

*How long will you hesitate?
The Lord is creating something new on earth;
The Woman sets out to find her Husband again.
Jeremiah 31: 22.*

6. On the fringe

One of the earliest descriptions of God in the Bible is found in the Book of Exodus. The words are God's own words, and this is the self-portrait:

*Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion,
slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness; for thousands, maintaining kindness,
forgiving faults, transgressions and sin. (Exodus 34: 6-7)*

This is the God who spoke to Moses as a friend, and who assured him: *"I have seen the misery of my people"*. (Ex. 3:7) The first and abiding image God wants us to have is of a God who is always and everywhere compassionate, merciful, forgiving, and tender. This is not to deny the other images of God as warrior, or king, or judge. But it is why so many of the images used in the Scriptures to describe God are images such as the mother giving birth in pain and bonding with the child in joy; the mother embracing her child; the mother eagle hovering over its nest of fledglings. The God who is revealed to us is a God who goes to the utmost limit to ensure that all will be saved. According to the prophet Micah, that mission of gathering from north and south, from east and west, would come to a peak when, as he foretold, "she who is to give birth gives birth". Then, Micah continues, "the remnant of his brothers will come back" (Micah 5). So, Mary shares closely in Jesus' mission to gather the scattered. Jesus himself went about doing good, having nowhere to lay his head, describing himself as the shepherd who leaves the 99 safe sheep to search for the one lost, and drawing close to all those who for one reason or another found themselves on the fringe of life. The mission of Mary to give birth to the Saviour, and the mission of Jesus to gather all the lost who find themselves on the fringes of life, are deeply connected. Both the Gospel of Jesus and the example of those pioneer Marists confront us with two questions: What if the compassion of God, as enfleshed in Mary the mother, disciple and woman of faith, were lived out by men and women acting in the world? And what if we took seriously Jesus' example of leaving the 99 safe sheep for the sake of the one who is lost?

The Bugey missions

On October 29, 1824 Pierre Colin wrote to his Bishop: "My Lord, today the little Society of Mary begins...." One may well ask why he considered *that* day as the foundation day. It was, after all, eight years since the little group had made a promise to begin the Society; already Marcellin Champagnat had a group of Brothers gathered round him at La Valla. This day is never commemorated in Marist anniversaries. But it was the day that a third person, Étienne Déclas, joined Pierre Colin and Jean-Claude Colin at Cerdon, and a team was formed to do mission work in the outlying mountain areas of the Bugey. Bugey is the general name for all the area between the Ain river and Gex, near to the border of Geneva. The area is mountainous and under snow for a good part of the winter. The Marist missionaries could do their work only in these winter months because it was the only time of the year when they could bring the country people together. The Bugey was a neglected area: priests didn't want to go there, and many of those who did were not up to the task. Some were described as schismatic or apostates to the faith; at least one had significant moral and personality problems. Many of the churches had been abandoned and uncared for since the Revolution: buildings and steeples that had been knocked down during the troubles had not been rebuilt. Marriages entered into unlawfully had not been rectified. Though the land was fruitful and fertile and the people lived reasonably well materially, their spiritual needs were immense. Colin spent five years in this terribly difficult work, but he looked back on those years with great affection and nostalgia. For him, it had been a fourfold experience: of the mercy of God, of a team ministry, of the extreme poverty of their resources, and of the immense power of God at work in them. He saw this period of time as representing a key feature of Marist life, that the "place" where Marists should find themselves most at home is among the abandoned, those on the margins, those in danger of being left aside. While Oceania represents the call to Marists to be at the very margins of the world, the missions of the Bugey represent their call to seek out and gather those in their own country who find themselves for whatever reason at the margins and beyond the margins of the Church; those who find themselves alienated from the practice of the faith; those who may be searching for the face of God, but cannot see that face in the Church as they perceive it.

In June, 1844 Father Colin said to me: "I especially want there to be in the Society some record of our beginnings, not just so that we shall be talked about... but so that in the future people will conform to our way of acting and imitate the simplicity that God blessed. Later, when the Society has grown and certain people will be tempted to discard this way of acting, the written records will serve as a rallying point."

The Mayet Memoirs

Powerful instrument

Étienne Déclas was the first seminarian to whom Jean-Claude Courveille revealed his dream of beginning a religious group dedicated to Mary. It was he who passed the word on to Jean-Claude Colin. Déclas remained faithful to the project, and when he joined the Colin brothers at Cerdon in 1824, this was simply the fulfilment of the promise he had made in 1816 to work at beginning the Society. Déclas was of simple and rough stock, and was never anything but a bad speaker. "At first I couldn't bear to listen to him, he made so many mistakes", said Colin. "But then I realized something else: despite Déclas' mistakes in French, God blessed the preaching." At the same time, Colin forbade Déclas to preach in any of the towns, or to say Mass in public, "because he said it in a way that provoked ridicule." Yet God blessed his work. "No one else is surrounded by so many people". Colin said. Déclas spent over 30 years preaching in the country area, and he gained the title of "Apostle of the Bugey". Towards the end of his own life, Colin said, "Look at our first confrères, Fathers Déclas, Humbert and Jallon. They were humble, straightforward and simple souls. See how the good Lord blessed them. Everything in their lives reflected poverty. We ate with peasants, we slept all together. Their preaching was utterly simple, and the people fell at their feet. We were overwhelmed in the Confessional."

