

## Care for the people of God

As if it were not enough for God's compassion to be revealed in both masculine and feminine images, the picture that Jesus painted of God was even more vivid. When the Pharisees and Scribes complained that Jesus was too close to sinners, He told three parables about God's compassion: the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Jesus' crowning picture is that of the Father who waits anxiously, daily, for the return of the prodigal, and is "moved with compassion" when he sees the son "a long way off" in the distance. Jesus Himself is the image of the Father; and He is the friend of sinners, Samaritans and lepers, and all those who for one reason or another are, or feel themselves to be, on the margins. The Gospels often describe Jesus as being "moved with compassion" and the Greek words used in this phrase mean literally "moved in one's bowels". The Greeks regarded the bowels as we might regard the heart: as the centre of one's deepest feelings. So the words for compassion in Hebrew and in Greek stem from the words for "womb" and for "bowels" - in other words, the deepest, most personal and most intimate parts of one's being. When Jean-Claude Colin said that Marists were to be "instruments of divine mercy", this is the sort of mercy we are to think of: a compassion that comes from one's depth, a love full of longing to gather, to unite, and to reconcile. He saw this compassion mirrored in a particular way in Mary, and in his view Marists are to resemble her in this attitude to the people of God. He saw Marists as *agents of gathering*, bringing everybody into the People of God, and pushing the boundaries of the Church to the furthest limits to ensure that everybody can be included. This means being *agents of compassion*, ensuring that God's longing for closeness is experienced by everyone, especially those at the edge of the Church. It also means that Marists will be *agents of unity*, doing all they can to break down and heal the divisions and barriers that exist between the people of God. Sometimes this will create tensions for Marists who may find that they are "loyal critics" of the Church, loving and supporting the Church while all the time working "to begin a new church". But Colin insists that Marists begin this work "at home", as it were, in their own local church or diocese, working with such support for the bishop of their diocese that he can look on them - priests, religious and laity - as people who are really with him: in fact, "as his own" people.

On September 27, 1842, the last day of the general retreat at Belley, Father Colin said:

"Look at the Blessed Virgin! See how she hastened the coming of God by her burning desire. When she learned that she had been chosen to be his mother, what an effort she made to co-operate! When Jesus Christ was born, he was the object of all her thoughts and affections. After his death, her sole thought was the extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation. That is the sign by which, precisely, you can recognise a Marist."

*The Mayet Memoirs*

## Agents of gathering

The Society of Mary exists not because of the early Marists' concern for Mary, or because of their concern about people's devotion to her, but because of Mary's concern for the Church, because of her devotion to God's people.

*Edwin Keel, sm*

One of the characteristic features of the "new church" that Father Colin envisaged was that it would be a community which would not be restricted to clearly definable and easily observable boundaries, but which would push the limits of welcome and mercy to the furthest extremes, in order to gather everyone into its fold. This is why the involvement of lay people was so important to his idea of the Society of Mary. It is clear that from the very beginning Colin considered lay involvement in the Society's mission as an essential means of diffusing the work of Mary, to "bring everything under her fold". This would be a way of continuing her wish to "extend and develop the mystery of the Incarnation".



## Agents of prodigal love

Marist artist Peter Healy portrays something of the rugged strength of compassion in his painting of the prodigal son and the prodigal father. In telling this story, Jesus tried to show that our God is a God who creates a community of equals, a community of brothers and sisters. The main point of the story is probably the point that frequently escapes us. Both sons in the story put too much emphasis on their actions, their concrete behaviour. The younger son sees his deeds as making him undeserving of his father's forgiveness, so he does not expect or hope for wholehearted forgiveness. He is prepared to accept the position of a servant as long as his hunger is satisfied. The older son sees his actions as totally justifying him, and is angry when his father acts in an unexpected way. But the father begins with quite another logic: both boys are my sons, and one has returned to life. What matters is not the virtues of one son and the vices of the other. The only thing that matters is what leads to tenderness and compassion. To be an "instrument of divine mercy" is to be an agent of *this* sort of compassion.



## Agents of unity

"The Church recognises in her a mother who keeps watch over its development and does not cease to intercede with her Son to obtain for Christians more profound dispositions of faith, of hope, of love. Mary seeks to promote the greatest possible unity among Christians. There is no ecumenical heart greater or more ardent than Mary's."

*Pope John Paul II*

One of the wonderful stories told about King Solomon's wisdom is found in the book of Kings. (1 Kings 3: 16) Two women came to Solomon for judgement in their dispute. The two women lived in the same house together, and had both given birth to infant boys at the same time. During the night, one of the women lay on her child in her sleep and smothered him. She

surreptitiously swapped her child for the other woman's child, so that when the other woman woke up to feed the child, she found it was dead, but she was sure it was not her baby. The two women argued their case before Solomon. In the end, he decreed that a sword be brought, and that the living child be divided, giving half the child to each woman. The false mother was content with this judgement in order to win the argument. But the woman who was the true mother of the child cried out: "No! Give the child to this other woman, but do not divide the living child!" Solomon then knew who the true mother of the child was.

A true mother of any living body – including the Church – will do everything possible to avoid "dividing the living child".

*The Marist prepares himself to be present in the Church in Mary's way by learning to love the Church as it is while at the same time being an agent of its renewal. Because of their desire for the unity of the Church, the healing of divisions among God's people will be one of their constant concerns.*

*Marist Fathers' Constitutions nn. 16,78*