



Characteristics of Marxist Education

Foreword

It is with real joy that I write this foreword to “*Characteristics of Marist Education*”.

At the Education Forum of March 2004, Marists and their lay partners shared their appreciation of Marist values as an inspiration in their work in education. They called for reflecting on and making more explicit, the characteristics of Marist education, the so called “*Marist ethos*” in education.

I am very grateful to François Drouilly, José Rodríguez and John O’Sullivan, who together with Hubert Bonnet-Eymard, general assistant, wrote this booklet “*Characteristics of Marist Education*”.

Since Marists work in areas of the world which are geographically and culturally very different, the set of characteristics had to be succinct and simple and rooted in the experience of our Founder, since he is for all of us a common point of reference.

May this brochure find its way into the minds and hearts of all those who in one way or another are involved in Marist education.

Jan Hulshof
Superior General



Introduction

Almost two centuries ago, **Jean-Claude COLIN**, founder of the Society of Mary, accepted with great reluctance to be the principal of a school in Belley (France). At this period of political and social unrest following the events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, it was a challenge to face undisciplined, confused and directionless young people.

COLIN quickly drew up some educational instructions for the staff, and patiently settled down to apply them¹. Later on in life he always considered this experience as being very important, to the point of making education a central element in the Marist mission.

Two centuries later, there are Marist schools in many regions of the world, but since COLIN’s day much has changed:

- In many places large numbers of lay people have taken over from religious and priests.
- Education of the whole person seems less favoured today. Subjects and disciplines are taught but often a focus on the whole rounded person seems to have less priority.
- In spite of difficulties, COLIN’s work took place within the framework of a largely Christian society. Today

schools are working in widely differing contexts: some very Christian, others very secularised, and others in environments where the traditionally religious, the secularised, and those searching for new spiritualities all rub shoulders.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite these changes, Marists continue to affirm their attachment to the educational project of their founder. They are well aware of its limits, and that it is not an original, exemplary, or unique philosophy of education! It concerns educational practices which are not the sole preserve of Marists. But these practices have borne fruit, and Marists are witnesses to that. They believe these practices can still bear fruit. Why? Quite simply, because their force and energy spring from the well of the Gospel.

¹ In the following pages these are referred to as “Instructions”. FS refers to the book “A Founder Speaks”, FA to “A Founder Acts”. Where we hear Colin’s direct quotations we should remember that COLIN was writing about an all male school and to a teaching staff composed almost entirely of priests. We hope that the wisdom inherent in his thought applies equally to the teaching of young men and women by lay and religious, male and female.

Think big



“Yes, we contribute with God to forming a man. That is really true: when a man leaves the hands of his nurse, he is only a rough sketch. We must make a man of him, form his heart, his character, his virtue, etc...That is what education does. Nothing is more exalted. You give him as it were a second creation”.
(FS 13, 11).

COLIN thinks big, both for educators and for those they educate.

The educator collaborates with the Creator and is charged with bringing to completion the work of God, with revealing to the child who he or she is, and who they are for God.

The educator collaborates with the student in this work, because in fact, nothing can be done without the consent and participation of the student in his or her own development.

What is the relationship between this vision of a human being and God linked in a common task, and the daily reality of the “job”? Correcting homework, attending to discipline, constantly trying to keep students interested, staying patient, re-emphasising the rules...

Unfortunately society often fails to help teachers to see beyond this limited horizon. Or else, on the contrary, it expects teachers to be responsible for too much.



Yet we can recall our own memories of being school children or students, and the memories we have of our teachers. How so and so, even while introducing us to mathematics or languages, gave us confidence in ourselves, by the way they took our efforts into account, how they helped us to value ourselves, to rise in the estimation of others, to discover abilities we had not suspected. It is only at a distance that we can measure the length and breadth of the road covered.

Didn't Mary do the same for Jesus? In the humdrum ordinariness of Nazareth, the routine meals, the meetings with neighbours, the carpentry work, as the seasons slipped by, Jesus became aware of his mission, and that he was the well-loved son of the Father.