Country mission

Izenave is one of the villages in the Bugey area. The Bugey is not poor and infertile. But it is isolated, difficult, and, in the time of the Marists, it had been left somewhat abandoned by the Church. The Marist missionaries preached at Izenave in March of 1825. In general, the Marists preferred to call themselves catechists rather than missionaries. The mission usually lasted three to four weeks. On arrival at a village where they were to preach, the first thing the Marists did was to visit the church; then they visited the Parish Priest; then they heard the children's confessions. The first instruction to the people was a friendly invitation to come to the mission. The



sermons in the first week were on the mercy of God, and other subjects calculated to win the confidence of the faithful. Later, they preached on the commandments, and when most of the confessions were over they preached on sin. It was the goodness of the priest, Colin claimed, not the fear he engendered, that brought people to Christ. So he insisted that there should be no diatribes against those who were failing in their obligations or refusing to come to the mission. *"Speak with esteem and respect of those who have not made the mission,"* he said. *"Excuse them by attributing their absence to the pressure of business or other responsibilities."* The guiding principle of the missionaries was: "We must win souls by submitting to them."

Hard times

There were many stories told of those hard times in the Bugey missions. Most of the travelling was done on foot through snow and mud. The living conditions were extremely difficult. Often the Marists had to sleep in the local inn, and this brought its own problems of vermin and poor food and limited accommodation. Sometimes the three priests had to be content with two small beds. On one occasion, the only bedroom belonged to the landlady, and the shy priests discovered that she planned to share it with them! Looking back on those days, Colin told Mayet: *"Never were we so happy. Never did we laugh with such good heart. I have always been nostalgic for those days. They were good times.... Often we had to get our own meals. Once, we arrived in a parish where there had been no priest since the Revolution. The presbytery was uninhabited. We set to to sweep it, as best we could, laughing all the time. There were no windows, the ceiling was open, the cracks were stuffed with hay. We went to bed. We were really cold, but we laughed about it."*

Marist tradition can continue to be a living reality only if it offers an experience of the Gospel similar to that of Jean-Claude Colin and his companions.... In the mountains of Bugey the first Marist missionaries experienced the joy of proclaiming the Good News to forgotten people.

Marist Fathers' Constitutions nn.50,54

The world as mission

Whether the pioneer Marists went to Oceania or whether they stayed in France, they were entering into a totally new culture. Each day the missionaries in Oceania were made aware - sometimes painfully - that they did not think or talk or behave like the people they lived with. The task ahead of them was to accept the people on their own terms, and to draw the Gospel out of this new and foreign culture. But even at home in France, the Marists who preached in the Bugey mission began to realise the same thing: even in their own country, among people who spoke the same language, a new culture had begun to appear, a culture with its own ways of thinking and judging and acting - a culture which found no place any longer for God. The Revolution in France and the Enlightenment in Europe had created a different world. There was not too much difference between the people of Oceania who were beginning to find God in their lives, and the people in parts of Europe who had somehow lost sight of the God who had been so much part of their lives. What the missionaries found right on their doorstep in France was a culture just as foreign as the cultures in Oceania, and an absence of God just as great as anything they may have imagined in any foreign lands.

The striking thing is that today a good deal of the modern world resembles the Bugey area of France: a whole world of people who may have been baptised and may have lived for a time as Christians, but whose faith has been fragmented or stifled by the secularised world we live in – a world with a completely different set of values and standards, a world which excludes the Gospel or the presence of God, yet which at the same time desperately seeks the power and mercy of God. The missionary who comes to this modern global mission territory will need to come with the attitudes of a mother handling the sensitivities of her adolescent child, accepting this world on its own terms without condemning it, speaking to this world in terms it can understand, trying to give flesh to the Word of God. From the beginning, some Marists had answered the call to step out of their own culture and go to foreign lands. But even those who remained in their own countries had to step out into another culture, and to recognise the seeds of the Gospel in the secularised world they had found at home. The symbol of the Bugey mission is a powerful symbol for Marists who are called to be missionaries wherever they may find themselves.

September 23, 1846

Father Colin said: "Let those who will stay in France, in Europe, console themselves. There is no need to go to Oceania to find suffering and danger. Are the majority of Frenchmen any better than the natives of Oceania? Have they any more faith? Better morals? Those of you who have travelled through France know well enough. Let us work, then, all of us, with new zeal, some in France, others abroad.... St Francis Xavier achieved sanctity in the Indies, St Francis Régis in our own country."

The Mayet Memoirs

Culture shock

The Christian who steps out of the familiar world of traditional faith into the modern secularised world is not unlike a missionary stepping into a culture totally strange to him. Especially if this strange culture has not yet been deeply influenced by the Gospel he will be tempted to get a very negative impression, one in which behaviour and values that are simply strange to him arouse the same indignation as things that are perhaps indeed sinful. Without becoming blind to what is really sinful, he must gradually learn to appreciate the positive values that hide behind patterns of behaviour that are foreign to him, and that can be true "seeds of the Word" and stepping stones to faith. We have learned to see the way of life of peoples far away as simply "other cultures". We should also have learned that "other cultures" are constantly being born, to the extent that culture change today has accelerated. The heart of Marist identity is indeed not a "way of life".... It is a mission, not to faraway exotic cultures, but to a new culture, and that is the secularised culture of today.

