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THE AGE OF MARY
LE SIÈCLE DE MARIE

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FOREWORD

Sometimes a saying is like a snowball that, made by a child's hands, rolls down a slope and grows. Given suitable conditions, it can turn into an avalanche. In the year 1800 somebody coined the phrase "The Age of Mary." It was picked up by many people and acquired layer after layer of new meaning. It turned into a mighty movement.

For the group of seminarians in Lyons around the year 1815, it came to mean that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was taking a particular interest in their historical situation: France, ravaged by revolution and war, but ravaged even more by corrosive ideas that were turning people away from the faith of their ancestors, slowly changing France into a dechristianized country. And Mary, the mother of mercy, establishing an atmosphere of mercy and compassion to replace the demanding and severe attitudes inherited from the heyday of Jansenism; Mary, woman and layperson, opening the gates of a very clerical Church to everyone, unbelievers included; Mary, humbly present in the early Church, again humbly present to teach the triumphalist Church of the counter-reformation and the baroque era to shed whatever could stand in the way of the Word being accepted by this new world.

The changes in the world that so alarmed the idealistic seminarians in the 1810's have proved to be much more powerful than could be foreseen. They have now spread all over the world, in what we call today Third World countries as well as in the so-called First World. This new world is not as evil as our seminarians feared: there is a great deal of sincerity, humaneness, a hunger for authenticity. But it is a world from which God seems to be absent, a world that is honestly and sincerely irreligious.

The group of seminarians grew into the Society of Mary. This Society found an inspired and inspiring leader in Jean-Claude Colin. Its members undertook to announce the Gospel to the modern world, promoting and anticipating among themselves a new Church after the model of Mary.

Somewhere along the slope, the snowball slowed down. Its momentum is gone. Has the Society lost sight of the mission facing it? The task is there, but can we get it moving again? Perhaps all we need is to hear the call again, stripped of its off-putting nineteenth-century moralizing and dramatizing, restated in a language we are more familiar with.

The conferences on Marist spirituality and Marist mission I was asked to give on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the approbation of the Society in the provinces of Boston and Ireland, and later on also in the Oceania regions of Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and New Caledonia, were an attempt at such a re-interpretation, inspired by Paul Ricoeur's reminder that it is only by interpreting that we can hear again.

On request of some Marists who attended the conferences, I have put the main ideas here in writing. Reducing the spoken word to a written text is not a satisfactory enterprise, nor a pleasant one. I fear that the readers, too, may consider this written text a little mummified. But this is the best I can do.

I did not work out all the themes I spoke on. A lot more was said, and could be written, on the core mission of the Society in relation to the various ministries that we are involved in, and that are of great importance to the evangelization of the modern world, e.g. education, foreign missions, ecumenism. Trying to write on those topics as well would mean delaying the publication of this booklet. Perhaps there will be other opportunities.

Another theme I had to leave out, but that I feel is of importance, concerns Marist attitudes within the Church, especially a Church that is so full of internal tensions as is the case today. What has “Mary in the midst of the apostles” to tell us about the conflicting demands of loyalty to the hierarchy - in Colin's mind, crucial to the Society - and of pastoral concern for “modern man”?

When I set out to put my views to Marist confreres and members of the other branches of the Marist family, I did not go without some apprehensions. Our spiritual heritage belongs not to our scholars, and even less to a private citizen without scholarly competence in things Marist. The enthusiastic response of Marists in different parts of the world provided a large dose of what theologians today call “reception”. They encouraged me to believe that my interpretation is somehow going into the right direction.

It is that belief which made me put these thoughts into writing and spread them around the Society. It is a pure coincidence that I should finish the task on the anniversary of the Founder's death. If by any chance these ideas do go into the right direction, he might from heaven give the snowball another push, to get it rolling again.

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Table of Contents

Foreword.....	3
1. Creative Fidelity.....	6
2. The End of Time: the Present Age.....	12
3. Instruments of Divine Mercy	20
4. Hidden and Unknown	30
5. A Tree with Many Branches	39
6. God Alone	46
Conclusion	51

1. CREATIVE FIDELITY

A Celebration

This year, 1986, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of our Society as an officially recognized religious community in the Church. It was in 1836 that Pope Gregory XVI formally approved the priests' branch of the Society of Mary. This calls for celebration: to thank God for the great things He has done through this Society, to sing praise for the *magnalia Dei*.

Great things He has done throughout the world. Great things He has done for each of us. We have been formed in a spiritual tradition, enriched by a worldwide brotherhood in which we are received and feel at home in so many countries.

