

## Most present

Even though Our Lady makes only occasional appearances in the New Testament writings, it is deeply rewarding to study those appearances. One common feature is in them all: she is "there", she is "available", and even though she may be most hidden, she is also most present. Right through the hidden life at Nazareth, at Cana, during Jesus' public ministry, at Calvary and in the Upper Room at Pentecost, Mary is present, ministering to Christ in the Church. When we search for the "spirit" of Mary, we will find it somehow here in this "presence", this 'availability': service without noise, the primacy of living over talk, availability for work with others, a simple and warm approach to people, a certain ability to work without too much insistence on personal success or consolation. This at least is how Father Colin saw the meaning of "hidden and unknown". Whenever he encourages Marists to be "hidden and unknown" it is always in the context of the most active and varied work: in the pulpit, in the confessional, in the classroom, in the workplace - in fact anywhere in the world. It is by being willing to clear a space for God to work with the other person that one becomes "hidden and unknown". And so, Colin never presents "hiddenness" as a goal to be sought in itself. It is always seen as a consequence of an interior attitude of mind, and as a means of doing the work of Mary more effectively. To speak properly of being hidden and unknown, then, we need to link this phrase with the other phrases that Colin uses to describe the Marian disciple. We need to see it as connected with what he says about greed and ambition, about "the only way to do good", about 'winning souls by submitting to them', and above all we need to remember that he always used the phrase when he spoke about "going everywhere", "doing everything or anything", "invading the world". There's always the danger that we may think of this charge to work in a hidden way as applying only to the big things we take on: our global mission and our important activities. But it runs much deeper than that; it permeates everything we do, even the little details of our daily routine. That is why the Marist enterprise allows for such a variety of personalities within it. Reflective types, outgoing types – all can be, each in his or her own way, hidden and unknown, if that spirit is rightly understood. Perhaps what it best means is: "Be present wherever you are, and let the love of God and Mary flow through you to all those whose lives you touch, and don't let yourself get in the way".

August 22, 1847

*Father Colin said: "Let us go everywhere, let us do all the good that we can, all the while remaining unassuming and hidden... Let us understand (the Society's) goal properly. There are those who think that Marists devote themselves only to works that are hidden, unknown, neglected... Gentlemen, the Society does not refuse them, it greatly prefers them.... But the Society will not shrink from any ministry, from any task."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## Quiet action

In 1986 the CBS-TV team produced a series of four programmes on the Church in Latin America. The series covered the work of the Church in Lima, Peru; in Sao Paulo, Brazil; and in Managua, Nicaragua. These places were chosen because they showed the many diverse challenges facing the Church in Latin America. In Peru and Brazil, the CBS team followed the work of Marists working in both these countries. Callao in Peru has a population of close to one million Catholics, there are few jobs available, there is massive poverty, and not much hope for economic change. The Marist parish of St Rose runs a food bank which provides breakfast for about 500 school children each morning. In Brazil, Marists serve in Sao Paulo, which is the largest archdiocese in the world. They work among those whose chances of economic improvement are minimal. At the end of the filming, CBS producer John Santos said: "What impressed me tremendously in the filming of the programs is the quiet dedication of the Marists we met along the way. On the one hand we met the great thinkers and the church hierarchy, but on the other hand is the profound ministry of the Marists who put all of the talk into action."

## *Hidden, yes: sterile, no!*

Colin never at any time suggested that the unobtrusive way of acting that he recommended for Marists meant they should not be in the forefront of the church's mission. And yet, even from the early years of Marist existence, there appear to have been Marists who interpreted the ideal of the hidden life as a reason for excluding this or that type of work. Once again, we have reason to be grateful to Mayet, the faithful observer of the scene, who in 1867 wrote this forceful comment:

*May we be permitted to remark that Father did say unceasingly: "hidden and unknown", but not "dead". It is the hidden life that he praised, not a useless, sterile life; it is the nothingness of humility, of self-contempt, of modesty, not the nothingness of the tomb. While he repeated without ceasing "hidden and unknown", he also repeated without ceasing that we are called, that we must offer ourselves, to do great things for God. More, he even made his "hidden and unknown" the true basis for great deeds. How wrong would be those who, being of a temperament that is soft and peaceful, or fearful and pessimistic, or cowardly and lazy, would want to shut themselves up in their shell under the pretext that we must lead a hidden life, and who would do nothing, or next to nothing, under the pretext that we must act "hidden and unknown". That mistake would be even more prejudicial to good, and to souls, if it were made by a local Superior. Nature is clever at self-justification. Corpses are also "hidden and unknown"; good-for-nothings are "hidden and unknown", too. Yes, it is the hidden life that Father extols, and to which we are called with Mary's example, but it is LIFE.... We will make this remark only once; the thing is so obvious. But we do feel that we should make it at least once, because, on very rare occasions, we have seen some subject, and even a superior, make a false application, at least in part, of this vital, productive principle "hidden and unknown", which they made a principle of death, of sterility, and even of sheer idleness.*

## *False interpretation*

The statement of Mayet shows what Father Colin really meant: it was the basis for great deeds and never a pretext not to do something. And it is very well analysed: "Nature is clever at self-justification". It is so easy for us to look for pretexts not to go out and work, to look for pretexts precisely to shut ourselves in our shell; and it is so hard, sometimes, to leave our warm houses and go out, go out into the cold to meet the danger, to meet the world and what it requires from our responsibilities. Always the danger will be to say: "Oh no! We are not supposed to do so, we are supposed to be hidden and unknown. Let us stay at home, then; let us not undertake this or that work, these new things, because you know, we are supposed to be hidden and unknown." "Never would such a reasoning enter into the preoccupation of Father Colin. That would be a false interpretation.

*Jean Coste, sm*

## *Wrong interpretations*

The dangers of half-understanding this phrase, of seeing one side and not the other, are obvious: we go for the "hidden" bit, and finish up hermits; or go for the "unknown" bit, and be simply lazy, inactive, opposed to change; or go for "in the world" and become mere activists, or secular humanists. Or we make "hidden and unknown" selective, and think that it restricts us to special kinds of works, the hidden and unwanted works. All of these interpretations are wrong.

*Kevin Maher, sm*

*The personal inspiration of our Founders, "hidden and unknown in the world", forcibly recalls this ideal for us. Far from preventing us from undertaking great things for God, it tells us how they should be done, how to become useful instruments in God's hands, fully open to his action.*

*Marist Sisters' Rule of Life n.6*