Jan Snijders,sm

The modern world a new culture

In an article he wrote for lay Marists in France, Marist Father Jan Snijders points out that the Marist project came to birth during the momentous upheaval of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is the natural “parent” of the secularised age we now experience at least in most parts of the western world. Jan Snijders indicates that the Marist approach which was so successful in the beginning, is just as relevant if not more relevant than before. He puts before his readers seven propositions:

1. The whole of the modern world is a new “culture”.
2. The apostle of today in the modern world needs the same attitude of openness as any missionary in any new culture.
3. The new culture has not yet been effectively evangelised: it too needs the Gospel.
4. Though this new culture needs the Gospel, it does shelter the “seeds of the Gospel”, which need to be recognised and cultivated.
5. One of the best helps for this delicate activity is to follow the example of Jesus who became human and “hid” himself in the human condition. (Phil.2:6-7) In Marist terms this is the attitude of being “hidden and unknown”.
6. Our Marist tradition helps us with its stress on Marists as “instruments of Mercy”, who do a great deal of good in a hidden way.
7. This is the “new church” which Marists are called on to build.

Not dead but absent

The many millions of people who have drifted away from the Churches, in anger, or in indifference, or simply in perplexity, are by definition out of reach to clerical ministry, nor do they usually want to have anything to do with priests. Most unbelievers of today are not convinced and militant atheists. They are the nice people next door who just don’t know. They are baffled if the subject is brought up at all and quite happy to stick to the available evidence as far as they see it. And that means they get along quite nicely without religion....

... Our modern world is honestly and sincerely profane.... God is not so much dead as absent; and not absent as one who should be there. He is absent as a sort of misunderstanding that has fortunately been cleared up.

Jan Snijders, sm



In countries which have become dechristianised, it is our task to show young people and adults the true face of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Marist Brothers' Constitutions n.90

A taste for sinners

There is a way for Marists to be present in the Church, a way which is special to them, and which they learn from Mary. It's best described by the words "supporting" and "upholding". In Colin's mind, these were the words Mary herself used to describe her place in the Church: "I supported the Church at its beginning..." In the Bugey, the Marist missionaries were faced with an enormous contrast between the Church as they saw it: poor, broken, abandoned, confused; and the Church as it could be, and as Jesus wished it to be: a Church which would be "united in mind and heart", a Church into which all would be gathered and where all would find a welcome. For those missionaries, the key to keeping a balance between these two realities lay in the personality of Mary, and in what they understood as "the work of Mary". Doing the work of Mary would mean looking at the Church as she would; it would mean looking on the Church with the heart of a mother. To look on the Church with the heart of a mother is to accept it as it is, in all its brokenness and inadequacy, and yet to keep one's eyes fixed on what it is called to be. To look on the Church with the heart of a mother is to develop a special care for anyone who is on the margins and struggling to believe or belong. A mother cannot bear even one of her children to be left out; she will be on the look-out for the one who is falling behind, or missing out, or neglected. It was this experience of maternal tenderness towards the sinner that Colin picked up in a special way during those missions. Many of the people in the villages they visited had been away from the Church and the Sacraments for years, following the events of the Revolution. Colin had described his six years as a curate in the presbytery of Cerdon as years of great consolation and sweetness, during which, he said, he had learned to "taste God". But to meet the God who is tenderness and compassion, and to "taste God" in prayer, is to develop a taste for those whom the compassionate God cares about in a special way – the weak, the lost, the outcast, the sinner. The experience of the Bugey missions gave Colin and his followers a sense of urgency about gathering people who were on the margins of the Church. Twenty years later, this experience was still with him. He said, "It seems to me that in an age of unbelief such as our own, the minister of souls must burn with the desire to fly to the salvation of his brothers, and be as it were impatient for the moment when he can race to their aid."

I recorded these notes in September, 1848. There are in my notes several similar articles.

Father Colin said: "Let us have compassion on poor sinners, let us not ask of them more enlightenment than they could be expected to have. Take a man standing at the entrance to a tunnel: light is already faint; he takes a few steps, darkness engulfs him; he walks on further, it is pitch black and he gropes in the dark. So it is with a soul which has forgotten God.... When grace seeks it out and good will responds, it is like a little glimmer of light in the depths... Do not rebuff him, receive him back into grace, ask little of him, and grace will do the rest."

The Mayet Memoirs

First mission

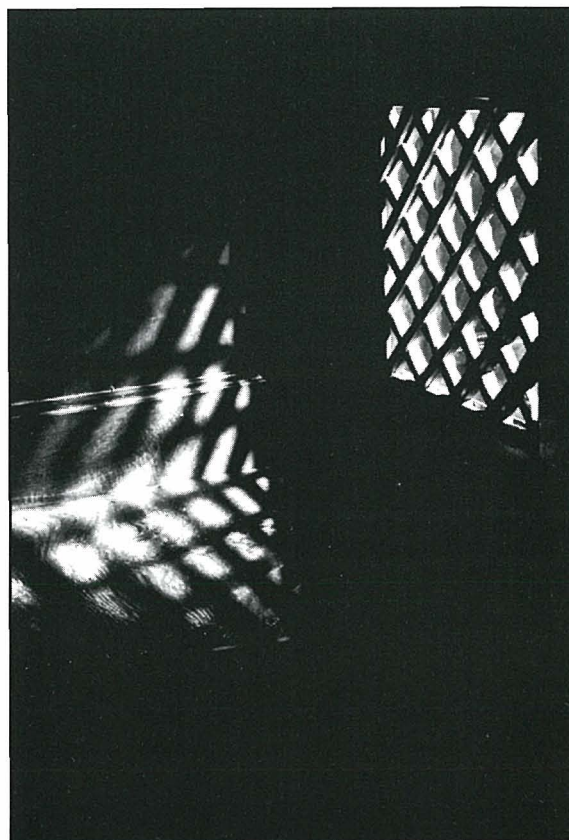
The church at La Balme – as in many parts of the Bugey – still stands as it did in the time of the Marist missionaries. La Balme was the first hamlet the missionaries visited. Every day Colin and Déclas climbed the steep hill from Cerdon to this place, and spent the day calling the people to God.