This must first of all be a celebration of thanksgiving for the gifts we all have received through and in our Society, and for all the good that the Lord has done through us in many parts of the world.

A Heritage and a Trust

The spiritual formation we have received in the Society of Mary is of a distinctive kind. It has a character of its own. We grew up within a particular tradition that gave a specific slant to our prayer life, our apostolate, our community life. This complex of specific traditions makes up our Marist heritage.

Spiritual gifts, however, as Saint Paul teaches (1 Cor 12-14), are for the benefit of the community as a whole. The Marist heritage has not been given to us for our own individual betterment only. It has an importance for the Church. Religious orders especially, as our Founder was well aware, have a special contribution to make to the Church of their time. "Each Order has its vocation, its mission, its time." (FS = *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 5) And so, the spiritual heritage that we have received is at the same time a trust. It is something entrusted to us for the good of the Church. And for that reason we are responsible for it.

Apart from a celebration, this sesquicentennial has to be an examination of conscience: what have we done with the five talents that our Marist ancestors passed on to us? Shall we be like the faithful servant who produced five more talents from the ones entrusted to him? or shall we be like the wicked and lazy servant who returned the talent entrusted to him saying: "I hid your talent in the ground" (Mt 25:14-30)?

On the Way to Extinction?

As we celebrate our 150th birthday we are reminded of our age: a respectable century and a half; not much as far as religious orders go perhaps but long enough to remind us of our mortality.

Recent Marist documents have drawn our attention to an alarming age pyramid. The ratio of students to ordained priests is very low. We are a rapidly ageing population, and demographically we are on the way to dying out. A few provinces may have to ask themselves whether they have not in fact passed the point of no return! Other provinces still show signs of healthy growth, but nevertheless Marists must begin to wonder if their Society is going to join, in a generation or two, the 70 percent of religious orders founded since the year 1300 that have become extinct (B.J. Ryan, Report to the General Chapter; S.M. Document 5, 1983).

Should this throw us into panic? Or call for a desperate drive to recruit vocations for the Society? Why should our Society not be subject to the law of all that is human and of this world, namely that “it is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31)? Isn't it part of the religious vocation to be a sign of another world to come, and of the Christian conviction that nothing in this world is, in final analysis, of lasting value? Jean-Claude Colin accepted that the Society of Mary had a specific mission, for a particular time. He accepted that religious orders will “fall when the need for which God created them has been met.” (FS, doc. 5) If the Society of Mary has made its contribution and finished its mission, then we should not be afraid to accept that it is approaching its end. And accept it gracefully!

The Question to Ask

The question to ask is therefore not, Will the Society of Mary survive? Certainly not in a wave of panic, or anxiety. If we have fulfilled our mission, then it is only right that we stage a gentle and graceful exit. The question is rather whether we have indeed fulfilled our mission! We do not have to worry about our communal survival. We do have to worry about the talents entrusted to us. Did we indeed put them to full use? Or did we bury them into the ground? We shall be asked to give account of our stewardship, not of our survival.

What if we have neglected our mission? What if we have not put the specific heritage given to us for the good of the Church, to full use? In that case, who knows, but the Lord of the vineyard is taking it away from us in order to entrust it to others who will “produce its fruit” (Mt 21:44)?

A Spiritual Niche?

Thomas Aquinas felt that the perfection of the universe was such that it would not lack any nature which could possibly exist. This may sound a little ethereal in the twentieth century, but biology too teaches us today that nature abhors a vacuum and that evolution will sooner or later fill the available niches from whatever species are available.

Is it not so in the world of the spirit as well? A few centuries ago some reformers thought that there was no place in the Church for religious life. Now we see different forms of religious life growing in some of the Churches of the Reformation: Franciscans, Benedictines. One Pope decided that the Church would be better off without the Jesuits, but a few decades later a successor had to admit that the decision had been a mistake.

There are niches to be filled in the world of the spirit. Our question is, Does the Society of Mary represent such a place? If there is a particular niche we were called to fill, then we should identify it more clearly than we have done so far. Also, we should adopt it vigorously and move

out of our present stagnation. Or step aside, and let others fill the niche we have failed to recognize.

A Blurred Vision

It would be interesting to ask, let us say, a hundred Marist priests, chosen at random throughout the Society, succinctly to state what they think the Society of Mary is all about. I venture to think that if one tried to distill a common Marist vision out of the answers, it would prove to be a very difficult task.

