

"Useful instruments"

If the arena for Marists is the world as it is, how will they be able to become "useful instruments" of the mercy of God to an era which Colin described as an age of "indifference, unbelief, pride and madness", to a period of history where "faith is disappearing", to a world whose "inhabitants are bowed towards the earth, stuck to it, breathing for it alone"? Given his personal background, Colin could be excused for looking somewhat negatively at his times; but his analysis of the age of the Enlightenment is not too far from the mark. More importantly, he doesn't leave his followers without spiritual resources for meeting this age in a compassionate way. Once again, we are led back to the experience of Jesus in his preparation for mission. Between his calling by the Father and his being sent on Mission, Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert in order to be tempted there." In the desert, Jesus struggled against three temptations: the temptation to greed, looking after His own interests ("turn these stones into bread"); the temptation to pride, doing the spectacular thing ("throw yourself from the pinnacle"); and the temptation to impose Himself on others, and control their lives ("I will give you all the kingdoms of the world"). Jesus struggled against these three temptations, and won the victory through His commitment to live for "God alone". He emerged from the desert and began to preach with authenticity and authority. If we are to speak of a spirituality of Jesus, or a christian spirituality, its centre is probably somewhere here in this experience of Jesus. He resisted those self-seeking attitudes which destroy inner freedom, and He committed Himself to live for the God who loves and forgives unconditionally. To be a disciple of Jesus is to absorb these attitudes of Jesus. Mary herself learnt these attitudes, bringing to them her own qualities as woman, as mother, as support of the newly-emerging Church. To speak of a Marist spirituality, then, is to speak of a way of being a disciple of Jesus, based on Mary's discipleship of Him. And again, Colin's insight is simple and practical. He invites Marists, following in the footsteps of Mary, to keep their eyes fixed on God alone and on the Kingdom, taking a personal stand against the crippling forces of greed, pride and power; and he urges them to approach the people of our times with delicacy and sensitivity, winning others over by putting themselves in their shoes, rather than by imposing – even in the name of truth.

Notes taken between 1845 and 1849:

Father Colin said to us:

"Each century has its sickness. In the past there was faith but the heart was sick; now the malady has risen to the head. We live in a century of pride, of madness. We must cure this spirit by our simplicity, by our humility. In the pulpit let us not seem domineering, or else we shall alienate people. Man is more jealous than ever of his freedom, and his independence."

"The human race appears to me today to be like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten into by a worm."

"It is necessary to instruct, to present the truths of religion, to preach doctrine, but it must be done with great tact. Ours is a difficult age: so, no innuendo or acid remarks."

".... In these days we are on top of a volcano, a volcano of all the passions. People have eyes and do not see, ears and do not hear. The most absurd errors pass for truths. Well, it is in the midst of this century that the blessed Virgin shows herself."

The Mayet Memoirs

Modern world

Colin could not have sketched the modern world better: it is jealous of its freedom and its independence. Mary's intervention was to guide the Church through this new crisis, a Society doing what the Jesuits had done, but in the way Mary herself had been present in the apostolic Church: hidden and unknown. This new Church, a Marian-type Church, prepared to strip itself of its rights, its glory and its privileges, for the sake of the Word. A Church, and apostles, so unassuming, so devoid of ambition and thirst for prestige and recognition, that nothing will stand in the way of the Word itself being heard.

Jan Snijders, sm

In 1985 a symposium of the Bishops of Europe was held in Rome. Pope John Paul II spoke of the need for a new evangelization of Europe, a new approach to this re-evangelization, and of a special type of missionary who would be needed for this task. Here is part of what he said on that occasion:

"This man (of the modern world) who would like to be so adult, mature and free is also a man who flees from freedom in order to settle down into conformism, a man who suffers from loneliness, is plagued by various disturbances of the soul, seeks to get rid of death, and experiences a frightening loss of hope. This is the Europe and this is the man that we are called to evangelize today. New and immense tasks await and solicit us, but at the same time great possibilities and vivid expectations open up before us.

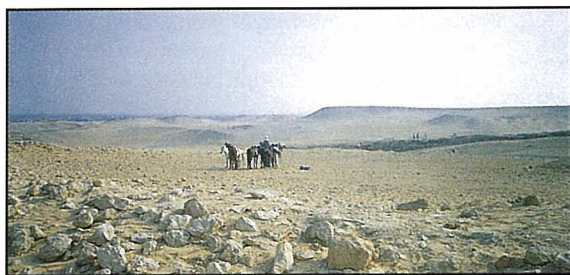
The work of evangelization is called to propose a new creative synthesis between Gospel and life.

The Church is called to give a soul to modern society ... and the Church must infuse this soul, not from above and outside, but penetrate within, making herself close to modern man. Thus an active presence and an intense participation in man's life is essential.

For this sublime mission aimed at the flowering of a new age of evangelization in Europe, evangelizers with a special preparation are required today. There is a need for heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who have a profound knowledge of the heart of present-day man, participating in his joys and hopes, anguish and sadness, and who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God. For this we need new saints."

Into the desert

"Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert"



We often use the word "desert" to describe an experience when one's life is brought into radical question, when things which were normally together seem to come apart. Those who survive these "desert" experiences emerge as more authentic and compassionate people. This was Jesus' experience as He struggled against the great illusions of greed, pride and power. Marists are invited to make the same journey with Jesus and Mary. Taking a stand against these crippling forces will enable Marists to become free people, "useful instruments" of God's mercy, and compassionate neighbours to their brothers and sisters.

Useful instruments

Later in his life, when Father Colin spoke about the sort of people he was looking for to be Marists, his criteria were clear. From his experience of the early Marist days, he was convinced that what was necessary to become a Marist was not great talent, or learning, or even great sanctity. What he wanted was people who could be "useful instruments" of God's mercy. And what made people "useful" in the eyes of Colin?

- * their interests:
"let them seek only the interests of Jesus and Mary."
- * their freedom:
"let them be ready to fly anywhere for the salvation of souls."
- * their point of reference:
"let us put on Christ's feelings for sinners."
- * their vision:
"like Mary, whose sole thought was the extension and development of the mystery of the Incarnation."
- * their manner:
"we must win souls by submitting to them."