Historian Gaston Lessard writes: "At La Balme, and in all the parishes where they will preach in the coming years, the first Marists are in contact with the church as it exists. It is a poor church, a hurting church, an uneducated church. They come to it with the respect, the tenderness, the care that guide a mother's hands as she approaches the bruised body of her son."

Experience of mercy

The Marist missionaries spent hours each day in the confessional in the churches they visited. Often the conditions were appalling: cold and damp confessionals in a cold church in the middle of winter. Colin's health was severely impaired by those times. Yet these experiences in the confessional shaped his thinking considerably. Here, the Marists experienced the mercy of God in concrete reality, and Colin looked on those experiences as key elements in Marist life. The hardships meant little to him. It was more important to him that a non-churchgoing man had said to his wife after a mission sermon, "Give me some Rosary beads. Tonight I cried. Tomorrow I will go to confession"; or that someone had whispered in confession, "Father, I have waited ten years for you to come!" The simple style of the Marists made a deep impression on the people. In several places they were initially received coolly by the people, and had to go begging for their food—sometimes unsuccessfully. But by the end of the mission, the little village churches were packed, and the villagers pleaded for the missionaries to stay.



The kingdom of mercy

Mayet noted several comments made by Colin on the ministry of reconciliation through the sacrament of Confession:

"In the Society, we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God, without of course falling into laxist theology."

"For myself, in the confessional I follow the same approach as the Romans do. I am very fond of those principles: 'All for souls' and 'Salvation before law'."

"Rome was very useful to me on this point. It was there that I learned the maxim, 'Law was made for man'. If I can't save him with the Law, I shall try to save him without it."

On January 25th, 1841 Fr Colin told us, "This is the kingdom of mercy; mercy here is boundless. Justice will take its course in the next world."

Like the first missionaries in Bugey they proclaim the Good News of God's mercy to those most in need.

Marist Fathers' Constitutions n.92

"Feel the pulse of the age"

When Jean-Claude Colin spoke to his priest companions about their need to "burn with the desire to fly to the salvation" of others, and to "be as it were impatient" for the moment when they could "race to the aid" of sinners, his very words described the sense of urgency that he himself felt. In his own words, he "longed for the notion of mercy to take root" in the Society of Mary. Profoundly influenced by his experience of reconciling people in the Bugey area, Colin had seen clearly with what great sensitivity one must approach those who are struggling to find a way to God. He himself had learned what it means - and what it costs - to get into the skin of another, to get below the surface of another's life, and to see the world through the eyes of another. He had also learned that to bring back the lost sheep, a good shepherd must be prepared to go beyond the boundaries of human comfort, self-interest, and even safe theology in order to find the lost where they are. From the beginning, Colin wanted to stamp Marists with an attitude which gave greatest play to the mercy of God. The approach he recommended in Confession and elsewhere was one which actually ran counter to the accepted sound theology of his day. It was an opinion which was favoured by St Alphonsus Ligouri, but which did not have the full acceptance of most of the clergy in France. Through his theologians, Colin laid the foundations for an approach to ministry, and especially the ministry of Reconciliation, which has become a tradition in the Society of Mary to this day. The Marist family has been characterised by an approach which always favours compassion, which looks first at the situation of the penitent, which gives greatest play to the forgiveness of God, and which pushes the limits of mercy to the outer reaches.

Actions speak louder than words - or at least give weight to words; and in our own times the action of Pope John Paul II in pardoning his would-be assassin gives great substance to the words he had already written some time before: "It is necessary to know present-day man in order to understand him, listen to him, love him, just as he is, not to excuse evil, but to discover its roots, quite convinced that there is salvation and mercy for everyone, provided they are not rejected consciously and obstinately. We must constantly feel the pulse of this age of ours, in order to know our contemporaries.... Today it is necessary to have patience, and to start all over again from the beginning."

Speaking to me one day about a pupil whose behaviour had been such that he deserved to be expelled, a child, moreover, whose character and lack of mature reasoning gave little hope of his mending his ways, Father Colin urged me to pray, saying that we had to pray all the more and have an even greater confidence, that our hope was not founded on anything human. He said to me, "How I long for this notion of mercy to take root in all our men! It is so much easier to get rid of dangerous elements than to convert them. It is not zeal to send away straight off what stands in the way of good. If so, the matter would be quickly settled. Our Lord did not take that line.... Personally, I pardon two, three times, and I am not afraid of doing this, because I say to the Lord, 'My God, this is the way you act.' I have often exercised mercy, and I have been glad afterwards.... We are not out for the healthy, but the sick."

The Mayet Memoirs

Submit to souls

It was usual in those days to be severe in the confessional. Being sorry for your sins and hoping to do your best by God's grace was not enough. People were sent away without absolution if the priest was not sure they were a hundred per cent sorry for their sins. The Marists, led by Father Colin, took a different line. They bore the name of Mary; they were to be caring. They were to persuade sinners to repentance rather than to try to force them with great threats. They were to accept what degree of contrition their penitents could genuinely muster, and leave the rest to God. They found, in practice, that people would afterwards go much further in conversion than had seemed likely at first. In the pulpit, too, the missionaries were to persuade rather than thunder at the congregation, to speak naturally and not in the high-flown style that was common then and for long afterwards.

