

**Taking the place of Mary:  
The wisdom of Mary in the Marist educator-student relationship**

Dear Friends,

I am grateful to you for this opportunity to share in your deliberations. Not only am I honored by your invitation but I am also humbled by it, since I bring to it no special expertise but only thirty-three years of teaching philosophy and theology. I have never taught in a Marist school except for one year when I taught very elementary French in our junior college seminary in Washington, D.C. I spent eight years teaching theology at Notre Dame Seminary School of Theology in New Orleans, Louisiana; one year teaching catechism at St. Charles Borromeo High School, Destrehan, Louisiana and twenty four years teaching undergraduate philosophy and theology at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in New Orleans, Louisiana. I am presently Director of Postulants for the United States Marists. I thank those who planned this conference for giving me great freedom to choose the subject upon which I will speak. They indicated only that it was to be something biblical, theological and or liturgical with regard to Marist education. Such great freedom, however, was hardly helpful in selecting my topic. After much wringing of hands and more than usual bothering of my long suffering confreres, I decided upon my topic:

**“Taking the Place of Mary: the Wisdom of Mary in the Marist Educator-Student relationship.”**

The remainder of this paper is an explanation of why I chose this topic. My sources are simple and few:

1. Drouilly, Francois, Les Avis de Jean-Claude Colin, au personnel du petit seminaire de Belley; Jean-Claude Colin's Instructions to the Staff of the Minor Seminary of Belley (translated from the French by C. Girard)

Maristica: Textus et Studia 3", Rome, 1990 = A J C C

2. Colin, Jean-Claude, De puerorum educatione in collegiis in Constitutions of the Society of Mary, Rome, 1992 = DPEC

3. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Mass for Mary Seat of Wisdom" in Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Sacramentary, Vol. I, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1992 = BVMS

4. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Readings for Mary Seat of Wisdom" in Collections of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Lectionary, Vol II, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1992, BVML.

Let us begin our explanation by looking at the two works of Fr. Colin. We begin with "Les Avis...", which Fr. Lessard tells us is "one of the oldest documents to come down to us from one of the founders of the Marist Fathers. Written in 1829, but used forty years later in the drafting of the

Chapter in the Constitutions on teaching in the schools, the Instructions are thus a basic source for the study of Marist tradition in regard to education.” (G. Lessard “presentation in ASCC) This paper cannot treat this work in any depth, but it will point out some matters that will serve our purposes.

For Fr. Colin, as for most Catholic educators, education amounted to nothing less than collaborating in the work of God and returning to God the children he created in His image. Every educator is to be a model of Jesus Christ in the midst of the students and to win them over to Jesus (AJCC pg. 20) For Fr. Colin the school is a community and his instructions emphasized the aspect of relationships. In fact he devotes sixty- four paragraphs to the various aspects of relationship between educators and students. (AJCC. p 16) Although Fr. Colin borrowed much material from other works on education, the area of relationships seems to be the most original aspect of his essay (ASCC p 56) “Les Avis...” however, turns out to be a disappointing resource for our paper. At the time that Fr. Colin was writing “Les Avis” he was formulating a plan for a Marian congregation, but he does not give any particular spiritual slant to his text and there is no trace in it of any Marian spirituality. We must look elsewhere.

We now turn to the second Colinian work on Education, “De puerorum educatione in collegiis”. In what way is Fr. Colin the author of this work? He

had always intended to include in the Constitutions an article on the education of boys in colleges. His illness in his old age prevented him from completing it before his constitutions were submitted for approval by the Holy See. The General Chapter of 1873 collected the educational principles he had already outlined and put them into the form we have today. When examined by Fr. Colin, the collection was fully ratified and approved by him. He also agreed with the idea to put them at the end of the Constitutions (DPEC "Notice").

I feel obliged to note that in France at Fr. Colin's time, especially in the Catholic Church, co-education was almost unknown, but is important to remember that three of the four original branches of the Marist Family concerned themselves with education – the Marist Fathers with the secondary education of boys; the Marist Sisters with the education of girls; the Marist Brothers of the Schools with the primary education of boys, especially in small towns and villages. Later on the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary would be involved in education in the foreign missions.