“Bernard Bro tells the story of a poet who was speaking one day to a famous Japanese painter and offered this haiku to him:

*O Master, Listen:
A dragonfly
without wings
is a bean.*

The master did not reply then after a moment of silence retorted:

*Oh no, no,
put it this way
A bean -
given wings
is a dragonfly.*

Teachers have a responsibility, whatever their subject matter, to open wide the horizons of their pupils.”

(Christiane Conturie, *Enseigner avec bonheur*, Parole et Silence 2004))

Nurture character



“We must make a man of him, form his heart, his character and his virtue...”
(FS 13, 11)

COLIN writes that forming a man is a creative work which unfolds in many ways. We must, as COLIN says (Instructions 2-4):

- make a Christian, by providing a sufficient knowledge of religion and a help in the formation of their hearts and minds,
- form an upright gentleman, teaching him to live in harmony with those near to him,
- form an educated man, by developing in him a taste for study and encouraging his progress in every aspect of life and in every area of knowledge.

How “apprenticeship” has changed since the nineteenth century! But the objective is the same. Education has to be rounded, or risk imbalance or even doing damage to the young person.

What would happen to a child, if nothing but his or her ability to assimilate knowledge were taken into account? if the “formation of their hearts” (FS 36,5) and their feelings were omitted? if in each one the capacity were not developed to deepen their inner lives, to reach within themselves to what most draws them closer to God?

This is the reason why education is a collective work, where numerous forces and people are at work, primary among them family and school.

Much is at stake here. We all know of those dramas which explode in adulthood in those who have never been allowed to express their emotions. Or the disastrous behaviour of those “geniuses”, who are unbearable to their family and friends.

We no longer simply think of forming our pupils “according to the principles of the

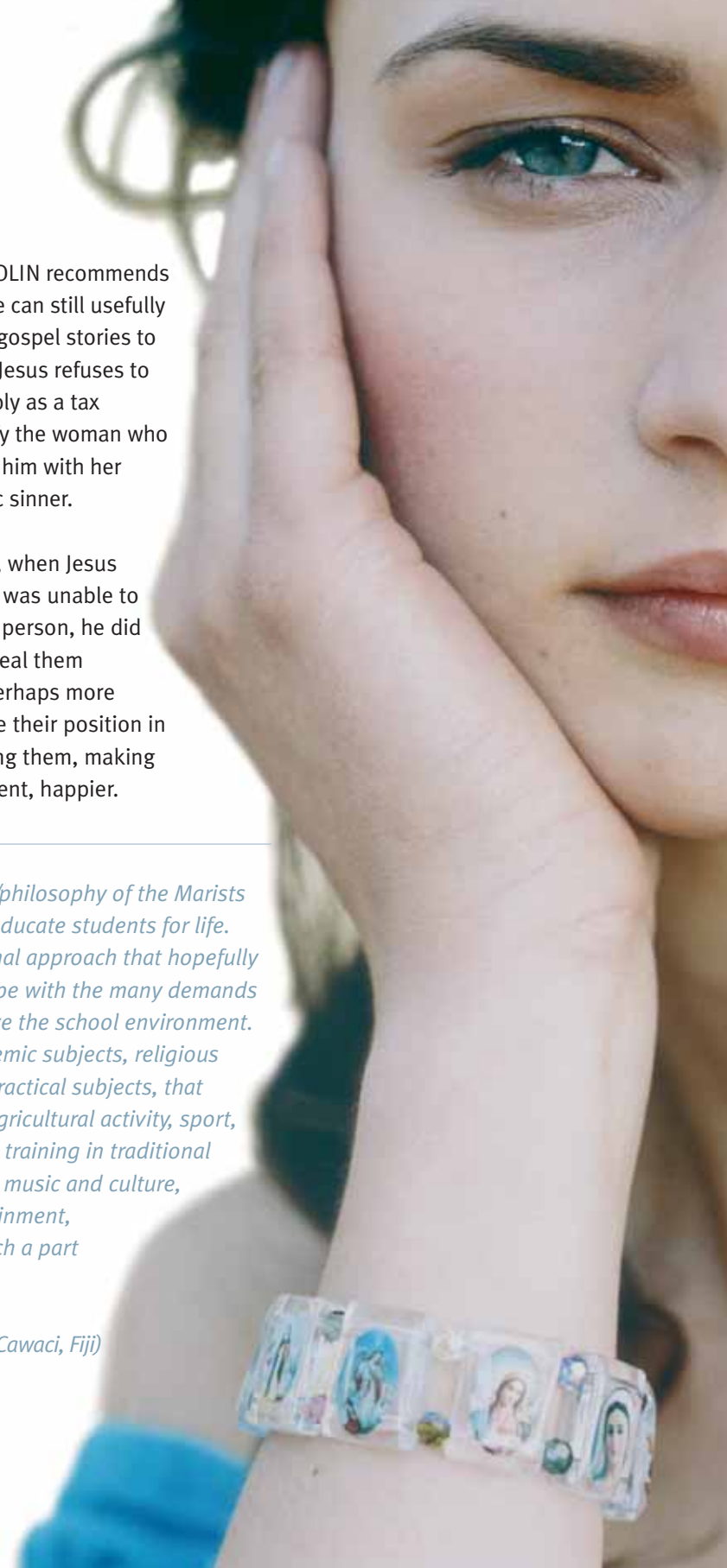
Gospel” in the way COLIN recommends (Instruction 1). But we can still usefully draw principles from gospel stories to guide our work: how Jesus refuses to identify Zacheus simply as a tax collector, or to identify the woman who poured perfume over him with her reputation as a public sinner.