Denis Green, sm

A theology of mercy

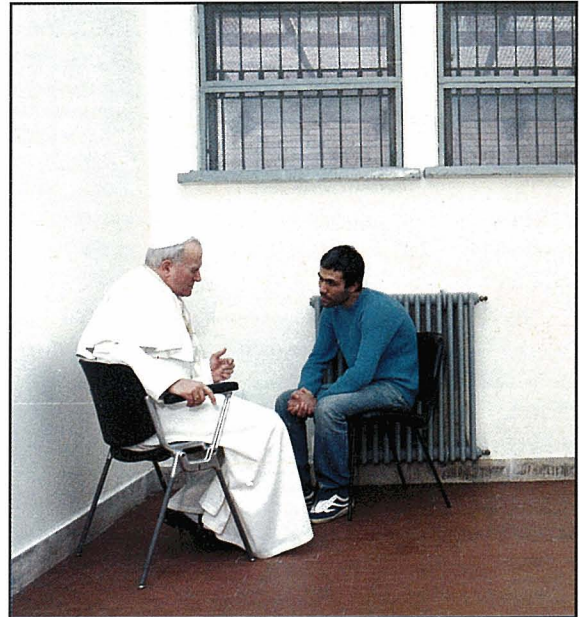
Mayet copied into his *Memoirs* an article entitled: "Great strides to which the elder Father Épalle prompts the Society in 1843 in theology and preaching under Father Colin's direction." The article deals with conferences on theology given by Father Épalle. Épalle took a line on theology, especially sexual morality, which was more compassionate than the current of thinking at the time, and, in particular, it was against the thinking and teaching of Father Cholleton, a revered and influential figure in the Society. Mayet records the incident:

Father Épalle had the greatest difficulty in gaining acceptance for a theology favourable to the salvation of souls at the expense of the older, severe moral theology generally taught in France at the end of the great revolution of 1793. Those who had been nurtured and raised in the study of this austere theology, which they had themselves applied in the confessional, struggled hand to hand with him and he refuted all their objections with a force of logic all his own. He taught in a manner diametrically opposed to that of Father Cholleton, former Vicar General become Marist.... Father Épalle's starting point in his teaching and all his decisions is the good of souls. Speaking about this theological teaching, Father Épalle told me, "If Father Colin had not by his authority put an end to the objections and recriminations of those who thought my moral teaching lax, I could never have established the principles that were promulgated. But Father Superior was in perfect agreement with me and gave his approval and support, both as theologian and as Superior."

Here then is the first great good that Father Épalle procured for the Society, a rather difficult one, because of the consideration due to Father Cholleton, who all his life had held and taught, before entering the Society, to priests who had since become Marists, a doctrine that was the complete opposite. But such a consideration, weighed against the good of the Society, was of no account to Father Épalle, any more than to Father Colin.

Why forgive?

Under the headline, "WHY FORGIVE?", *Time* Magazine reported the historic meeting of Pope John Paul II and his would-be assassin Mehmet Ali Agca in Rome's Rebibbia prison two years after the shooting. The magazine reported: "For 21 minutes, the Pope sat with his would-be assassin. The two talked softly. Once or twice Agca laughed. At the end of the meeting, Agca either kissed the Pope's ring, or pressed the Pope's hand to his forehead in a Muslim gesture of respect. John Paul's words were intended for Agca alone. 'What we talked about will have to remain secret between him and me. I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust.' It was a startling drama of forgiveness and reconciliation. On one level, it was an intensely intimate transaction between two men. But if the Pope spoke in whispers, he also meant to proclaim a message to the world. The Pope's deed spoke, not his words, and it spoke with full authority."



It is in a deep experience of God, personal and communal, and by trying to live daily the Gospel values of communion and reconciliation, that we become witness to God's love and instruments of divine mercy, sharing with Him in the transformation of society and its total liberation in Christ.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions n.26

"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

Beyond the margins

Perhaps the Work of Mary is not only to gather those who are on the margins within the Church, but to gather those who are *beyond* the Church; those who depend on the faith of others to bring them to an encounter with Jesus. In Chapter 5 of his Gospel, Luke tells the story of the cure of the man who was paralysed. Some of Luke's details are very significant. The paralysed man was prevented from meeting Jesus by the crowd, and even, it seems, by the building itself. The friends of the paralysed man overcame these obstacles by removing part of the roof and lowering the man through the hole. Luke tells us that Jesus, "seeing *their* faith", cured the man. It was not simply the faith of the sick man, but the faith of his friends, and their efforts to remove the obstacles, that enabled the encounter with Jesus to take place. There are many in the Church and beyond the Church who today need this sort of person; someone who can remove the barriers that exclude them from the body of the Church, or at least help them to climb over them.

Seeing their faith... Jesus cured the sick man. The paralysis of today may not be the physical paralysis that Jesus cured. It may be the fears, the memories, the experiences of the past which make an encounter with the healing Jesus very difficult within the Church. These are people who may have had more than one marriage, or children by different partners; people who have no schedules or no way of fitting into the Church's schedules. The Marist approach is to remove the obstacles that prevent these people from meeting Jesus.