If, instead of limiting the correspondents to a terse statement, one were to allow them to write a few pages, then it would become easier to pick out common elements. No doubt we share certain basic attitudes, a certain sense of priorities, a few allergies. But would a clear vision emerge, in sharp focus, one able to rally Marist minds?

Let us face it, as we celebrate our hundred and fifty years, and thank the Lord for all the good there was and is in our Society, we have to admit that our problem is not so much a demographic slump, which we share with many others, but blurred vision.

Messieurs, we must study the spirit of the Society more and more. I feel, alas, that unless we renew ourselves, our treasure will run out... We must constantly overhaul it, and wind ourselves up, as people do with clocks to make them go. Yes, unless we are attentive and generous, the spirit of our Society will soon be lost (FS, doc. 59, § 2).

Renewal... Re-Founding

“Renew ourselves,” said Jean-Claude Colin already in 1842. It again became the in-word of the post-conciliar years and their chapters of renewal. Today people seem to feel that the word is worn; we need something stronger, we speak of re-founding. But people who use the word are not too sure of what they are using it for.

In contrast with the 1960's, most Marists today will probably agree that what needs to be renewed are not administrative structures. Neither, I think - but with this view some Marists perhaps disagree - is renewal first a matter of individual conversion, however important and essential that will always remain.

What needs to be renewed, re-founded, or perhaps re-found, is the common vision that enthused the young seminarians in Lyons during their last years of preparation for the priesthood, the vision that led them to the chapel of Fourvière, that enabled them to persist in a common project through the years of dispersion and that after twenty years was vigorous enough to make them adopt what at the time must have seemed the most daunting of mission fields.

Without a renewed and fully shared vision the Society of Mary either acknowledges that “the need for which God created them has been met,” (FS, doc. 5) at which point we move off stage; or, worse, we admit that really we did not recognize our mission, we did not fully adopt it, we failed. For the Christian, failure means another chance. If there has been failure then this is the time of grace. All through the Marist world there are signs of genuine searching, and of converging lines. Who knows but that this celebration may be the occasion for us to follow up the converging lines to the point where a renewed vision will appear and draw us together.

To Found, to Renew, or to Restore?

Questions about the renewal of religious life or changes needed within religious communities were not invented in the Second Vatican Council. Before a council was mentioned, those questions were hotly debated by religious and bishops alike. A whole literature was already on hand to provide matter for discussion.

Three alternative approaches presented themselves to the Council Fathers. One was to aim at something similar to what had been done in former days by Saint Bernard, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Matteo da Bascia: let the religious orders return to a literal observance of the original rules of Saint Benedict, the Carmel, Saint Francis, etc.

Another way was to aim at making a clean sweep of the past: weren't there simply too many orders and congregations, all encumbered by too many burdensome and obsolete traditions?

Eventually the Council chose for a middle way between founding and restoring: an *adaptatio renovate* implying both “a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes,” and “their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 2)

When our own chapter of renewal met in 1969, all three orientations had their defenders. There were capitulants who felt the Society should, with a minimum of adaptations, return to the strict observance of the constitutions written by our Founder. Another considerable group was inclined to bypass what they saw as Marist historicism: the meticulous search for Colnian authenticity. Like the Council, our chapter eventually opted for the complexities of a middle way, still to be explored.

Creative Fidelity

In choosing for the middle way our chapter of renewal acknowledged the alidity, up to a point, of the two other options. One cannot build a future by pulling up one's roots. Pure creativity is an illusion. Human beings do not create from nothing, *ex nihilo*; we create by re-ordering, re-shaping what we have received from our past, consciously or unconsciously. Creativity always implies a fidelity to what we are.

The other option likewise contains a valid message. One cannot build a future by repeating the past. In fact there is no surer way to warp the original meaning of a text, or an institution, than literal repetition. As we move through time the meanings of words shift, the implications of behaviour change: the same words, the same behaviour come to mean something quite different. There is no fidelity without creativity. If we re-interpret the past we can make mistakes: there is a risk of false translating. But unless we re-interpret the past, we shall certainly destroy its original meaning.