(Lk 7, 36)

We can also see how, when Jesus healed a person who was unable to speak or a paralysed person, he did not do so simply to heal them physically but also perhaps more importantly to restore their position in the community, freeing them, making them more independent, happier.

“The underlying aim/philosophy of the Marists that work here is to educate students for life. An integral educational approach that hopefully will help students cope with the many demands of life when they leave the school environment. The school has academic subjects, religious formation and also practical subjects, that involve students in agricultural activity, sport, fishing, cooking, and training in traditional customs of welcome, music and culture, manners and entertainment, that are still very much a part of life in the islands”.

(Former head-master, Cawaci, Fiji)



Deal with reality



A woman teacher writes: *“Lack of respect, aggression, violence, rudeness, instability, laziness, cultural poverty; all these hinder me from giving what I could give, and would like to give”.*

How would you deal with young people who from birth had heard of nothing except revolutionary violence or political instability? They respected nothing, were impassioned for or against the current government, were turned off religion and steered clear of Christian morality. They were quick to ridicule it, not even stopping at sacrilege. COLIN did not feel up to such a difficult job: he was ill-prepared and ill-supported. So much so that he initially turned down (eleven times!) his nomination as principal of the college in Belley.

Two hundred years later, in many countries teachers are at times confronted by violent young people with no interest in school. They go looking elsewhere for a reason to live and get their “kicks”: drugs, sex, alcohol, and when they do this they turn this violence against themselves.

In all circumstances, COLIN knows where to impose limits. And at the same time, he shows good sense and a knowledge of children which many of today’s psychologists might envy. We must take account of *“the weakness and giddiness of their age”*, he says, not impose too demanding a pattern of religious practices and *“not to do too much”*, in the area of devotion. Avoid putting them into situations *“contrary to their nature”*. We have to make allowances. We should not make a scene over things that simply come from childishness, nor take a tough adult stand over trifling misdemeanours.

This invites teachers of today to distrust overly swift reactions in the heat of the moment, but, instead to be patient and discerning.

This is an invitation to draw “close” to young people, to become as it were friendly with our pupils, learning their

language, getting to know and even to share some of their tastes.

