minor seminary/college of Belley

the mother of God, he found the best example of a disciple and a teacher. She taught Christian faith and life to the first apostles and members of the early Church. Indeed, Fr Colin saw her as the first and perpetual “Superior” (primary leader) of the Marist Fathers and Brothers, who were called by a “gracious choice of Mary” to breathe her spirit and follow in her footsteps, i.e., to think like Mary, Judge like Mary, Feel like Mary, and Act like Mary. He envisioned that the Marist Fathers and Brothers would teach the Christian faith and life to new disciples, especially young people, through the ages. Indeed, it was Fr Colin’s grand vision to make the whole world Marist . . . everyone thinking, judging, feeling, and acting

like Mary.”

The first and most important component of our Marist education mission today remains to help young people to be Christ-like, following Mary’s way. The Annunciation scene from Luke’s gospel tells us all we need to know in order to think, judge, feel, and act like Mary. Further, for Fr Colin, the beginning point of any Christian discipleship model was a willingness to adopt Mary’s “fiat” (let it be done to me as God wills). His own life mirrored Mary’s “fiat”. He was passionate about fulfilling God’s will and in a Marian style. This once prompted a Roman Curial official (Cardinal Castracane), after an interview with Fr Colin, to say to others in the room

that “one day this man will become a saint.”

Today, we might call Fr Colin’s first component catechesis or the religious education of students following the Marian way.

**The Second Component: Upright Citizens, Useful to Society**

In his own time, the Marist Fathers and Brothers preached missions in the poorest and most rural regions of the Bugey Mountains of France. It is there that his beloved “home missions” and the beginnings of Marist school teaching began. Having, myself, walked the very steep trails of those first Marist missionary journeys, I had a feeling of being in, what we Americans would call the “backwaters” or “sticks”.

Fr Colin “founded his schools in response to local needs, confining himself to towns of secondary importance where there were no other religious congregations . . . (this) an application of his general principle about choice of works, ‘Marists exist to do what others don’t want to do.’” No doubt, he dealt with “backwoods” mentality in many of his students, and Fr Colin’s aim was to work with God “to produce well-educated Christian gentlemen.” His aim was to teach young people not to be boorish at one extreme or affected at the other. “Discipline was to be firm but reasonable; corporal punishment was excluded.”

In his curriculum he offered physical education and sports. We would surmise he did that, first, to help students learn how to work with others; and, second, to make them physically strong and competitive—useful to society and its workforce.

It is obvious, Fr Colin's second component of education joins paths with public sector education as practiced then and now.

### **The Third Component: Academic Scholars (People of Letters)**

Like the second component, Fr Colin's third component offers many of the same subject areas offered by the public sector schools, but he purposefully deviates from the secular path by introducing religion and morality.

Clearly, in Fr Colin's view, the development of religious spirituality (approaches to God) and relationships with other people were far more important than academic ability in classroom subjects. He firmly believed any person had the capacity to be a child of God and could learn to relate well with other people, but he understood well that not everyone was equally adept at classroom subjects.

For Fr Colin, academic skills help students to navigate culture and the world of work, but academic scholarship still remained the least compelling educational component. Christian people able to have a

relationship with God and other people always came first. For Fr Colin, this was not to say that book-learning does not have its own important and proper place in education . . . it clearly does; and so, although he often preferred an environment among the poorer, less educated class, "he was not resigned to having only second-class establishments where a respectable mediocrity flourished." His schools were quite strong and demanding, academically. They were what we might today call "classical" schools, teaching ancient languages like Latin and Greek, French, mathematics, physics, natural sciences, and, where possible, the fine arts—very much after the fashion of the Jesuit schools of his time. Nonetheless, religion and the salvation of souls was his primary concern; and religion not simply as an academic subject, but religion in sense of practice, including prayer and a pious (devoted, dutiful, and moral) behavior.

Fr Colin held study days for his teachers and insisted that they know theology and the subject matter of their other secular subjects as well. As for French, he believed ". . . it would be humiliating if a student or their parents found mistakes of grammar or spelling" in the work of one of his teachers. He "raised the bar" as much for teachers as for students, and his standards for teachers, in particular, seemed to rise over the years. For instance, he

often reviewed teacher's work and demanded greater accuracy in the way student work was marked.

Fr Colin was also very concerned about priest-teacher decorum. In 1853, he gave advice to his Marist-priest teachers "regarding their attitudes and behavior towards their pupils, which (he said) should 'conform to the rules of wisdom and prudence.' His watchword was 'tact', referring, in his time, to intelligent and sure judgement. Thus, they (teachers) were to act kindly toward (students), not judge them too harshly, not speak too roughly to them or to speak ill of them. They were to avoid over-familiarity with them, showing no preferences or particular affection." This would seem to be excellent advice to teachers in any age, and our Marist Fathers and Brothers try their best to practice his advice in our schools even today.

### **And Finally**

As a religious founder, Jean-Claude Colin was a man of great passion and compassion. He loved God and Mary, the mother of God, from whose womb, Jesus Christ became man.

For the field of education in his own time, he was something of a visionary, particularly the **order** of his educational components. His thoughts and practices continue to speak to Marist Fathers and Brothers and those with whom they teach in

our Marist schools. I personally find it refreshing that I can go from one Marist house to another anywhere in the world, from one Marist school to another in any country, and have virtually the same experience of life and school. I find it remarkable that our saintly founder has had such a long-standing impact.

A good summary of what we Marists in education strive for comes from these words of Fr Colin:

*'I have always had this thought, that the Society is destined to combat until the end of time. Mary has been the support of the Church at its birth; she will be that also at the end, and she will **be that through you**. So, we must be filled with her spirit, and must go and draw this spirit from her heart. The apostles did nothing without consulting her; for she had the new law written in her heart, and well before the Incarnation she had been instructed by the Holy Spirit.'*

*'It is by self-effacement that you will overcome the world. You have to do everything for God and for the blessed Virgin. Nothing for you, everything with self-effacement.'*

At the end of the day, our founder taught us to take a back seat, i.e., to be a "hidden and unknown," a leaven that makes others rise. For us, Marist educators, "our students will always come first."

## Prayer for the Beatification of Venerable Jean Claude Colin

God our Father, in your servant Jean-Claude Colin you gave your people a zealous priest and religious founder dedicated to serving the Church in the spirit of Mary.

We ask you for the glorification of your faithful servant in the midst of your Church and grant us the favor which we ask through his intercession.

*(Here mention your favor or request)*

This we ask through Christ Our Lord.



If you receive any grace through the intercession of Jean-Claude Colin, please advise:

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**Fr Leon M Olszamowski, SM**, is Animator for the Cause of Fr Colin in the north, east and west regions of the United States:

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Fr Leon notes: I am indebted to Fr Justin Taylor, SM, who has compiled the resources and written the definitive life of Fr Colin for the Holy See, entitled: *Jean-Claude Colin: Reluctant Founder*, ATF Press, Adelaide, S.A., Australia, 2018.

I have used many references from his book in my article. The book, itself, is a wonderful read, and I would suggest it anyone interested in knowing our Father Founder.

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Jean-Claude Colin has been declared by the Catholic Church as “Venerable”, the Church’s first step on his road to sainthood.

For more information go to the Colin website: [www.jeanclaudecolin.org](http://www.jeanclaudecolin.org)