

## ***"Buried in the rich soil"***

When Rome approved the "Society of Mary" in 1836, legally it was only the branch of the priests that was approved. And yet from the beginning, the venture was much broader than something for priests only. For those who knew of the Marist plan, "Society of Mary" meant the 'many-branched tree' of priests, brothers, sisters and laypeople that had been talked about at the beginning. And from the start of the missionary venture, priests were not the only Marists at work in Oceania. The departure of the missionaries on December 8, 1840 was a good example of this. Colin wrote of this departure: *"We have done great things. Fourteen missionaries; priests, brothers, artists, engineers, booksellers, have been sent off to the other world with bag and baggage. People say that not for a hundred and fifty years had such a convoy been seen moving off at one shot for the savage countries."* Of the fourteen people in this group, only four were priests. Five were brothers, two were clerics yet to be ordained, and three were laymen. Within five years, Françoise Perroton was to break the barrier that had prevented women from taking part in the great missionary enterprise. As the missionaries set out, the words attributed to Mary by Colin: "I supported the Church as it came into being..." could well have been in their hearts. Certainly, it is worth noting that while the letters written before the missionaries set out, and the letters written during the voyage, reflect the attitude current in Europe of referring to the Islanders as "savages" and "barbarians", once the missionaries began to have contact with the people, they tended to refer to them as "les naturels", which in English would read as "the local people". Colin's insight of Mary supporting the Church as it came into being helped many of the early Marists to be sensitive to the "seeds of the Gospel" already present in the lives of the people. Today we call this the process of Inculturation of the Gospel. Colin of course never used the term "inculturation". The very concept was not used officially until 1977 when the Bishops in Synod used it for the first time in their "Message to the People of God." But the image he puts before Marists of Mary submerged in the Church provides them with a very effective way of inculturating the Gospel. Some of the spiritual principles most cherished by Colin are also principles which underpin effective inculturation. Marist historian Jean Coste describes these principles as ways for Marists to "bury themselves in the rich soil of the Church of a place."

September 17, 1849

*Father Colin said: "As I look at this little new-born Society of ours, I cannot help recalling our Divine Master in the midst of His disciples, giving them His fatherly instructions before His Ascension. We see the good shepherd with His sons. Then He ascends into heaven. But He had previously told them: 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.' What a mission that was! It involved changing the face of the earth, going everywhere on earth. The apostles did not argue, they divided the world between them, and went their separate ways.... You know the rest."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## ***Barometer of vitality***

The new emphasis on all sides is on a renewed sense of mission. The Church has awakened to a growing awareness that its fundamental task is to evangelise and that this requires a constant effort to relate the Gospel to the real condition of the people. In fact a sense of mission is being seen as a barometer of the vitality of the Church and of each individual Christian and religious community. Our communities are meant to be not inward-looking, closed in upon themselves, but communities of hope lived and communicated.

*Frank McKay, sm*

## Christ waiting

I was told of a village church somewhere in New Caledonia where an artist, who was a leper, had painted on the back wall of the Church a mural depicting the arrival of the first missionaries to the island. The painting showed the sailing ship out in the bay at anchor, with the missionaries coming ashore in long-boats with all their boxes and baggage, goats and animals, while on the shore the local population was lined up with various expressions of wonderment and anxiety shown on their faces. In amongst the crowd there was a person who was different from the others, of lighter colour and partly obscured. When asked who this person was, the artist said that this was the Melanesian Christ waiting for the missionaries.

*Kerry Prendeville, sm*

## Inculturation

Inculturation... Acculturation... The words are new, but when I read the wealth of correspondence from the Pioneers I realise that they were already living those concepts, although with the mind-set of their own times, naturally.

They were acculturated, because as soon as they arrived, they tried to learn the local language, to live among the women and girls, to share their food, their work, their sufferings and their hopes. By giving the girls a Christian formation, by working for the promotion of women and of the family, by very early suggesting consecrated life to the women of Oceania, were they not making it possible for those women to incarnate the gospel in their own culture?

For us, inculturation is an essential aspect of evangelisation; it is the foundation without which the latter remains something foreign and superficial....

I find that the Marist Spirit harmonizes perfectly with that missionary attitude: an unassuming and active presence; remaining hidden and unknown in the world; simplicity and humility; "as ready to receive as to give, having no other goal but to seek humbly with everyone else the coming of the reign of God."

*Claudine Nakamura, smsm*



## Christ present

The Brothers have adopted, or rather, are adopting, a new strategy of spreading the Good News. It consists of recognising from the very beginning that God is present in those to whom they are sent, of appreciating the values of the latter as expressions of this presence of God, and even of making them their own. We notice that this way of acting leads the young, and also the not so young, to question their own selves and their own cultural values in the light of the Gospel. The next step is to be awake oneself and to waken others to the presence of God in them and in their cultures, so that all may say together: "Truly God is here, and we did not know it!"

In this new way of acting, we must state that the apostolate of our presence among the young in the Marial attitude of true humility, simplicity and modesty will do more for a real inculturation than a plethora of academic reflections. In the different places where the Brothers are, their very presence has created and continues to create an attitude of openness to the Gospel message. Once this attitude has taken hold, inculturation has begun. But we must learn how to guide it, and particularly how to respond to the rhythm of the people.

*Theoreste Kalisa, fms*

*The Brothers are quick to recognise the Gospel values already present in the diverse cultures, and, by their services and example, they help to purify whatever in these cultures is not in harmony with the Gospels.*

*Marist Brothers' Constitutions n.91*