An invitation to take children as they are... for they are not as we might like to dream they are.

An invitation to believe in each one of them and to have confidence in them.

“In our school many pupils come from difficult emotional backgrounds. They live in unstable homes with many problems. The school must help them to integrate and find ways to fill any emotional vacuum; but do this without compromising academic requirements and while still respecting the appropriate professional distance”.

(Educational Community, Sullana, Peru)



Inspire respect



“We shall try to assert authority over our pupils, both senior and junior; that is to say, a certain ascendancy that inspires respect and commands obedience. Let us take careful note that it is neither age, nor height, nor tone of voice, nor threats that give this authority, but an even-tempered, firm, impartial frame of mind, that is always in control of itself, simply guided by reason, never acting on impulse, nor through ill-humour or anger”. (Instructions, 19)

Everything is said in these few sentences: an authority which

- does not depend on such external characteristics as an impressive bearing or physical strength,

- does not allow personal feelings to influence its decisions,
- is exercised with a calm inner strength.

COLIN’s practice confirms these statements:

- rare, moderate and graded punishment, *“We must do all we can, try everything, pray, only as a last resort deal severely”* (FA 206, 6.9)
- always safeguarding the pupil’s esteem and affection for their teacher.

An expression of COLIN’S conveys well the tension which is at the heart of the understanding which he brings to the exercise of authority and can be loosely translated as: *“be firm, but be flexible too”*.



We can easily imagine the kind of situation to which his maxim applies: firmness in dealing with rebellion, while also understanding childish reactions. What is most difficult in simultaneously maintaining firmness and flexibility is keeping a necessary distance from students while safeguarding their basic confidence in, and affection for, their teacher.

Are we going too far in seeing here an effort to bring together in the same act of authority the attitude of both father and mother? And moreover, to think that for COLIN the last word would be mercy?

“... her love remains a mother’s love: it never gives up on her children; it favours especially those children who have lost their way and seem least deserving. And so, Mary is the Mother of Mercy: she has found a place in her heart for all”.

(E. Keel, in C. Larkin: A Certain Way, p. 76)

“As a Student at St Bede’s, I am willing to help develop an environment in which...

- *I can expect the right to be happy and to be treated with compassion. This means being able to move about the College without being laughed at, hit, shoved, threatened, intimidated or mocked in any unwelcome way*
- *I take personal responsibility to see that I do not laugh at, hit, shove, threaten, intimidate or mock in an unwelcome way other people in our College. I will also do my best to make sure that all members of our College community are safe and are treated with respect and I will act to make people feel welcome at St Bede’s”*.

(From the St Bede’s Charter, Christchurch, New Zealand).

Be yourself



“The Children are watching us all the time”. (Instruction 86)

Example is a common theme in educational thought: COLIN speaks of it seven times in the Instructions to the Staff. But does it still have a place in our world where freedom of the individual has become so important?

In our societies, quick to identify with images, what points of reference can we offer young people, how can we help them to attribute more importance to being rather than to appearances, how can we help them to become authentic people? We know very well how they themselves are quick to judge, often quite rightly, the authenticity or otherwise of those who speak to them.

COLIN responds to this in his time and in his manner:

- by being an authentic person himself,
- by not concealing his own real thoughts behind a rule,
- by doing what he says and saying what he does,
- by saying “I”, whether he is repeating a school rule, or simply giving advice, or encouraging a teacher or student,
- by accepting or arranging a meeting, however difficult it is likely to be,
- by ensuring consistency between what he demands of the pupils, and what he expects from staff: such as appropriate behaviour, keeping one’s temper, fraternal charity among the whole staff at Belley, including especially the Principal.



The young need to experience competent teachers, but still more they need to experience “real people”, not simply people who identify themselves solely by what they teach, or by their position. Men and women who communicate their taste for life, and the meaning it has for them.