As the sailor crosses the ocean the horizon looks the same each day, but one thing is sure: it is a different one from hour to hour. To chart a course over the ocean the sailor must assume that his horizon shifts all the time. To chart our course through history, we too must assume that our horizon shifts relentlessly, demanding constant readjustments. “We can believe only by interpreting... It is by interpreting that we can hear again.” (P. Ricoeur) If today we do not hear the Marist message any more, if it has become insipid, if it strikes us as mere “historicism,” is it

perhaps because we have failed to interpret it? “Is ... an interpretative contemporary translation ... not essentially the fidelity that follows from man's historicity?” (E. Schillebeeckx)

Marist Roots

If our chapter of renewal opted for an *aggiornamento* based on faith in the value of a specifically Marist religious life (cf. DD 1-4), and if today “there is in the Society a better understanding of the person, spirituality, and vision of Father Colin and the early Marists,” (cf. mission statement, 1985 general chapter) then we owe a great deal to the foresight and courage of the first postwar administration under Fathers A. Cyr and F. Wieschemeyer, which commissioned and encouraged professional and scholarly research into our Marist origins.

We owe an even greater debt to Jean Coste who, assisted for many years by Gaston Lessard, re-discovered for us the spirit and the aims, indeed the very dreams and vision of our founders, and provided the Society with publications of the highest quality: *Antiquiores textus, Origines maristes*, numerous articles, and lately with *A Founder Speaks* and *A Founder Acts*. Partly due to this opening of archives, similar publications became possible in other branches of the Society.

From History to Hermeneutics

Understanding history is a complex process that combines two very different movements, very different and yet constantly intertwined. The historian, as historian, tries to get as close as possible to the events of the past. He tries to feel what people felt, look at things as the people of the past themselves did. He knows he can never detach himself completely from his own time and from his own experience, but he nevertheless attempts the impossible: to step back into the past as it was.

Stepping back into the past as it was is only possible if, and insofar as, our horizon of understanding at some point coincides with the one of people in the past. Only then can two horizons fuse (H.-G. Gadamer). This fusing of two horizons enables us to undertake the second movement of historical understanding: extend the significance of the past into the present. Only this second, hermeneutical, movement can restore to the past its full impact. Unless we have re-created the significance of the past in terms of today, we remain blind to its past significance as well. Moreover, our “purely historical” understanding atrophies into mere historicism or archeology.

The first movement - from the present into the past - is the prerogative of the historian. The second movement is one shared with the whole community whose history they explore. Our Marist historians have done their part; has the Society done its own? Have we made the follow-up with a contemporary interpretation of our past that brings the significance of the past back to life? Perhaps our historians did their part so brilliantly that we, the Society, forgot about our responsibility to translate our past into the reality and the language of today. As a consequence our history appeared to many Marists interesting but hardly exciting. Simply hearing our history did not spark off a new vision for the Society today that we could all share and that could bring us together into a critical mass, source of new energy.

The theologian must “mediate between a cultural matrix and the significance of a religion in that matrix.” (B. Lonergan) For “religion” read “our historical heritage.” For “theologian” read “all of us.” We do not live in the same culture, the same civilization as our Marist founders. The

cultural matrix is a new one. It is up to us to mediate between the inherited deposit and our own culture, its values, its problems.

Our culture is as different from that of early nineteenth-century France as was the Polynesian culture the first Oceania missionaries met. With the whole of the Christian faith of which it is a part, our Marist spiritual endowment needs to be, not only adapted, but “inculturated” or “contextualized” into the world of today. And that is not a matter of dressing up. It does not leave the message untouched: “The context affects the content.” (R. McAfee Brown)

A Wager

There is a risk in attempting a contemporary interpretation: it may turn out to be too creative and lack faithfulness; it may also turn out to be the opposite, too literal. It is a risk we must take. Failure to interpret is certain to cancel the significance of the past.

Interpreting is not an intellectual exercise only. No interpretation follows logically and cogently from the past. No particular interpretation is necessary; interpretations are possibilities. We can know beforehand that certain interpretations are simply excluded, but we cannot beforehand delineate what is possible. Interpretation resembles language competency: the grammar only defines the outer borders of what the language is capable of saying, it indicates what would be wrong. It does not foresee the sparkling new language that writers yet unborn will create within the limits of established grammar.

To find out whether an interpretation is valid and able to arouse common assent and commitment there is only one way: surrender ourselves to its perspectives and see where it leads. It demands a surrender that is open and prayerful. Is this where the Lord is leading us? “We must wager that it will prove to be of value, enter into its circle, in an act of interpretation” that is both faithful and creative (P. Ricoeur).

2. THE END OF TIME: THE PRESENT AGE

A Treasure

“Unless we renew ourselves, our treasure will run out,” said Jean-Claude Colin (FS, doc. 59). We have a treasure in our founding texts. In fact we have a surfeit of texts, and perhaps that is part of our problem. We have so many texts, especially through the Mayet Memoirs, that we don't always know where to start.

