

"The only way to do good"

The Work of Mary – support for the Church and compassion for the world, loyalty to the mission of the Church and involvement in this world – when done in the spirit of Mary, will have a particular fruit and a characteristic feature. The fruit will be that the Gospel of Jesus will be able to take root in the ground of contemporary world and its individual cultures. The characteristic feature will be that the person who lives by this spirit will appear to be unnoticed while doing a great deal of good for others. Jean-Claude Colin found a way to describe this approach in a short phrase: "hidden and unknown in this world." Though not the motto of the Society of Mary, it has become a consecrated phrase in Marist thinking, and is in fact the touchstone of a life lived for God, a life whose focus of attention is the true needs of the other. Probably the phrase crystallised in Colin's mind during his years at Cerdon as he was putting together the first ideas on the Society. Interestingly, the first written record of the phrase is found in a letter written by Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn to Bishop Devie in 1824, which indicates that this was a phrase obviously used at Cerdon, and one whose importance was not lost on Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn who understood so well the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin. At the end of his life, Colin himself said, "When God speaks to a soul He says many things in a few words: for example that phrase 'Hidden and unknown in the world'." All of Colin's life had been spent in unpacking the layers of meaning and significance in that phrase. The mystery is that the God at work in this world of fractured faith is not a God who wishes to impose on us. God has endowed each person with reason and conscience and has allowed each one the freedom to decide, and the space to do so, never forcing, never dominating, but always encouraging, waiting, watching. This attitude of watching and waiting is one that christian tradition has applied especially to Mary. It is the special characteristic of a mother to let go, to leave free, to wait and to watch. Colin had another way of expressing the same idea: "We must win souls by submitting to them." Though Marists find their place "in this world", they take a specific stance in this world: a stance which places more attention on the situation of the other person, a stance which thinks only of helping the God hidden in the other person's life to emerge. To be "hidden and unknown" as one does "an enormous amount of good" is a sure sign that one's focus of attention is indeed on the needs of the other.

1847

On December 4, 1847, while speaking of the hidden life which must be that of the Society, Father Colin said, "That, gentlemen, is one of the characteristics of the Society, the one by which it should be distinguished, in accordance with the particular spirit of its vocation, from the others which have preceded it, which others I neither judge nor condemn. The animosity which some of them encounter does not all stem, it seems to me, from hatred for religion. In several cases, the alienation could also come in part from the style these communities have adopted... Let us... try to adopt a modest way of behaving, one which gives the least possible offence to those among whom we live, and which is in conformity with our vocation and the spirit of the blessed Virgin whose name we bear...."

1846

Returning to the Article, 'Hidden and Unknown', he said: "Really, that is the way to take over everything. It was the approach the Church followed, and you know that we must have no other model than the early Church."

1848

On November 19, 1848 I myself heard Father Colin say: "A layman told us recently, 'It is well known what the Marist Fathers do, but it is not talked about.' That gave me great pleasure, gentlemen."

The Mayet Memoirs

Hidden presence

God has placed within his Family,
as in every home,
the figure of a Woman,
who in a hidden manner
and in a spirit of service,
watches over that Family
and carefully looks after it
until the glorious day of the Lord.

Pope Paul VI

A style of mission

After the Revolution, mission preachers often adopted a heavy-handed style of preaching. The mood of the time was the re-establishment of the rights of God, and the re-installation of the power and presence of the Church. The culmination of the mission was the planting of a mission cross in the place where the mission was held. This was often a point of controversy among the people. Colin offered an alternative approach. He always preferred to be known as a "catechist" rather than as a "missioner"; he often asked no money for the missions the Marists preached; and as regards the mission cross, Mayet records him saying, *As long as the cross is planted in people's hearts, there is no need to plant it in the ground.*

It was all a way of winning souls by submitting to them.



A run-down school

In 1847 the Marists were asked to take responsibility for a school in Langogne, a small town of three thousand inhabitants. The school was in a disastrous state from every point of view: the condition of the buildings, the state of the finances, and the discipline of the pupils. Mayet writes in his *Memoirs*:

You would have no idea of the state in which our confrères found this house, the devotion which they showed to it, and everything they suffered there. Only the Society of Mary would have taken a College in such conditions. It was as bad as Oceania. The whole house was in a state of revolting filth; there was no linen. The rain and the snow came through in some rooms, the partitions were so badly made that you could join hands through the cracks in the wall, and in some rooms the draught put out the candles when the doors and windows were shut.

They walked past the dormitories and at that moment a legion of hungry fleas invaded the legs of the visitors, so that they had to beat a retreat. Then, one of the Confrères said, when they ran their hands over their arms handfuls of the annoying guests fell to the ground.

Pigs came into the dining room and the kitchen to find food, and they soiled all the rooms. Chickens climbed on to the pupils' tables and dirtied them.

And despite so many difficulties, so many privations, or because of such extreme poverty, they had an extraordinary cheerfulness which never left them for the whole year. They took everything with a laugh.

Mayet gives a long description of the transformation of the school. At the beginning of the Marists' time, the roll was 95, and after three years it had risen to 135. When the Marists had succeeded in transforming the school, the diocesan clergy expressed a desire to have it back. Fr Colin said he had no intention of entering into a struggle to remain there, and the Marists left in 1855.

Jean Coste comments on this moment of Marist history:

"That was Father Colin – that is really the sense of 'hidden and unknown'. I will not be the one interested only in my business, in the number of my colleges, of my parishes, and of the greatness that I represent in this diocese, in this parish, but I am interested in going where something has to be done. We are bound, says Fr Colin, to do what others do not like to do. And we will leave to them the opportunities, the great opportunities, in order to go where something has to be done. That is the real Colinian spirit!"