

***A Lay Woman's Reflection***

***on***

***Marist Spirituality***

and the interface with  
Spiritual Direction

***by***

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## **Introduction**

Over the last two years of formation with Spiritual Growth Ministries my understanding and experience of spiritual direction has expanded enormously. The formation experience has not changed my spirituality, which is essentially Marist, but added depth and integration to it. In this paper I offer a taste of Marist spirituality, particularly as experienced by laity today and reflect on how that spirituality sustains and develops my direction ministry.

## **My understanding of spirituality:**

Spirituality is a particular way of opening to the Divine and of incorporating that relationship and experience into our life and actions. Arguably every religious belief system is expressed through a spirituality so here I focus specifically on Christian spirituality which I suggest is a way of life marked by prayer and acceptance of the Revelation of God through Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, which leads to a relationship with God expressed in a new way of relating with others and the world.

Even within Christianity there are nuances in the way individuals live the Gospel according to their personality and experience of life and over time these become recognizable as particular spiritualities which if authentic, are always expressions of the one Christian quest for Christ. So for example we can talk of a Franciscan spirituality, where Francis focused on Christ who was one with the poor, or the spirituality of John of the Cross who discovered Jesus as the Lover, drawing him to the peaks of contemplation and intimacy. Reflecting on and learning from these varied Christian strands of spirituality is like standing on the shoulders of our forefathers and finding hidden treasures in our *whakapapa*.

## **A Taste.**

Marist spirituality is a broad topic and I offer only a taste of those aspects which I have experienced as significant for laity; living everyday ordinariness open to and aware of the Divine, the image of Mary at “*Nazareth*” and among the birthing church at “*Pentecost*”, living in a way which is “*as it were, hidden and unknown*”, and seeking to live as “*instruments of divine mercy*” by imitating the discipleship of Mary both in relating to Christ and the world.<sup>1</sup> I will conclude with reflection on the interface between offering spiritual direction and my experience of this spirituality.

The bulk of this paper will be sourced from the founder, Father Jean Claude Colin with reflections by Marists on his legacy. As background I approached three Lay Marists and incorporated the essence of their responses into this paper.

## **Spiritual Direction:**

My understanding of spiritual direction may also be helpful. A definition I believe congruent with Barry and Connelly is that spiritual direction is a ministry of

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<sup>1</sup> The italic’s highlight key aspects of Father Colin’s vision and will be notated and explained as they arise throughout this paper. Tradition had emphasized Mary as the embodiment of all the great virtues, Marists brought fresh insight “...drawing inspiration not from Mary *in* herself... but Mary seen always *in* relationship: to Jesus, to the Church, and the contemporary world.” C. Larkin, s.m. *A Certain Way*, Pg 40.

sacred companionship which aims to nurture both growth toward inward reflection and contemplation of God and outward into a lived expression of that relationship with all of life.<sup>2</sup>

## **Marist Spirituality; Aspects**

### ***The Beginnings.***

In post-revolution France, 1816, a group commits to live the Gospel like Mary the mother of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Through the convictions of Jean Claude Colin and those he gathered round him, the Society of Mary was birthed and once Pompallier and the first Marists arrived at Hokianga,<sup>4</sup> Marist spirituality influenced the Catholic Church in Aotearoa and has strongly impacted my own faith journey.<sup>5</sup> Mary is a lay woman and Marists seek “to promote and anticipate a church in which the clergy abandon their privileged role, step back among the People of God, and work with them on a basis of equality.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***Nazareth***

For Colin two images of Mary stand out. One being Nazareth, the other Mary amongst the Apostles and birthing church at Pentecost (Acts 1:13-15, 2:1). While inextricably linked in Colin’s thinking we shall explore Nazareth first.

Colin reflected on the events and meaning of Nazareth within the life of Jesus and Mary.<sup>7</sup> Nazareth also represented for him the ‘cradle’ of the church.<sup>8</sup> “Nazareth was the first cell

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<sup>2</sup> Barry & Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, pg 8. “We define Christian spiritual direction ... as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”

<sup>3</sup> *A Founder Speaks*, Introduction, pg. 5/6. “On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1816, at Fourviere in Lyon, twelve men signed a promise to devote themselves to the foundation of the congregation of Marists. It took until April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1836 for the congregation of priests to be approved. Earlier efforts to secure approval were rejected on the basis that the project was too vast an undertaking, with its proposed three branches of men and women religious and above all its Third Order of Laypeople, intended as potentially co-extensive with the world”. Also *A Founder Speaks*, Mayet Memoirs, 117:3. The Society of Mary was to take as its “only model, the early Church”.

