

## "Leave the ninety-nine"

Deep in the heart of every missionary lies the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who has compassion for the lost and dejected and who leaves the 99 safe sheep to go and look for the one who is lost or has gone astray. But what does it mean to have this compassion of Jesus for the lost sheep? What does it mean to leave the 99 who are safe, and go in search of the one who is lost or left aside? Where does the heart of compassion lead us when we are confronted with today's abandoned, especially those who feel themselves to be abandoned by the Church: the divorced and remarried, the homosexual, the unmarried parent, the unchurched, the young, the suicidal? What does it mean to leave the "safe" and go out specifically in search of the lost, in order to gather them into the Body of Christ? It seems that Colin's insight into the place of Mary in the Church will lead Marists to a life of risks, not least of which is the risk of being marginalised themselves by the Church as they themselves go beyond the safe boundaries to where they will find these abandoned ones, to be in solidarity with them and to bring them into the Body of Christ. Colin was quite clear about those to whom Marists were *not* called: they were not called to what he called "the devout" or "the pious few" or those who could be considered among "the well". He also made it clear to whom Marists *are* sent. They are to go "where there is danger, like a soldier"; "among the poor"; "to the abandoned works"; "to the poorest foundations"; "to the prisons"; "to those caught in sin"; "to those who are struggling to be reconciled". Colin once told the Bishop of Belley: "We are for doing what others cannot or will not do". And so, to go in search of the lost is by definition to leave one's own comfort zone and area of safety. It is to enter the messy, unorthodox, and grey area where the lost are to be found. The lost sheep does not come to the shepherd; it is the shepherd who goes out in search of the lost sheep. The special call of the Good Shepherd is to gather from the periphery, not to welcome at the centre. This means living dangerously; it means being a boundary rider, going to the edges of what others may think is normal, acceptable, or prudent. To "leave the 99" means looking and acting beyond these limits and stepping out into unknown territory, conscious of no security except that we are acting in the name of the Lord and under the leadership of Mary who has already made a similar journey in faith.

September 15, 1845

*Father Colin said: "I think more is to be gained by arousing people's feelings of confidence than by thundering and frightening people. There are souls perhaps who respond to a fright, but there are far more, I think, who respond to kindness, gentleness and trust.... I shall never forget one poor creature who fell at the missionary's feet, eyes streaming with tears, and said: 'Father, I have been waiting for you for ten or twenty years. I weep every night.' This person did not dare to go elsewhere and had not the courage to confess to the local parish priest."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## *The more abandoned*

Sketched out in the Gospel in parables and hidden sayings, I find a man who is a shepherd of a hundred sheep. When one of them left the flock and wandered off, the shepherd did not stay with those who stayed grazing in the flock without wandering. On the contrary, he went off to search for the single stray; he followed it through countless valleys and ravines, climbed many difficult mountains, searched with great trouble in lonely places until he found it. When he had found the lost sheep, far from beating it or driving it to return to the flock, he laid it on his shoulders and gently carried it back and returned it to its fellows. The Good Shepherd rejoiced more over the one that was found, than over all the others.

The whole story has a sacred meaning, and it warns us not to think of anyone as lost or beyond hope. We must not easily despair of those who are in danger, or be slow to help them. If they stray from the path of virtue, we should lead them back and rejoice in their return and make it easy for them to rejoin the community of those who lead good and holy lives.

*St Asterius of Amasea*



## Mother Courage

The rugged Aspromonte range in the Calabrian "toe" of Italy's "boot", is known as the country's Wild West. Since the early 1970's, over 250 people have been kidnapped, some of them famous people, including John Paul Getty III, kidnapped in July 1973. But most of the victims of kidnapping in Calabria are neither rich nor famous. In recent times, however, the name of one victim, Cesare Casella, became a household word. Rather, the name of his mother Angela became the household word. Her efforts to find her son earned her the name of "Mother Courage". In January 1988 Cesare was abducted while parking his car in the family home. When police investigators failed to find her son, she went alone to the Aspromonte. Travelling from town to town, she begged everyone she met for news of her son in defiance of *omertà*, the Calabrian "code of silence". At night she camped out in the town squares. In one village she chained herself to a phone booth until the police claimed she was jeopardising the chance of Cesare's freedom. After nearly two years' captivity, Cesare was released, and the name of Angela Casella remains in the historical memory of the Italian people. It is a dramatic example of the mother who will do *anything* for the sake of a lost child. What if Marists, too, were drawn to do *anything* for the sake of those who are lost or abandoned?

*"I sought him whom my heart loves. I sought him but did not find him. So I will rise and go through the City; in the streets and the squares I will seek him whom my heart loves. 'Have you seen him whom my heart loves?'"*

*Song of Songs 3: 2*



## The right person

As a Marist, I do at times link faith with compassion. Faith is also the freedom to admit that no matter how we see ourselves there have been moments when we seemed to be the right person at the right time in the life of someone else.

If I show that I am not threatening, compassion is fully manifested.

*"Jesus saw a large crowd and had compassion on them." (Mark 6: 34)*

*Martin Williams, sm*

*We seek out young people wherever they may be, even at the risk of entering unexplored territory where their need for Christ is evident in their material and spiritual poverty. In our encounters with them, we show a caring attitude that is humble, simple and selfless.*

*Marist Brothers' Constitutions n.83*