Seeing their faith... Jesus cured the sick man. In a world of diminishing faith and diminishing trust in the Church, men and women of this sort of Gospel faith will be needed: people who will see possibilities for an encounter with Jesus where others see nothing but obstacles. Without destroying the Church, or leaving the Body of the Church, they will find ways of making a meeting point with Jesus possible. Some, like the Pharisees in the Gospel, will find this impossible, intolerable, destructive, even blasphemous. Others, like the crowd in the story, will be amazed that those on the margins can find themselves "in front of Jesus". They too will say, "We have seen strange things today"; "This is something we never thought of". For today's Marists, this is part of what their predecessors looked on as "something new for our times", that fresh approach to the Gospel which gave energy to the Marist project at its beginning.

In December, 1845 Father Colin said:

"Jesus left His Mother with His nascent Church so that she would watch over it in its cradle. She reappears at the end of time to call in those who have not yet entered the fold and to lead back to it those who have strayed from it."

The Mayet Memoirs

Mission beyond the church

"Mary was the support of the Church in the beginning and she still is at the end of time." This formula for me brings expression to three things:

- * The essential is our mission, Mary's work.
- * Mary is God's initiative at the end of time. All mankind is to be saved through mercy.
- * Ours is an age of unbelief. It needs people who can bring faith, hence it needs Church as a community of "experts in God".

To my mind, the Society of Mary is about a mission beyond the Church to those who do not belong or let us say no longer belong to the community of believers. The target of our apostolate is the whole world, not only the Church.

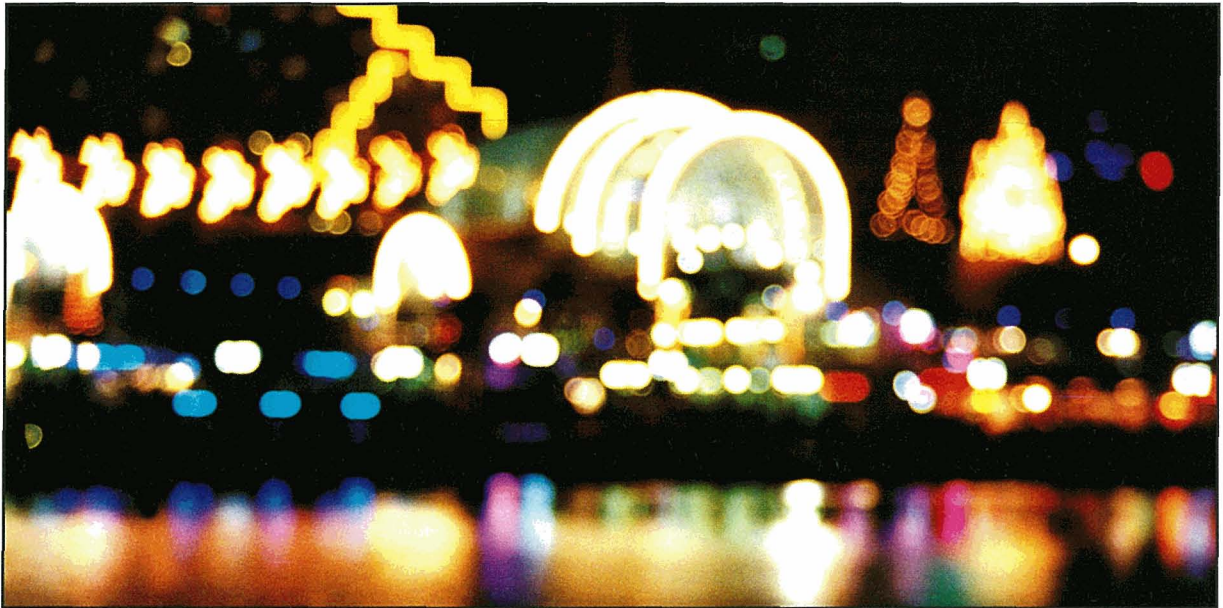
Alois Greiler, sm

Understanding at the end

At the end of John Rechy's dramatic novel, *City of Night*, the tragic homosexual hero makes a desperate series of phone calls to various rectories in the city in which he is living. His life is coming apart, and he needs someone to whom he can talk. He is disappointed at the way his efforts are received, and by the lack of understanding that he finds from the priests on the other end of the phone. Finally, however, he pours out all his inner confusion to a priest who seems to sense what he is trying to communicate. The priest does little else but share in all his pain, but this is no small gift. Rechy writes:

The first Church I telephoned was St. Patrick's. "I can't see you," said the priest, "not until morning, we're closed now." And he hung up. I called St. Louis Cathedral, "I can't see you - of course not. We get these calls all the time." A third one - and I said hurriedly: "Don't hang up, Father. I've got to talk to someone!" And he listened only a few moments. "You must be drunk," he said angrily, and he hung up. And I called the Church of the Eternal Succour, and I called other churches - and they all said: "No, go to sleep," "Come tomorrow to the confessional." (Where life doesn't roar so loudly - in whispers, it can be listened to...) "Some time else, when we are open." One even said: "God bless you" before he hung up...

And I called one more church, St. Vincent de Paul. And a priest who sounded very young answered, and he didn't hang up and he was the one I had tried to reach, I knew, and he spoke to me, and spoke - and I can remember only one thing he said - and the rest doesn't matter because all I had wanted was to hear a voice from a childhood in the wind... And what I do remember that priest saying is merely this: "I know," he said, "Yes, I know."



The phrase "unknown and even hidden in this world" indicates the manner in which Marists engage in the apostolate and does not hinder them from doing great things for God. It leads Marists to place themselves in the situation of those to whom they are sent, and to put aside everything in themselves which might be an obstacle to the working of the Spirit.