<sup>4</sup> Michael King, *God’s Farthest Outpost*, Penguin: NZ, 1997. pg. 44. Jean Baptiste Pompallier arrived in Hokianga on the schooner Raiatea on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1838.

<sup>5</sup> In 1836 the Society of Mary was constituted according to what was legally possible at the time, however the Marist project carried the dream of a movement likened to a tree with many branches including Laity and this has never been completely lost. (*A Certain Way*, C. Larkin, pg 40 “Something Never thought Of”).

<sup>6</sup> J. Snijders, *The Age of Mary*, quoted in *A Certain Way*, pg 40.

<sup>7</sup> At Nazareth Mary conceived the Messiah and submitted fully to the Spirit of God (Lk 1:26-38). From Nazareth she set out to visit Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56), the Holy family returned to Nazareth after their time as refugees from Herod (Matt. 2:19-23), Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents after the incident in the temple (Lk 2:51-52) Here Mary “stored up in her heart” and pondered the words and events of Jesus’ life. (Lk 2:19, 51), Jesus grew in “stature and wisdom with both God and men” (Lk 2:40, 52) in the relative obscurity of Nazareth and yet in God’s time burst forth with astonishing power and authority. (Lk 4:16-22).

<sup>8</sup> Colin spoke of Belley, a small town in the isolated Bugey area of Southern France, as “the Nazareth of the Society.” Somebody said: “No Order has ever begun like this in a small town.” [Colin] answered: “Yes, there was one, but only one. It is the Order of the church. Nazareth was its cradle. Jesus, Mary, Joseph: there you have the church coming into being. It began there.” 17/9/1838. Edwin Keel, Para. 553, pg 332, a book of texts.

of the church before the church really began”.<sup>9</sup> It symbolized a place of prayer and reflection to learn dependence on God, and the virtues of humility, obedience, simplicity, self denial and service.<sup>10</sup> This symbol sustained him amidst frustration as he reflected that Jesus was thirty before leaving Nazareth.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Marist spirituality is a contemplative stance toward the world, an openness and willingness to seek God first, and place “myself alone before God” as part of discernment for action. Colin states, “...when I deliberate upon what to do, I place myself in the spirit ... of Nazareth. It seems to me that I see coming from there a light which clarifies my path: I immediately understand what I have to do.”<sup>12</sup> Coste explains further:

“The image is that of a path. I have to leave Nazareth and do what I have to do by going out to the world, to other people. But to see what I have to do, I had to enter the house in Nazareth and find myself alone there, before God ...and then from there ... I can leave again and go forward.”<sup>13</sup>

Colin’s Nazareth understanding is not simply imaginative reflection on biblical imagery; “... one should place oneself there [Nazareth] and *from* there *look out at* one’s path and to see it because one has truly been able to place oneself alone before God.”<sup>14</sup> Nazareth represents a contemplative stance which “ponders the things of God”, and seeks God’s will: “Colin says, ‘it is from Nazareth’ that we get a balanced perspective on life”.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Home.***

Nazareth also represents ‘home’ and this touches a chord for many laity. It represents a place of the heart for transparency before God. In a sense we are invited to be ‘at home’ with ourselves, our *whanau*, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and about our faith, making our relationship with God the linchpin for all other facets of life. (cf.Col.2:6-7) It is our “private room” (Matt.:6:6), a place to ‘taste God’ and face silence which is so anathema to our world.<sup>16</sup> Blaise Pascal wrote: “I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”(*Pensees no.136*)<sup>17</sup>

### ***Pentecost***

For Colin, Nazareth is a place of deep interior relationship with God which carries the seed of Pentecost as it represents submission, discernment and contemplation in readiness for whatever the Holy Spirit asks. “The spiritual force of Marist life is a power which bursts out, but it comes from a point of stillness.”<sup>18</sup> The two mysteries are not treated by Colin as separate theological events needing analysis. “The key point for him was to

<sup>9</sup> Jean Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church*, pg 424.

<sup>10</sup> C. Larkin, *A Certain Way* pg 88

<sup>11</sup> Edwin Keel, *A book of Marist texts*, pgs337/8. Para 565: “Consider also Our Lord Jesus Christ during the thirty years in Nazareth.” And Para 566: “Imitate Our Lord, who remained shut up in Nazareth for thirty years; when the time for the apostolate comes you will follow Him in the conquest of souls.”