That is not learnt in universities. It does not depend on diplomas and degrees. It is not a privilege confined to the young...or the old...or to religious...or lay people.

Each of us has to ask ourselves basic questions: why have I chosen education? What means have I to form my true self, finding my proper place? Whom can I rely on to help me towards that goal, whom can I talk with about experiences in my work?

There is a strong need for this. A cabinetmaker works with high quality wood, a fashion designer with fine

cloth. Educators work with children and young people. A teacher’s manner and way of meeting and relating with young people either promotes their healthy development or does the opposite. The teacher’s own inner freedom is a good guarantee of theirs.

The quality of the teacher’s presence calls young people into existence!

“I remember having to speak once with a young man about a serious mishap while his parents were away. He freely admitted what had occurred and offered his sorrow at the action, knowing the grave consequences. When his dad came to see me, he suggested a legion of reasons why the boy would not be culpable. Alas, the student had it right. He shouldered his burden and went on to win positions of leadership later”.

(Principal, Atlanta, USA)

Watch the atmosphere



“In six months the spirit of the house had completely changed “.

The college at Belley, shaken by student agitation, returned to calm after COLIN had asserted his authority, having taken care moreover *“to distance everything which gets in the way of doing good”*.

We all know about staff-room conversations: in such and such a class you can teach for twenty minutes and you spend the rest of the time keeping order. But how pleasant it is to teach that other class: there the pupils are awake, attentive, taking part...

For COLIN the “atmosphere” of the class is not a given, imposed on the teacher. He or she is in part responsible for it. He or she can modify or improve it in several ways:

- **confidence** first of all, *“without which there is no fruit to be expected of education”* (Instructions 78).
The confidence of the pupils and their

parents, which the teacher can gain by his or her competence, the justice and the soundness of their remarks, the quality of their relating, and their own confidence in the pupils.

- **attention** to all: the teacher *“will lavish care upon the weak as on the strong”*. *“The most tardy”* are to be encouraged, and *“those most open to learning”* kept stimulated. An attitude of favouritism, *“gives rise to pride in some, and discourages others”* (Instructions 21).
- **imagination** placed at the service of teaching: learning becomes interesting when the teacher is able to capture the interest of the pupils, when he or she stimulates them more by underlining their successes than their failings (Instructions 61), or when they give them confidence in their own capacities.

- and finally... and this is no small matter... atmosphere is created by a **joyful simplicity** in relationships. After all, learning/discovering can be enjoyable, and fulfilling. And children and young people have, in a sense, a “right” to a relaxed atmosphere, because of the *“frailty and frivolity of their age”*. (Instructions 43).

Observers from outside quickly notice the atmosphere of a school or class. This is not necessarily due to the physical condition of the place, sophisticated resources and lay-out, or luxurious buildings. Rather there is an unmistakable welcome, the smiles of pupils and adults which speak much more

tellingly of the quality of life, than would lengthy educational or pastoral documents.

“The immediate environment surrounding the person(s) during the process is important. The freedom to grow and change demands a respectful, loving, and accepting atmosphere, so that people are free to challenge and be challenged in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. It does not exclude of course loving confrontation as an essential part of the process” .

(Principal, Rural Training Centre, Tutu, Fiji)



work with others



“We shall show solidarity with each other in the conduct of the house”.
(Instructions 87)

When he speaks of solidarity, COLIN is taking into account the needs and feelings of all the community. Applied to a school, this attitude entails the building of just relations between all the members of the educational community: students, parents, teachers, management, governance.

Unlike the designer who can draw up a programme, verify it, evaluate it at each step of the work, and draw from it a legitimate sense of pride, the educator is invited to humility.

When he or she encounters young people, they have already been formed in a family and a culture. When they relate with a student, they know the youngster is already simultaneously in relationship

with quite a number of other adults in the school, with his or her peer group too, and so a large part of his or her life and activity will be outside the teacher’s knowledge. When some years later the young person leaves the school, the teacher generally has no further “hold” on him or her.