Marist Fathers' Constitutions n.136

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

"Saved without the law"

Jean-Claude Colin was profoundly affected by his experiences in the Bugey area where he preached those country missions. Here he became more and more aware of the numbers of people beyond the limits of the Church, beyond the Law, whom the Church could not or at least did not touch, and who felt unable or unwilling to touch the Church. Colin's experience was paralleled by that of Marcellin Champagnat, Jeanne-Marie Chavoin, and Françoise Perroton in their own situations. It's not difficult to imagine what such experiences do to one who has the viewpoint of Mary who wants only to gather all into the Body of Christ. When he was in Rome on his visits as Superior General of the Marist Fathers, Colin discovered there a theology which was much more flexible than his own, a theology which enabled him to stretch the limits as far as possible to enable those on the margins to be included. *"It was in Rome", he said, "that I learned the maxim: 'Law was made for man'. If I cannot save him with the law, I shall try to save him without it."* Colin did not mean that Marists would by-pass laws of the Church which may be irksome. But on the other hand, to go to where the "lost" and "abandoned" are, is to find oneself in situations where the saving word of God's compassion must be spoken to people before the Law can be put to them. When one begins to live by the rule of compassion, one immediately comes in contact with people whose situation makes it impossible for them to communicate with the Church. The good shepherd is one who has made the decision to go beyond the safe limits and to meet the lost and abandoned where they are to be found. Today's "abandoned" may not be the same sort of people as the pioneer Marists encountered. They are more likely to have the faces of those in complicated marriage situations, those who know nothing of God and are happy to stay that way, those affected by addictions of every sort, those who have laid violent hands on themselves and have taken their lives, those who die unknown, uncared for, unnoticed and unmourned. The only guideline that the loving shepherd has is the "appalling strangeness of the mercy of God". But only those who have experienced this mercy can speak of it to others. This is why Jean-Claude Colin insisted so strongly that Marists are to be people of deep prayer. Only through prayer and suffering can one enter into the deep womb of God's compassion for the earth and for every creature, and so become an effective instrument of the divine mercies.

September, 1848

Father Colin said to us: "Gentlemen, let us educate ourselves. The more learned a man is, the more he opens up to you when you consult him. If he is only a fraud he puts a spoke in your wheel and prevents your going further."

Rome was very useful to me on this point. It was there that I learned the maxim: 'Law was made for man'. If I cannot save him with the Law, I shall try to save him without it."

The Mayet Memoirs

Prayer for the lost

There is a story written by the "most Russian of all Russian writers", Nikolai Leskov, which is called "The Enchanted Wanderer". In the story we are told of a poor priest in an outlying village in Moscow who was reported to his bishop for being a terrible drunkard. The bishop decided to deprive the priest of his ministry and banish him. However, just before the bishop did this, he had a dream in which St. Sergius appeared to him and put the fear of God into him, revealing that there were countless dead who were grateful to this broken-down priest because of his prayers for them.

When the Bishop woke, he immediately sent for the priest and questioned him about his prayers. Eventually the priest broke down and said, "I confess to being guilty of one serious transgression. Being weak in spirit myself and in my despair thinking that it were better to take my own life, I always during the service of Holy Communion say a special prayer for those who die without absolution and lay violent hands upon themselves." The archbishop was astonished by this story and gave his blessing to the lowly priest and told him to carry on his good work as before. Leskov also hints that there are many others who pray for suicides. He says, "I believe that on Trinity Sunday – or is it Whit Monday? – everybody is allowed to pray for them. They say special prayers for them on that day, wonderful prayers, so moving that I could listen to them forever."

The appalling strangeness of the mercy of God

Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock* tells the story of the relationship between Pinky, a vicious young gangster, and Rose, a simple girl, in the beach resort at Brighton. Both are Catholics, which is an important element in the suicide pact that they make. At the close of the novel, Rose is in despair because Pinky has been killed, and she has, as she thinks, let him down by remaining alive. She goes to confession to an old priest, telling him what has happened, and she accuses the priest of not understanding. Greene writes:

Rose could just see the old head bent towards the grille. The priest had a whistle in his breath. He listened – patiently – whistling, while she painfully brought out her own agony. She could hear the exasperated women creak their chairs outside waiting for confession. She said, "It's that I repent – not going with him." She was defiant and tearless in the stuffy box; the old priest had a cold and smelt of eucalyptus.

The old man began to talk – whistling every now and then, and blowing eucalyptus through the grille. He said: "There was a man, a Frenchman, you wouldn't know about him, my child, who had the same idea as you. He was a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all his life, because he couldn't bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation." She listened with astonishment. He said: "This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments, he never married his wife in the Church. I don't know, my child, but some people think he was – well, a saint. I think he died in what we are told is mortal sin – I'm not sure; it was in the war; perhaps...." He sighed, and whistled, bending his old head. He said, "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone, the.... appalling.... strangeness of the mercy of God.".....

He shivered and sneezed. "We must hope and pray," he said, "hope and pray. The Church does not demand that we believe any soul is cut off from mercy."

A sudden feeling of immense gratitude broke through the pain. It was as if she had been given the sight a long way off of life going on again.