<sup>12</sup> J. Coste, op. cit., pg.430 citing David 1 (APM 921.41),

<sup>13</sup> J. Coste, *Ibid*, pg. 430

<sup>14</sup> J. Coste, *Ibid*, pg.430. Italic’s added.

<sup>15</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way* pg.88

<sup>16</sup> *A Founder Speaks* 63:2 pg 196 “But having once tasted God, a novice will turn to him again and again. It is a treasure in his soul...to which he is constantly brought back as to his own centre.”

<sup>17</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg 87

<sup>18</sup> Larkin, *Ibid*, pg. 102

keep looking at the person of Mary, who found a home at Nazareth and in the early church...she who was the woman who pondered the Word in her heart was also the woman on mission, her heart on fire with the Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Colin recommended “warm[ing] yourselves at the fire of God’s love”.<sup>20</sup>

By contemplating both Nazareth and Pentecost through the person of Mary, Colin brings an enriching perspective whereby the two become telescoped in her life. “In Mary, a Pentecost had already taken place at Nazareth when the Holy Spirit came down on her at the Annunciation. In Mary, the still life of Nazareth was being lived in the Pentecost life of the early church.”<sup>21</sup> Marist spirituality carries the call to be *like* Mary, to be contemplative in action and active in contemplation. “It is not a question of choosing one or the other, or of choosing one at one moment and the other at another, but of keeping the two realities in balance.”<sup>22</sup> For Colin the word “church” would probably have meant a “picture of all believers from the beginning to the end of time, gathered ... round Mary, and all attentive to the Spirit who hovered over the world at the beginning, who descended in tongues of fire on the believers at Pentecost, and whose ‘power working in us can do infinitely more than we can hope or imagine.’ (Eph3:21)”<sup>23</sup>

### ***Hidden and Unknown.***

Colin’s phrase “hidden and as if unknown”<sup>24</sup> is his précis of a complex Christian value, (Mk 10:42-45, 1 Cor.9:19,20) which functions as something of a touchstone for Marists yet needs to be interpreted through the other facets of Colin’s teaching or is open to misinterpretation. It must be linked with the fact that Marists have an outreaching spirituality which nevertheless seeks to walk alongside, listen and share, rather than stand and shout. “Hidden and unknown” does not promote inactivity. “It is about *how* we act, not *whether* we act.”<sup>25</sup> It means being about the often hidden quiet work of the Kingdom of God.

Let me draw out some points for reflection. Long before the birth of the Church, the Kingdom of God (Matt 13:24-36) existed in obscurity, in a hidden and unknown way in the ordinary life of one family at Nazareth. The conception of Jesus must have been one of the most hidden moments in history. Christ was born in obscurity, hidden and

<sup>19</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg 102

<sup>20</sup> *A Founder Speaks* 140:13 Pg. 398. From a retreat to novice priests at La Favourite, Lyon, Jun. 29, 1847.

<sup>21</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, 102.

<sup>22</sup> Larkin, *Ibid* pg.90. Refer also *A Founder Speaks* 141:5, pg 401. In speaking of the relationship of prayer and action, Father Colin said: “Let us consider where we stand in relation to the spirit of prayer. Our Lord told us: ‘*Oportet orare et nunquam deficere.*’ (Jn 15:5 ‘Without me you can do nothing’). Certainly we cannot always be on our knees with our hands joined; that indeed is not our vocation. But to pray always is to feel unceasingly the dire need we have of the grace of God, of prayer...then in the midst of our various occupations, as we come and go, speak and act, let us say: ‘My God, help me.’ That is how to put into practice that recommendation of the our Lord Jesus.”

<sup>23</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, Pg 90.

<sup>24</sup> *A Founder Speaks*: “*quasi ignoti et occulti in hoc mundo*” (‘hidden and as if unknown in the world’) Spoken of as “Colin’s favourite article” there are subtle differences in the saying but hidden and unknown forms the basis of all renditions. Cf. 57:1, 119:7 & 146:1. It is also linked with and appears in some 53 other references in his teaching, cf. *A Founder Speaks* subject index pg 560.

<sup>25</sup> Larry Duffy & Charles Girard, *Like A Bridge*, pg. 76.

unknown by most. Mary was not an Apostle in the church but her original “Yes” was instrumental in everything they did and we do today as followers of Christ. Scripture tells us Mary was quietly present from the Annunciation, through the Crucifixion to Pentecost. She was not the figurehead but Jesus and the early church invert all comfortable notions of power. Her profound ‘Yes’ to God was also a resounding ‘Yes’ to service and love for humanity and we are invited to follow her example.<sup>26</sup>

Any form of obscurity challenges our value system as it calls for self forgetfulness, recognising that our true value comes not from what we do, but from who we are in ourselves and before God. In an age of individualism, ego and self development, the example of Mary challenges us to put God first and to think of others with simplicity and humility.

