

## Compassion to the limits

The special vocation of the Marist is not only to go to the limits and then beyond. There is a work to be done at the margins, a work which is about the compassion of God. Compassion, like love, craves concrete expression. But when our whole way of life is conditioned by ideas of achievement, productivity and competition, then compassion becomes a non-starter on the list of life's priorities. Often this is because of fear. People on the margins remind us that after all, the things we possess, the reputation we have acquired at the expense of other things, cannot save us.

A woman, recently bereaved and in danger of being locked in her own grief, decided - against her fears of the unknown and of what it may cost her - to give three nights of her week to be with a woman who was totally paralysed, except for the movement of one toe. The widow had to feed her companion through a syringe in her stomach, and had to wait patiently while she tapped out messages on the typewriter with her toe. Gradually the widow began to realise how privileged she was to be alongside this other person whose situation had been such a source of fear to her at the beginning. A day before she died, the paralysed woman spelled out with her toe: "It has been a great privilege to know you." The question is, who was the privileged one? And who ministered to whom? And who visited whom in their prison? Who was the paralysed one who was enabled to walk free?

Among the many tributes paid to Leonard Bernstein, the great musician and composer, at the time of his death in 1990, was one from the singer Edda Moser. She said: "In Amsterdam, Lenny had to record the *Missa Solemnis* for television. At the Concertgebouw, the atmosphere was terribly heavy. Lenny came in, nervous, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He seemed sad to the very core of his soul. The practice began, and even the music didn't draw him from his desolation. He didn't look at anyone, and he cast over the musicians a gaze of emptiness and despair. Then I began to sing the *Kyrie*. Of a sudden, he stopped and began to weep. I held my hand out to him. He took me in his arms and said: 'My wife is dying'. I'm happy to have been able, once, just once, to have sung for his consolation."

Compassion has many expressions: action, word, song. The expressions may vary, but compassion doesn't. It is the face of God which God wishes to show most clearly in our age.

September, 1838

Father Colin told us: "When I am at the Hermitage in the midst of the Marist Brothers, I often say to them, 'My sons, I envy your happiness.' They do in the Society what Jesus and Mary did at Nazareth. What would we do without them? They have the happiness of serving others. Forgive me for saying so, gentlemen, but personally I enjoy spending my recreation with a Brother far more than spending it with you." Then, speaking of the poor, he said, "The age we live in has no love for the poor. It cannot even stand to see them, which is why it has invented prisons to lock them up in, and keep them out of sight."

"How I want the sons of the Blessed Virgin to be known like our Lord by that mark: 'the poor have the Gospel preached to them'." He laid great insistence upon this, saying, "I love the abandoned works, hidden service, I love the poor."

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## Take the opportunity

If you are willing to listen to me, I should say we should visit Christ while there is opportunity, take care of Him and feed Him. We should clothe Christ and welcome Him. We should honour Him, not only at our table, like some; not only with ointments, like Mary; not only with a sepulchre, like Joseph of Arimathea; nor with things which have to do with his burial, like Nicodemus, who loved Christ only by half; nor finally with gold, incense, myrrh, like the Magi, who came before all those we have mentioned. But as the Lord of all desires mercy and not sacrifice, and as compassion is better than tens of thousands of fat rams, let us offer Him this mercy through the needy, and those who are at present cast down on the ground.

*St Gregory of Nazianzen*





### *Love is service*

*"When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again, he went back to the table. 'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you?'" John. 13)*

We know quite well what Jesus was saying, but somehow, we forget. He was showing us that loving is inseparable from service, and that we must not stand on our dignity but must humble ourselves and do menial, earthy, bodily tasks for our brothers. To put it bluntly, he was saying that we must feed the hungry and clothe the naked - and not only that: we must clear the drunkard's throat of vomit, and turn him on his side so that he does not choke, and we must clear up the foul excreta of those whose bodies are so ravaged by disease that they cannot care for themselves. By *this* shall people know we are his disciples, not by veils, or dog collars, cathedrals or statues to the Virgin.

*Sheila Cassidy*

### *God of the poor*

In his life and parables, Jesus offers us an image of God that constantly demands that we allow our myths to be shattered and that we give up notions that would try to limit God's freedom. He shows us a compassionate God who became one of us, and suffered with the poor and oppressed. He reveals a God who identifies with love and not with power. He challenges us by portraying a constant identification with those who know suffering and rejection, not with those who are decked with symbols of success. He challenges any church that does not present this face of suffering, compassion and self-effacement to the world.

*Neil Vaney, sm*

*Attentive to the cry of the poor, and the demands of social justice, we shall be concerned about the needs and rights of those who suffer.... We shall work to promote justice and charity which are an integral part of the Gospel message.*

*Marist Sisters' Constitutions n.24*