So let us begin with lining up the major themes, i.e., those that seem to recur regularly in different forms. Let us overlook the nuances of each text for the time being. What themes do we get?

Hidden and unknown, instruments of mercy, the end of time, the present age, the tree with many branches, Mary in the midst of the apostles, Nazareth, the early Church, God alone, humility and simplicity, prayer...

Guided by the subject index of *A Founder Speaks*, we can criss-cross through this treasure and find every time something new.

A Structure

All these fine texts on the many aspects of our vocation are, however, no more than a random collection of building materials. We all know what happens if we plan a building and start collecting materials: bricks and timber, cement and sand, roofing material and reinforcing rods. It can all be nicely stacked up near the building site but it does not add up to a building. In fact, if we do nothing with it, everybody, including ourselves, will soon start picking out bits and pieces that just happen to come in handy to fix one thing or another. And it will not take long before most of the materials are gone.

What is needed is a plan, and also workers who are going to put all those bricks and all that concrete and timber together accordingly.

Have we not used our treasure too often as a handy stack of ideas we could use for one thing or another, without ever reconstructing for ourselves the building itself, the building of what our Marist vocation is to be?

Structural exegesis of scripture has developed techniques for this purpose. They consist, among other things, in looking for recurring combinations: which idea regularly calls up which other? Where are the constant linkages? Is there a central idea that in turn summons others and could therefore be considered the main concern of the writer or speaker?

The Central Idea

The central theme that seems to call up now this Marist idea, now that, is, amazingly, one that, so it appears to me, we usually leave out of our considerations, or to which at least we give little importance. It is the combination of the two references to “the present age” and “the end of time.” Our Founder seemed to have a strong conviction that the particular time in which he lived was somehow special, that it even was in some way “the end of time.”

This present age is so special that Mary is going to intervene in a novel way: it is the age of Mary. It is a special time that asks for special mercies, that needs a new approach based on humility and simplicity; it is this time that needs a “hidden and unknown” way of working and living on the part of those called upon to serve it for the sake of the Gospel. It is a time of unbelief and pride, it demands more learning, and at the same time respect for its fierce sense of independence (cf. the many texts referred to in the subject index of *A Founder Speaks* under the heading “present age”).

There are several good reasons for avoiding in our reading precisely these central themes. To say that one's own time is different from all previous ones sounds hackneyed at best. Moralizing about the evils of one's time is a preachy thing of times past: no priest today would dare to do it from the pulpit. It all sounds a little overdramatic and trite. Talk about the end of time is something we prefer to leave to the evangelists of the sects that abound everywhere.

So we do the decent thing: we skip it. And so we deprive our Marist structure of the very thing that can, I feel, hold it together and restore its spark and vigour.

Behind the Available Concept

One of the key principles in interpretation is to take into account that people are always limited by what has been called the available language (P. Ricoeur). Not only do we have to limit ourselves to the language understood by our hearers. We ourselves are products of our time, we think in its language, even if what we are trying to say has a relevance far beyond the here and now.

Our founders were country priests, it came naturally to them to use a preachy language and express themselves in the sort of imagery that people expected of them. They thought in that sort of language and had no other.

To really hear them today we must put aside our own linguistic sensitivities that are, after all, as much part of our historical context as their way of speaking was part of theirs.

And then the real question arises: was Jean-Claude Colin just ranting? Was he simply declaiming on the sins of his time, probably no worse than those of other times? Was he out to make his point by calling his time, rather clumsily, the end of the world?

In fact, Jean-Claude Colin was very anxious to avoid that sort of thing!

Be very prudent in the pulpit. The time we live in calls for the greatest prudence in preaching, prudence in talking about vices, prudence in the presentation of truths. We should be very clear that our age is one of pride and arrogance. People

call it a century of enlightenment, and in material terms that may be true, but in religious terms, it is a century of the profoundest ignorance (FS, doc. 142, § 2).

In *A Founder Speaks*, Colin's "siècle des lumières" is translated very correctly by the term "enlightenment." It would have helped, had the word been printed with a capital letter. We would have seen immediately that all this talk of a very different time, so strange that it seemed to be "the end of the world" was in fact a reference to what is indeed a very special period of history. In English it is called the Enlightenment. Some use the German term, *Aufklärung*.

The name Enlightenment, or its equivalents, had been coined by the very men who proudly announced the final victory of reason over ignorance, superstition, and obscurantism. It probably had not yet become, as much as nowadays, a technical term referring to a specific period of history, but the scornful way in which Colin uses it indicates that it already was something of a fixed expression. Although the word is not very frequent in our founding texts, there is little doubt that whenever there is mention of "the present age" this is in fact what they were referring to.