Marist spirituality invites the search for God hidden in our everyday world and for God of the mystic’s who appears to hide in darkness, strips us of falsehoods and invites deep communion only through stripping and becoming real with God, ourselves and others. It is as though God hides in everyday life and Marist spirituality invites reflection on this incarnational mystery. We do not bring Christ to the world, he is already here, (Lk17:20-21) our role is to reveal the Word by relating with people in a way which expresses the mercy, compassion, faithfulness, joy and integrity of Jesus. Marists are invited to reveal the presence of Jesus by our way of being, to imitate Mary’s way of relating to God, Jesus, events and people and thereby support others in their own unique experience of the divine hidden in their midst. Christians have a relationship with God, whom the secular world searches for often unawares and people long for companion disciples more than abstract teachers.

### ***Instruments of Mercy***

Marist spirituality is based on Mary’s discipleship of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Luke has Mary call herself ‘handmaid’ (Lk.1:38), which the psalmist describes in psalm 123:2. This highlights for me how Marists seek to focus upon God alone, while being ready to reach out to others with the grace of God. We are called to be instruments of mercy and bearers of hope.<sup>28</sup> Colin adopted the approach of ‘call’ which offers the opportunity to hope in others and bring out the best in them. “Only call conveys the feeling of being desired and useful... gives a life meaning and restores the person to the fullness of dignity. Only call goes to the limits of mercy.”<sup>29</sup> Colin called Marists to compassion and hope for others. In 1846 he said;

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<sup>26</sup> SMSM Constitutions 1984, pg.55, no.51. “Mary’s one desire was to do the will of the father which she sought throughout her life, and to cooperate with her whole being in the saving work of her Son. Our lifelong task is to learn to put the interests of the Lord before all else, trying to discern His will each day and to forget ourselves in loving Him.”

<sup>27</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg.53 quoting the Marist Fathers Constitutions 1872, 60:1. “like Mary, whose sole thought was the extension and development of the mystery of the incarnation.”

<sup>28</sup> J. Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church*, pg. 258 “The theme of ‘instruments of divine mercy’ was already present in [Colin’s] sermons for the opening of a mission and in the 1833 *Summarium*. It occurs again in the 1842 constitutions.”

<sup>29</sup> J. Coste, *Ibid*, pg. 260 Referring also to *A Founder Acts* 331:4

“show great kindness to sinners...Do not rebuff them, or appear surprised by their crimes, however great they are; that would be a great imprudence and very harmful to souls. Instead remember you hold the place of Jesus Christ ...Jesus knew the profound depths of the human heart [and] welcomed sinners with gentleness. Listen ... quietly and with kindness.”<sup>30</sup>

This attitude typifies the Marist charism and while spoken to priests, his words apply to spiritual direction today.

To imitate Mary means considering her as mother and this may be contentious. All Christians can relate to her as the mother of Jesus, but Marists specifically seek to imitate her in the way she herself related to God and others. Coste explains:

“We are not to be like the child, but like the mother who, after kissing her child [goodnight] stays up another hour or two mending socks because she is responsible for the life in the house. There is no question of going to sleep in bliss; there is work to be done. We imitate the mother, not the child. ... Like the mother who increases her efforts when her child is sick, so ...also should we increase our efforts to take care of this world which is increasingly pagan, increasingly estranged from Christ, and try to bring it back; we should be instruments of mercy.”<sup>31</sup>

Colin saw the laity as being best equipped to be instruments of God’s mercy in every corner of secular life because that ordinary world is our Nazareth, our *Turangawaewae*, our rightful place to stand.<sup>32</sup> Father Colin spoke of the laity as a “bridge to souls”.<sup>33</sup> Traditional churches struggle as effective instruments of Good News in our secularised society and Father Colin’s insight is perhaps even more compelling today. The church is no longer in a position of authority in the world but must learn to operate more as ‘yeast in the dough’ or the ‘small seed that is sown’.<sup>34</sup> Spiritual direction has a role to play here.

### ***Unifying Principle:***

Fidelity to the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the unifying principle of Marist spirituality.