As one among others, teachers are called to participate in the cooperative effort that is this great work of education:

- by communicating freely with their colleagues,
- by having confidence in each other,
- by having confidence in the parents,
- by having respect for each pupil as a unique person, without regard to social or ethnic origin, and by taking care to establish a similar respect between pupils,
- by the appropriate and irreplaceable position they endeavour to maintain among their pupils,



- by not losing sight of the purpose of their work, which is the success of the young person in life, and which is broader than the success of the pupil in any particular subject,
- by their responsible participation in the management of the school,
- by caring for their own professional development and on-going formation.

*“Dear Friend
Thanks very much for agreeing to take part in the project which brought together a wonderful circus for the group of autistic boys.
My ambition was for each of us to put him/herself at the service of those who have more difficulties than we do; and that by offering acceptance; tolerance; and patience; we would allow them to live and experience friendship which is so important and necessary for them”.*

(Extract from a letter to a student from a specialist teacher of autistic pupils, Riom, France)

Be warm hearted



COLIN speaking to the staff of the boarding school in Belley said:

“My God, what a great task it is to form a man! How difficult it is! How much patience is required! But is there anything greater?” Then feeling deeply moved, he continued in a changed tone of voice: “Tell me Fathers, do you love these children? Do you love them for God, keeping God in sight?” (FS 36, 1)

This is the final word... or perhaps it should have been the first word - that really is up to you.

This is the key to the job... but at this stage can we still talk about it being just a job?

This is also the challenge - to establish the right distance from young people, accepting their feelings for us, and being clear about our feelings for them:

- feelings of affection that do not clash with the professional demands described above
- feelings that respect the freedom of the young, allow them to express themselves, make their choices in life, allow them to grow... all of which entail the gradual withdrawal of the educator...

They must grow while I must diminish...
(Jn 3:30)

In order that they may grow, I must be prepared to withdraw.



“Why have we chosen Education? Working with young people, yes dealing with all the difficulties that go with it can be extremely tough - but also rewarding. New teachers must always be aware of their influence on students - their interest and

encouragement, confidence and friendliness towards their students can really make a difference. Teachers have a mission”.

(Young teacher, Dublin, Ireland)

Mission



“As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart”. (Lk 2, 51)

Marists in education... we are invited to work *“in the way Mary did “:*

- to welcome everything without seeking to understand everything,
- to welcome everything except that which prevents growth
- to store questions in a wait-and-see attitude, not as a sack of problems
- to retain from the past only what bore fruit

- to consent to what is
- to want for the future only what God wants for each one
- to be present but not omnipresent
- to relate to our students with the patience and the impatience of the farmer with his or her crops.

To allow that all may be done as God wishes it to be done.

Some references points

1790 birth of Jean Claude COLIN

1789 et 1815 period of political and social unrest in France with the Revolution and the First Empire.

1815-1853 fragile re-establishment of the monarchy and another revolution in 1830.

1804-1816 COLIN studies in the minor and then the major seminary. Ordained priest in 1816.

1816 First "Marist" aspirants come together COLIN is named curate in the parish at Cerdon, Preaching "missions" in the countryside.

1829 Monsignor DEVIE appoints COLIN as superior in the minor seminary of Belley. Writing of the "Instructions" (*Avis aux Maîtres*)