The Marist founders had a very definite understanding of what they were called to do. They had a clear sense of mission.

We are now in the age of Mary. Yes indeed, for this is an age of indifference, unbelief, an age of crime, of false learning ... (FS, doc. 78, § 2).

Why has the Society of Mary waited until the nineteenth century to make its appearance? If not a single hair falls from our head unless it is the will of the Father in heaven, we must not think that this happened by chance. Yes, it means that the blessed Virgin is going to redouble her efforts at the end of time ... (FS, doc. 118,)

Our founders saw the Society as a mission to a very definite period of history. It was not just a way of life; it was not a project to promote some special devotion to Mary; it was not designed to take care of particular apostolic needs, such as parishes or education or even home missions. It was a mission to a particular period of history, and everything specific about the Society was geared to enabling Marists to fulfill that mission: a Society of clearly distinctive characteristics for a mission not to a particular place but to a particular time.

The Enlightenment

What was this Enlightenment to which they knew themselves called to minister? Instead of listening now to the early Marists' description of it, let us listen to our own historians.

When we speak of the Enlightenment today, we refer especially to the eighteenth century, when the fundamental changes in scientific, intellectual, and moral ideas that had begun in the Renaissance began to dominate, in a definitive way, most of Europe. Science and technology led to an understanding of, and a mastery over, the forces of nature such as had never been dreamt possible before. Progress and evolution became accepted ideas and discredited the age-old conception of a divine and immutable order. Man and his world are seen increasingly as products of history, a history moreover that man has in his own hands.

Civilization can progress indefinitely, provided individuals are left free to express themselves and develop themselves, without constraints from either Church or State. All men are born equal and free, and liberty is the right to happiness and self-fulfillment. Nature is essentially benevolent, and it will sort itself out if we leave it alone.

The absolute certainties of logic, mathematics, and dogma are discredited. True knowledge is a matter of provisional hypotheses, empirically tested. Claims of absolute certainty usually lead to fanaticism and abuses of authority.

In social, scientific, political, and religious fields the Enlightenment rejects authority. Society must learn to be tolerant of different views and ideas. If revelation and other non-rational criteria of knowledge are allowed to interfere with human freedom, they only maintain superstitions and obscurantism.

For institutions to function well, they should constantly be open to criticism. Power should never be concentrated in any individual, but spread over mutually independent institutions.

The only valid norm of morality is the autonomous human person. And what the Enlightenment found particularly distasteful was the idea of original sin and man's inability (so loudly proclaimed especially by Jansenism) to cope with himself and his world: a sort of perpetual and irremediable infancy.

This inability of man to cope had for too long been used to justify the clerical tutelage that the men of the Enlightenment openly challenged. They scorned the pretensions of ecclesiastical and political authority wherever it seemed to infringe on the claims of reason. Man held to the conviction that he had come of age. And as one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America proudly said, "It is in man's power to begin the world over again." (Thomas Paine) (1)

The Marist Response

The Marist reaction, especially as we can see it in Jean-Claude Colin, was quite remarkable for several reasons.

First of all, it is remarkable that they were so vividly aware of what was going on in the larger "world" from which their seminary training and their family background would have kept them at a safe distance.

Secondly, they were remarkably accurate in their assessment of the Enlightenment as a very radical change in Western civilization. The dawning of the Enlightenment did indeed mark the end of a world. Until then religious values, meaning, and structures had exercised a powerful influence on public life. The ancient Roman civilization had never been "pagan" in the sense of being areligious. And after the decline and breakup of Christendom, religion had remained a major force in both Catholic and Protestant countries in Europe. To refer to this change as "the end of time" was not as outlandish as one might think. A world that was losing all official and public reference to religious values and meaning was an entirely new phenomenon.

The human race appears to me today like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten into by a worm. That worm is unbelief, the indifference which has made the world pagan for a second time (FS, doc. 117, § 2).

In fact, pagan in this way, for the first time. This assessment was not as common as we may think. It was John Henry Newman, less inclined to speak in dramatic terms, who shared the same judgement when he said, "... our days have a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it, the experience namely of a world that is simply irreligious."

Thirdly, our founders could have joined the romantic trends and the restoration movements by which many in France tried to forget about the mad excesses to which the Enlightenment ideas had led during the Revolution. They would have been forgiven for dreaming of a world in which the old certainties would be restored. But they did not. They did not turn their backs on the modern world of their time. They accepted that it had come to stay.