In number [459] of the "De educatione..." we find an amazing statement "...let the teachers to whom the care of these boys is entrusted realize that they TAKE THE PLACE OF THIS HOLY AND VERY SWEET MOTHER (capital letters mine)"

Taking the place of Mary in the lives of their students is a role which can put the fear of the Lord into the heart of any Marist educator. What could Fr. Founder possibly mean? It is clear that he does not mean that we are to replace Mary in the lives of our students, but it could mean that "taking the place of Mary" is the key concept in the Marist educator-student relationship. How does Fr. Colin think that the Marist educator can "take the place of Mary" ?

Taking the place of Mary requires the Marian conversion of the educator. The educator must change. Let us begin with the conversion of the mind. Marist educators must understand that "they have been entrusted with a lofty ministry, a heavenly work, a truly apostolic task!" (DEPC ([#451]) Marist educators are to remember that this high purpose cannot be achieved unless all their toil and efforts proceed from God and are referred back to him, so that the source of divine graces may issue forth more abundantly upon them and upon their students." (DPEC [#452]2)

Marist educators must not forget "that in the education of boys, divine Providence offers them very many occasions and innumerable means to promote the glory of God and the salvation of souls" ([DPEC [#467]14)

How can this interior realization grow in the educator and bear fruit in lifestyle, actions and works? What will help this metanoia? Fr. Colin is never short on suggestions. Marist educators are to continually deepen the knowledge of their Christian faith and their own growth in holiness (DPEC #[463]13) The Marist educator is to be a person of prayer and not to neglect his or her own prayer life. Furthermore, they are to pray for their students. All that we have said thus far about the Christian life of the Marist educator will help the Marist educator to interiorize Mary. The Constitutions of the Society of Mary, 1872 clarify for us this interiorization of Mary. "...they are to emulate the virtues of this holy Mother and indeed even to live her life, above all in humility, obedience, self denial, mutual charity and love of God." (Constitutions 1872, #1,10)

If Marist educators wish to be true children of Mary "let them continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it...and so they must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things..." (Constitutions1872, #49) Marist educators should "make a habit of meditating on our Lord Jesus Christ in his dealings with children and resolve to imitate him" (DPEC #[458], 8)

It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to conclude that Jesus followed the example of his Mother in his relationship with children. Marist

educators are also to “think of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom Jesus was subject while he grew in wisdom and age and favor with God and men (Luke 2:51-52) (DPEC #[459]9)

Marist educators are to be filled with religious respect for their students and a love that is exclusively pure and supernatural. They are never to harm their students either by cruelty or by demonstration of special affection (DPEC #[458]8) By loving their students with Mary’s love in Mary’s way they will form Jesus Christ in them. (DPEC) #[459]9)

Finally we must do everything we can to lead our students to Mary through celebrations in her honor, through our words, through the sacraments, devotions and even organizations. I remember with great fondness the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Marist College in Atlanta, Georgia. Many boys showed up for Monday afternoon rosary in the church and the entire school participated in the occasional living rosary. Fr. Colin reveals a charming simplicity when he tells us that we should give Mary credit for school holidays (DPEC #[459]9) He speaks to us from his own heart when he expresses his desire that the young hearts of the students may be alive with a spirit of devotion towards their heavenly Mother.