“It was the Holy Spirit who guided Mary and fashioned her soul; it was the Holy Spirit who inspired and helped Father Colin to understand the mystery of Mary; and it is the Holy Spirit who, working in the church and in the Society which forms part of it, enables Marists to discover today how they can follow in the footsteps of Mary and of their founder. In this sense, to live the Marist spirit is to listen to the Holy Spirit...to the thousand suggestions of the Spirit speaking to us about our particular situation.”<sup>35</sup>

Combining this fidelity to the Holy Spirit, with the notion of ‘hidden and unknown’, Marists are called to be “instruments of mercy, working quietly and without fanfare following the example of Jesus who became human and “hid” himself in the human condition.” (Phil.2:6-7)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *A Founder Speaks*, 116:11 pg 337

<sup>31</sup> J.Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church*, pg. 336

<sup>32</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg. 86.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Girard, *Lay Marists: Anthology of Historical Sources*, 310:6, pg. 529, & 313:10, pg. 533.

<sup>34</sup> J. Coste, *A Marian Vision of the Church*, pg. 460

<sup>35</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg.s 90 & 161

<sup>36</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg. 131, quoting J. Snijders, s.m. France SM 1991. (APM).

## **My Reflection on the Interface with Spiritual Direction**

My experience is that Marist spirituality interfaces deeply with spiritual direction. I will reflect briefly on the main points:

- Nazareth calls for a contemplative incarnational stance toward life and ministry: to an interior life which reflects on God's presence and action in the ordinary everyday circumstances of life and invites me to be present with directees in a way which encourages them to do the same. It invites self-reflection, acceptance of self and willingness to be open and aware of my utter dependence on God, perhaps especially as a director.
- Pentecost invites me to imitate Mary in seeking to be obedient to the Holy Spirit and to warm myself in prayer at the fire of God's love, both for myself and my directees. It reminds me that it is the Holy Spirit who is the real director and that I am deeply privileged to participate and assist in the process of discovery and growth with another. Pentecost invites me to always try to be present with the Holy Spirit when I am with a directee.
- Hidden and unknown gives me a touchstone for how to relate with directees. Coste highlights this when he says: "The [person] has come to meet God, not me. I must be able to stand aside."<sup>37</sup> Marist spirituality calls for an open style of communication emphasizing listening and acceptance of the other without attempts to fit the directee into a predetermined mould or process.
- The Marist charisms of mercy and hope remind me to encourage directees to search for how God is calling them into growth and wholeness. Mercy calls for empathy when they face struggles. Hope looks forward and envisions growth in wholeness and holiness, sometimes holding that hope in silent prayer long before they experience it for themselves. It calls me to compassion and solidarity with directees as I become ever more deeply conscious of the fact that I also share the journey of discipleship and must keep my eyes fixed on God alone to be of real benefit as a director.

I believe Marist spirituality interfaces deeply with spiritual direction. Marists are called to be available to those who ask for help in experiencing and discerning God. Knowledge and skill are important, but willingness to experience God more deeply in discipleship is crucial in being a worthwhile companion for directees. So much more could be said but I hope I have given enough of a taste of Marist spirituality that the reader can reflect for themselves on its value for supporting and sustaining the spiritual director. Colin said it well with these words: "The spirit of Mary is something most delicate and profound, obtained only through sustained meditation and prayer."<sup>38</sup>

### **Summary**

Imitating Mary's way of relating to God and others, invites reflection on God's presence in everyday life. The call is to be open to the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, in the challenging, busy or boring reality of ordinary life. This is a radically incarnational

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<sup>37</sup> J. Coste, *Op.cit.* Pg. 260. "Here, you have a good example of the application of the hidden and unknown, one which is much more important than not having ones name in the newspapers."

<sup>38</sup> Larkin, *A Certain Way*, pg. 169, quoting Jean Claude Colin.

spirituality which is both contemplative and missionary but grounded in ordinariness and therefore not locked up in monastic tradition but accessible to all. St Paul spoke of our whole life being “hidden with Christ in God” (Col.3:3). As Marie de la Croix wrote; “Our vocation is to be unknown, hidden in God. Zeal – but the quiet zeal of Mary; the silence of the heart of Mary, but deep down, this furnace that burns before God in secret...”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Quotations Booklet, 1985 addendum to *Constitutions of Missionary Sisters of Society of Mary*, (SMSM) pg.10, no. 52.

### **Abbreviations**

**APM**, Archives of the Marist Fathers (Rome: reference to Archive classifications)

**SM**, Priests and Brothers of the Society of Mary (also called Marist Fathers).

**SMSM**, Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary.

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