Fourthly, and most importantly, they accepted the challenge. This new world was in need of their ministry. They would announce the Gospel to that new world as it was, on its own terms. If the traditional Church was not adjusted to this mission, then they would work towards the building of a new Church, according to another model. If traditional religious life was not equipped to deal with this task, then the Society of Mary would be different:

Let us not look at what the societies who have preceded us have done, for when a society comes to birth it is for a particular need... (FS, doc. 152, § 1).

Each age has seen new Orders come to birth. God has brought them to birth to meet current needs (FS, doc. 5).

Losing Sight of the Mission...

Unfortunately this vision of the Society of Mary faded after the first generation. The reasons may be many.

The remarkably accurate insights of Jean-Claude Colin into the gravity of the historical situation were perhaps too prophetic, perhaps they were expressed in too dramatic a way. The practical concerns of everyday life elbow long-term views aside.

All movements begin with creativity and enthusiasm. They draw generous spirits to throw in their lot with the charismatic leaders. But the real test comes with "routinization." The routine work that maintains the necessary institutionalization dulls the initial enthusiasm.

Perhaps the Society was unfortunate too in its second superior general. There is no better commentary than the following remarks of one who was first secretary to Jean-Claude Colin and then assistant to Favre, Colin's successor:

Very Rev. Fr Favre did not share this way of seeing the Society. He had less lofty ideas and feelings about the Society of Mary. He saw in her a congregation of pious priests, living under a broad and easy rule, doing home missions, running colleges, and available for apostolic works within a limited area and of a commonplace style. I am not saying this of my own accord: I have heard Father General himself speaking in such a way about the Society, reproaching Father Colin for having a too high idea of this Society and for having wanted to found a large religious order: those were his very words (Fr Jeantin).

...they [Favre, etc.] did not have a sufficiently exact idea of the Founder. Worse: they had no sufficiently correct idea of the Society of Mary. Whoever had had

even a little contact with Father Founder knew that the Society of Mary was destined to be a full-fledged religious order. She comes on the scene in this century of pride, luxury, materialism, sensuality, human and worldly progress, religious indifference, even godlessness. She is to counteract these lamentable trends through humility, unpretentiousness, mortification, simplicity, and all the other virtues that formed the character and spirit of Mary. In the mind of the Founder, the Society of Mary has to play a significant and important role, although a hidden one, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls in these last days. Hence, in his mind, a great and high idea of the sanctity that the members of the Society should attain.

This personal testimony is of capital importance for our history. It brings out both the original Marist vision and one of the major reasons why the Society of Mary lost sight of its mission.

Rediscovering the Mission

The general chapter of 1866 began to see that the Society was losing its original sense of mission. It asked the Founder to come back and write the sort of constitutions that would effectively express the original vision. This was no longer possible: the trend was never effectively reversed (J. Thornhill).

Only very recently, as more and more Marists have become familiar with the original Marist literature, especially through *A Founder Speaks* and *A Founder Acts*, are we re-discovering that the Society was something quite different from a “way of life,” or even a “spirituality.” The sense of mission is the very heart of our identity.

Today we are recovering that sense of mission. This is a quite recent development, which began to make itself felt between the last two Chapters and is still going on. When one compares the Constitutions texts prepared by these two Chapters [1977 and 1985], one recognizes this recovery of a sense of mission. Many Marists found inspiration in the statement of Marist identity set out in the first numbers of the draft Constitutions prepared by the 1977 Chapter (I know that text well since I helped to draft it). Today I would recognize that it has a serious defect. It is too “contemplative”. It does not issue with a proper urgency the Society's call to take up that mission which was essential to the creative moment of grace in which it has its origins.

This testimony by Fr John Thornhill qualifies his earlier one. The trend set by Fr Favre is being reversed today! Marists everywhere are waking up to a joyous sense of mission. The call is recognized by many as expressing something that has lain dormant in our collective consciousness for many years.

It is by Interpreting that we Hear Again

The clarion call to mission is being heard. But those who rise to answer it are left wondering where to go. "Mission" supposes a definite purpose. How can one be sent without being told to where, or to what?

The original sense of mission of our founders had such a purpose: it was a mission, not to a place but to a particular period in history, namely the period of the Enlightenment, that "present age" which they knew to be so profoundly affecting the world that they called it "the end of time."