Prayer for the forgotten

Every day call this prayer to mind, and repeat it to yourself as often as possible: *Lord, have mercy upon all who appear before thee today.* For at every hour and every moment thousands of people depart from this earthly life and their souls appear before God – and how many of them depart in loneliness, unknown to anyone, sad and dejected because no one feels sorrow for them or even cares whether they are alive or not! And then, perhaps, from the other end of the earth your prayer for the repose of their souls will rise up to God, although you never knew them nor they you. How deeply moving it must be for a man's soul, as he stands in fear and trembling before the Lord, to know at that very instant that there is someone to pray even for him, that there is still a fellow creature left on earth who loves him! And God will look on both of you much more favourably, for if you have had so much pity on him, how much greater will God's pity be, for God is infinitely more loving and merciful than you! And he will forgive him for your sake.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Discourses of Father Zossima"

For us, prayer is an absolute necessity. It is our way of being present to and entering into communion with God, who draws closer to us as we show our concern for others. Little by little, our life becomes a continuous prayer which influences everything we do and everyone who enters our life.

Marist Brothers' Constitutions n.77

Do we hesitate?

When Étienne Terraillon told his story of the meetings of the seminarians who discussed the Marist project at the Major Seminary of Lyon in 1815, he wrote: "We used those meetings to inflame our zeal, at times with the thought that we had the happiness of being the first children of Mary, and at times with the thought of the great needs of the people." In his own way, Terraillon was pinpointing the same two striking convictions that other contemporaries had remarked on in the early days of the Marist project.

In the first place, the pioneer Marists seemed bound together by a *sense of destiny*. Terraillon described it as a conviction that they were "the first children of Mary". The pioneer Marists understood that their congregation was the first religious congregation in the history of the Church that bore the name of Mary. For them, this was the moment of destiny, the moment of history when Mary wished a religious congregation to bear her name and to do her work in the Church. The pioneer Marists felt caught up in the energy of this conviction. It was a moment of history for them, who had been called and chosen to be part of something new for their times.

Coupled with that sense of destiny was a *sense of urgency*, as they thought of "the great needs of the people". This too was a great source of energy as Marists realized that time could well be running out for the world, and that it was their special and unique task to bring the spirit of Mary into a world which lacked it and desperately needed it.

This sense of destiny and sense of urgency are both contained in two major symbols of Marist origins: the missions of Oceania and the missions in the Bugey area. The Bugey and Oceania stand for

- * the people to whom they should feel instinctively drawn,
- * the hardships they should be prepared to accept for the sake of their mission,
- * the mobility, flexibility and inner freedom which they need in order to act as missionaries.

The archives of the early years of Marist history are full of stories of the heroic lives of pioneer Marists who left everything forever in order to bring the message of peace and reconciliation to others. The very witness of their lives is a silent and powerful question to each Marist today: "Do you hesitate?"

April, 1842

Father Colin said: "Look at the apostles: they sold everything. Jesus Christ called them to follow him only to use them in hard work. They did not hesitate. When we know the one who is calling us, when we know that God is everywhere with us, what then should we fear?"

To obtain God's blessing on our ministry, let us pray the blessed Virgin to guide us in all things. Let us say to her, 'Blessed Virgin, show me the will of your divine Son.' Having done that, let us have no more fear, even if we had to die as a witness to our faith."

The Mayet Memoirs

Missionary vocation

Mary totally focussed on the coming of God, Jesus going round the towns and villages of Judea and moved with compassion at the sight of the crowds who were harried and dejected: these are the images that nourish Colin's meditation on the missionary vocation of Marists. The missionary experience of Colin and of the first Marists gives this meditation a context which is more concrete, more defined, more rooted in time and place....

If we want to hear Colin clearly when he tells Marists that their vocation is to go from place to place, we have to ensure that this expression evokes for us the sorts of things that it evoked for him: Jesus going through the villages and towns of Judea, Mary focussing all her desires on the coming of God in Jesus, the happiness of the woman who finds the lost coin. It is from that standpoint also that we can understand from within how Colin perceived the demands of this missionary vocation.... Poor, free from temporal administration, ready to go anywhere: that's how Colin sees Marists.

Gaston Lessard, sm

Time to strike camp

The point is that Colin characterises the age not as the age of Satan, but as the age of Mary; not as an age of sin, but as an age of grace. It is not a time to pitch camp in the desert and rue the harshness of the environment, but a time to strike camp and set out for the promised land; not a time to bemoan the loss of faith, but a time to “recreate the faith of the first believers”; not a time to take refuge under Mary’s mantle as though returning to a womb of safety, but a time to assist at a new birth of the Church. Colin’s reading of the signs are positive, creative, Gospel-inspired: where sin is abounding, grace abounds even more.

Edwin Keel, sm

Time is short

All my experiences and encounters in third world countries fill me with the worrisome conviction that time is short. Do we Christians not hesitate too much and too long? Do we not plan too far ahead and do we not play it safe too much? Is it not true that too easily we choose the beaten and safe paths and that we lose courage too quickly whenever it is a matter of trying something new and of taking risks? I do not mean here to plead for absurd panicking. But if it is true that Scripture calls us to decipher the signs of the times, then that means also, in my opinion, that today we need to appreciate how little time we have left and be ready to act quickly.

Pedro Arrupe, sj

Time for action

One thing is certain for me: the day when all this stops being for Marists a wish, a word, or a problem, and becomes a commitment to identify ourselves with the mission of the Church - the day when we are poor and forgotten, making our own the cause of the poor and the abandoned - then we will have discovered the meaning and richness of the Spirit of the Society and of her Mission. On that day we will have torn down the barriers which have been hiding our identity and have been crippling so many efforts.

Bernard Ryan, sm



Attentive to the calls of the Church and the world, we try to respond creatively in any form of active service, according to the missionary charism of the congregation, concerned only that the Gospel be proclaimed.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions n. 18