

## Caught up

Everything about the Marist way of life was to be simple. It was to be a way of life that was open to all, no matter what their vocation, age, or occupation. Even sinners and the unborn could be caught up into this work of Mary. Yet "simple" didn't necessarily mean "easy". The way of life of Mary in the Church may have been "simple" and "hidden", but it was not easy. And the Marist way of life, while it is "simple" and "ordinary" is not necessarily easy. But it is possible, and it is possible for all. What seemed to strike the Marist pioneers from the start was the double-sided nature of the call they answered. On the one hand the Marist project gave them energy, because they knew that such a way of life was worthwhile for them and for others, and that living this way would make a difference. On the other hand, the project challenged their courage because they knew – and some quickly experienced this – that this way of life would call for all their faith, their generosity and their love, to the point of leaving everything and even laying down their lives. One wonders, in reading the annals of the early years of the Marist enterprise, just what it was that inspired those men and women to make such extraordinary sacrifices of life and life-blood for the sake of their mission. Was it simply a spirit of adventure, a reckless search for new fields? Or was it rather a sense of destiny, a deep conviction that they were being caught up into something bigger than themselves? Jean-Claude Colin said, "Not everyone is called to be a Marist", and in choosing people for the Marist project he and the other Founders were looking for people who would be useful to the Society's mission. On several occasions he made it clear that he was not looking for highly talented people, or a sort of élite; he was looking for people with a spirit of faith and a generous heart; people who could look to the interests of Jesus and Mary instead of serving their own interests; people who could become "useful instruments of God's mercies" to others. But the Marist pioneers also knew that this was all the work of Mary. She had a special interest in those who had been called to this work. She would form those who joined, if they drew near to her and caught her attitudes of close union with God, her deep sensitivity to the needs of people, and her concern for the "extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation". Mary, the woman of Nazareth and the Cenacle... The key was to keep one's eyes on this woman who had made her home in both these places.

*On Wednesday September 16, 1846, during the general retreat at Puylata, Father Colin turned to the young men, addressing them in vigorous terms. We were in the refectory and had just heard read the life of Saint Francis Régis.... Father Colin rounded off in a martial tone with these words: "And I shall find again another three hundred brave men, who like Gideon will drink only from cupped hands."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## Men like Gideon

The off-the-cuff remarks of Jean-Claude Colin that Mayet recorded show the extremely human side of Colin. It was after hearing the story of the life of St Francis Régis being read in the seminary at Lyon that Jean-Claude Courville had first spoken about the project of the Society of Mary. Colin said that he was always stirred by St Francis Régis' story, and this occasion in 1846 made him think of the courageous lives of the Marist missionaries in Oceania. He encouraged the young men to consider being missionaries, and ended his talk with this reference to Gideon. The story he was referring to is found in the seventh chapter of the Book of Judges. Gideon set out with 32,000 men to do battle with the people of Midian. God said to Gideon that his army was too big: if they won victory, they would be in danger of attributing the success to themselves. Gideon told the soldiers that all who were frightened could go home, and 22,000 men turned back. God said to Gideon that even the 10,000 who remained were too many. Gideon was ordered to take the soldiers to a river to drink, and to notice how they took their water. Those who knelt down for a rest as they drank were sent home. Those who took their water "on the run", in cupped hands and without pausing, were the ones God wanted for the battle. With this small band of only 300 men, Gideon won the victory over the Midianites.

## Signed in blood

This gives rise to certain requirements with regard to the people who will be attracted to belong to Mary's family. In fact, what they are called to join is an army, and the qualities expected of them are the qualities of soldiers, prepared to leave everything, totally unencumbered with themselves, capable of facing the enemy. I find that nothing illustrates better the attitude of the early Marists towards candidates than the following passage from a letter that Marcellin Champagnat addressed, in 1832, to the "Mother Superior of the Sisters of Bon Repos" (Jeanne-Marie Chavoin):

*"I am sending the three young girls of St Laurent-d'Agnay that I told you about. If they cannot bring all they would wish as regards riches, they at least have good will to do whatever you require of them. I told them that if they do not take with them real self-sacrifice, unshakeable submission, great openness of heart, a steadfast vocation and a true desire to love God as Mary did, then they should not proceed any further with their plans. They replied that such were their intentions and the desires of their hearts. I told them you would keep this letter to remind them of their promises in due time and place; they replied that they were ready to sign all this with their blood if necessary."*

Gaston Lessard, sm

## Decision

In his book, *Path through Scripture*, author Mark Link tells the story of Linda Marshall, daughter of the famous chaplain to the U.S. Congress, Peter Marshall. Linda was about to take a shower. She had one foot in the shower, and the other foot on the bathroom rug. As she stood in this awkward position, she thought to herself, "This is a good picture of my life." For a long time Linda had thought of committing her life to God, and had wanted to do it, but somehow she could never quite make the decision. She had always kept one foot in and one foot out. Now it seemed that the moment had finally come for her to decide. Linda paused for a long time. Then she took a deep breath and said aloud, "I choose you, Lord." With that she stepped into the shower. It was like a baptism.

Something of that sort of decision faces those who feel called to this Marist way of life. When Champagnat sent the three girls to Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, he knew and they knew that what lay ahead of them would cost them not less than everything. But Marcellin knew, as did all the first Marists, that what seemed like giving up so much was in fact a liberation. *"The Society is called to do anything, it is like a soldier who goes wherever there is danger, wherever there is need of his services,"* said Colin on one occasion. But he also said, *"What have we to fear? The Blessed Virgin is leading us."*

## Incurable dreamers

While keeping alive our sense of belonging to Mary, with what it implies by way of loving concern for all, especially for the little ones, and of painstaking detachment from all that could make us less effective in Mary's work, we will also allow Mary to direct our attention to the Church. With her we will walk to a point where we can see the Church through her eyes and with her heart. This will enable us to define further good Marist decisions. Marists work in such a way that bishops don't look upon them as intruders or as competitors, but as their own. Marists care about the Church and want to serve it. They are not in the business of self-aggrandisement or of self-promotion.

At the same time, Marists are incurable dreamers. They are well aware of all the warts of the Church, but they are like the author of the Acts of the Apostles. They believe there was a time in the life of the Church when there were no conflicts, no selfishness, a time when all believers had but one heart and one soul. They also believe that Mary, the discreet mother, was the secret centre of that perfect communion. And now, faced with the divisions, the sluggishness, the rigidity of their Church, they don't lose hope. Indeed, they believe this is the time when Mary will intervene again and renew the miracle of perfect unity, all sinners brought home, all having but one heart and one soul.

Gaston Lessard, sm

*It must be remembered that the Society has but one overall mission, namely, to proclaim the Gospel to the people of our time, ever conscious of the mystery of Mary in the Church.*

*Marist Fathers' Constitutions n.74*