Now we must leave Fr. Colin and 19<sup>th</sup> century France to journey to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rome to learn more about what it means to “take the place of Mary”. Fr. Colin too made this journey to Rome. He not infrequently found Rome helpful in solving his problems and answering his questions. No one could doubt Fr. Colin's attachment to Rome after reading numbers 9 and 10 of the “1872 Constitutions”. The third end of the Society is “to teach and defend with special zeal the faith of the Roman Church in all its purity...” (Constitutions 1872, #9)

I am certain that Fr. Colin would approve of the direction in which we are going. We look to the Roman liturgy, especially to the Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to deepen our insights into the topic we have chosen. Keeping in mind that “lex orandi legem statuit credendi” we realize that the way the Church prays tells us a lot about what she believes. The Mass of “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom” (BVMS #24, pp224,ff) attracts our attention. Beginning with the tenth century we find in Masses of Our Lady, Mother of the Incarnate Wisdom of God, readings from Wisdom literature. In these texts, though listening primarily to the voice of eternal Wisdom, one hears also the voice of the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to the medieval writers, the Wisdom of God speaks in a certain sense “in the person of the Virgin”. From the twelfth century on we find the Marian title “seat of Wisdom” and other titles, all of which contain the word wisdom.



The Missionaries of the Company of Mary, founded by St. Louis Grignion de Monfort, are known for their devotion to Our Lady under her title "Seat of Wisdom". The church in celebrating "Mary, Seat of Wisdom" rejoices in her maternal role, her royal dignity and her incomparable wisdom and prudence in the things of God. Through the mystery of the incarnation the Wisdom of the Father is cradled in the arms of his Virgin mother. Mary is our wise mother. As the Mother of Jesus Christ she kept all his words in her heart, preserving them for us and commending them to our remembrance. It is not unreasonable to conclude that in the early church Mary taught these words, recounted them and proclaimed them that they might be recorded, preached and proclaimed throughout the world. (BVMS p 224)

Before we examine our liturgical texts let us picture in our minds Mary, Seat of Wisdom. She is seated on a substantial chair (the cathedra of a lecture hall). The child Jesus sits in her lap and he holds the book of the Scripture. We know that Jesus and Mary have been teachers to each other and students of each other, Mary taught Jesus about earthly things and he taught her about the divine. Since wisdom, unlike knowledge, never grows old, Jesus, Divine Wisdom Incarnate, is depicted as young. The Gospel tells us Jesus began his teaching career at the age of twelve but Mary was united to his eternal wisdom from the moment he was conceived.

us. Like Mary we reflect on all these things in our hearts. (Luke 2) Finally like Mary, sister of Martha, we never allow anyone or anything to keep us from sitting beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak (Luke 10). As we contemplate the image of the seated Mary holding Eternal Wisdom in her lap, we know that to take her place among our students we must be as closely united in love to Jesus Christ as we can be; we must learn from him and follow where he leads us. We must hold him out to our students by our prayers, our example, our actions and our words. We must do all in our power to bring our students to Divine Wisdom Incarnate so that they too may choose "the better part" and not have it "taken from them"

Thus at the end of this paper we now pray:

God of Wisdom, bathe us in the radiance of your life giving Word; may we come to the joy of a perfect knowledge of your love. Grant through the intercession of Mary, Seat of Wisdom, that we and our students may not learn the wisdom of the proud but with humility treasure your revealed wisdom. Prepare in our hearts a worthy dwelling for Jesus Christ and pour into them the light of his wisdom, which so wonderfully filled the heart of Mary our Mother, so that we can help those you have put under our care to know you in truth and love. We ask this through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thank you for your kind attention

Fr. Thomas Ellerman, S.M.

## **Discussion questions**

1. What can I do to better prepare myself to “take the place of Mary” among the students?
2. What can we do to enable educators, staff and students in our schools to know, love and follow Mary in the context of Christ’s Church?
3. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?
4. What is the wisdom of Mary? How can we ourselves imbibe that wisdom and share it with the students?
5. How can the Marist educator be a source of Christian Life wisdom for the student?
6. How can “Mary, Seat of Wisdom” be an inter-denominational/ interfaith point of unity for students and educators?

# **A Brief History of the Marist Fathers Involvement in Education**

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How does what Fr. Colin experienced in post-revolutionary France match up with what we are facing in today's secular society?
2. What did I learn from this presentation that is significant for me as a member of a Marist school?
3. What has this history taught me that a Marist school should be?