1836 Society of Mary recognised by Rome and the Society accepts charge of the mission to Oceania.

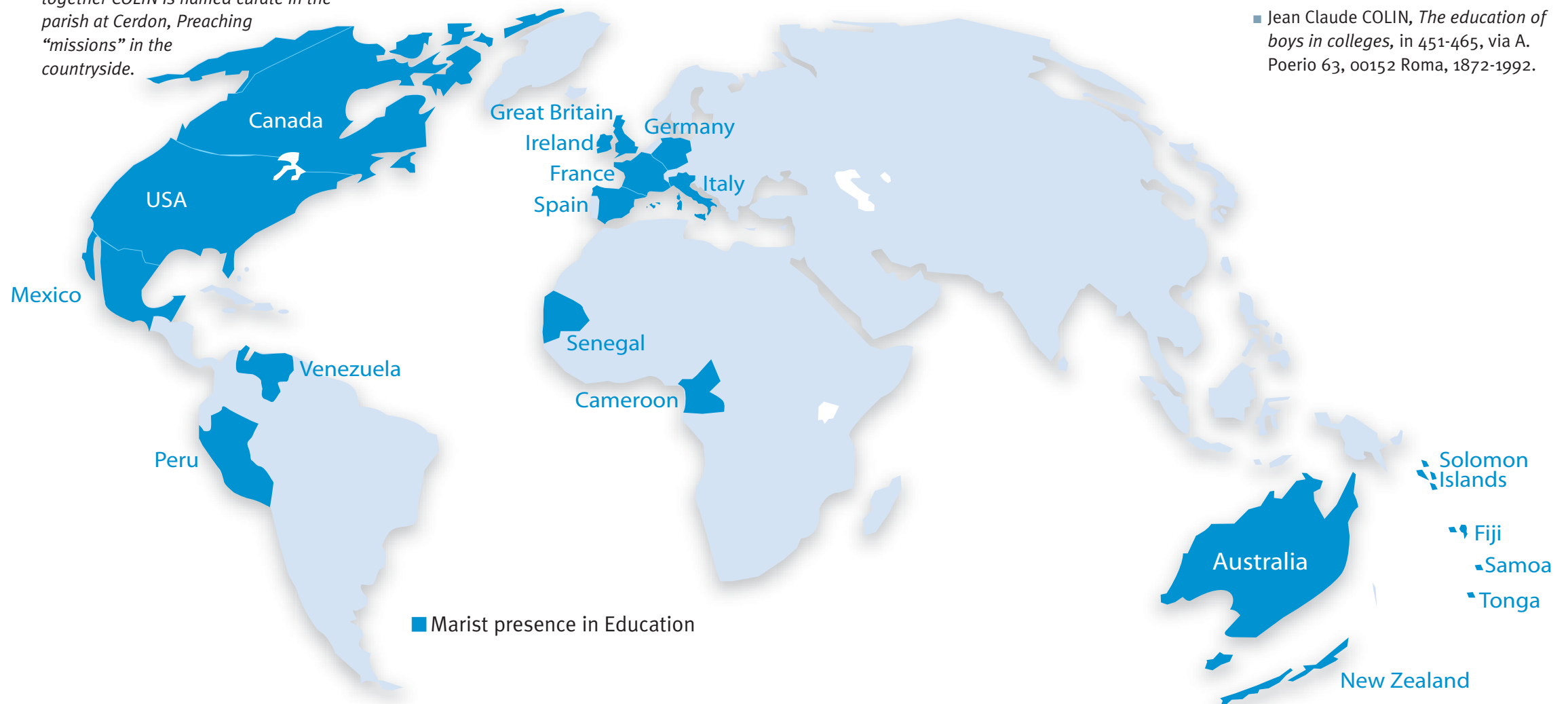
1845-1853 founding of educational establishments at Valbenoite, Langogne, La Seyne, Saint Chamond, Brioude, Montlucon.

For further reading:

- F. DROUILLY, *Jean Claude Colin's Instructions to the Staff of the Minor Seminary of Belley*, via A. Poerio 63, 00152 Roma, 1990
- Jean Claude COLIN, *A Founder Speaks*, via A. Poerio 63, 00152 Roma, 1981.
- Gabriel-Claude MAYET, *A Founder Acts*, via A. Poerio 63, 00152 Roma, 1981.



- Craig LARKIN, *A Certain Way*, via A. Poerio 63, 00152 Roma, 1995.
- Jean Claude COLIN, *The education of boys in colleges*, in 451-465, via A. Poerio 63, 00152 Roma, 1872-1992.



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