What happened to the Enlightenment? Today we can clearly see that what the Marist founders correctly discerned to be a vast movement of the human mind was only a stage of a still vaster movement. It has affected now the large mass of people to an extent that was still unthinkable in the beginning of the nineteenth century. We have given it another name, but it is substantially the same thing, only much stronger, more pervading, more universal. We call it secularization.

Secularized man is the direct descendant of the Enlightenment man. By now, for many, perhaps for most people, the meaning of life has lost all religious reference. The world in which modern man lives, his own self-understanding, and society as a whole are completely withdrawn from all control and influence by people or institutions speaking on behalf of religious values or religious meaning. Everything has been withdrawn into the sphere of the rational. A nearly complete desacralization on the one hand, and an unlimited emancipation of the individual person on the other hand, have created a new sphere of positive secularity in which no absolutes are admitted unless freely chosen by each person, or adopted by the community in free democratic ways (and hence less than absolute).

Many thoughtful Christians today take a much less negative view of this world than did the first generation of Marists. Many, but not all, see a splendid opportunity to purify man's relatedness to God from traits that are not in accordance with the dignity of His children.

Whichever way we assess the positive and the negative dimensions of secularization, an immense task of evangelization lies open in front of us. And this is precisely what the Society of Mary was founded for. Evangelizing the modern world can be a hackneyed phrase, a truism: after all, what other world is there? What is meant is something very specific: to evangelize the modern world in its modernity, its secularity and secularism.

The Mission Statement of the 1985 General Chapter begins by saying that the societies to which the great majority of Marists belong are radically challenged by the powerful currents of secularization which in all its forms challenges the preaching of the Gospel. Indeed so. But if we are faithful in our creativity, and accept the core of the original Marist vision as the core also of a renewed Marist vision for today, if we further interpret "the present age," the age of the Enlightenment, to be the secularized world of today (and what else is it?), then we should add to the first number of that Mission Statement: "and that is the very reason for our existence" - that mission is what we were founded for.

"Each order has its vocation, its mission, its time... They fall back into the common run when their mission is ended." (FS, doc. 5) Surely, our mission is not ended. On the contrary, with the radical secularization of the world in recent decades, not only in the industrialized

countries but also in the “developing” ones, our mission is becoming more urgent than ever. Reinterpreted this way, the call to mission by our Founder can truly be heard again and can rally the Marist movement.

3. INSTRUMENTS OF DIVINE MERCY

Wager... Enter into the Circle...

To say, as has been done here, that the Society of Mary is a religious movement characterized by a specific mission, and that this mission is to the secularized world of today as such, i.e. in its secularity and secularism, sounds perhaps a little novel. Yet anyone who reads *A Founder Speaks* and similar “founding” texts has to admit the central place of themes such as “the present age,” “the end of time,” etc. He must also admit that Jean-Claude Colin was not moralizing in a general way. He was speaking about the very special character of his age, a period of history he already referred to as the Enlightenment, as we still do in our history books today. It is equally undeniable that the features of the Enlightenment which he judged in need of a new effort of evangelization did not disappear with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the contrary, those same trends intensified and spread and led to what we today call the process of “secularization.”

However, even though some may find the idea a little unusual, let us take a risk, let us wager, let us step into this circle of interpretation, and see how the other major themes of our spiritual heritage can fit into an overall view built on what is at least a possible hermeneusis.

An Age of Mary

The Marist founders saw their enterprise as an essentially apostolic venture with a precise object. But they did not consider themselves as the initiators. They did not pretend that they had understood their age better than others and had a more effective remedy for the ills of the time.

The Marist vision was that Mary, Queen of the Apostles, was so moved by the new paganism of that “enlightened” world, that she intended personally to intervene in a large gesture of mercy:

The apostles needed [Mary] to guide them, and to be in a sense the foundress of the Church. At the end of time her protection will shine forth in an even greater way... she will make her presence felt even more than in the beginning (FS, doc. 116, § 7).

... mankind is really sick. At the end of time it will need a great deal of help, and the Blessed Virgin will be the one to give it (FS, doc. 152, § 1).

The Blessed Virgin, who did such great things then, will do even greater ones at the end of time, because the human race will be even more ill (FS, doc. 117, § 3).

In the deepest convictions of all the founders, the Society of Mary was not a human enterprise. It was “Mary’s undertaking”. The expression *oeuvre de Marie* recurs again and again, not only in Colin’s texts, but in Marcellin Champagnat and others. And this meant not something undertaken in honour of Mary, or following Mary’s example, but first of all something

undertaken by Mary herself. Mary is herself intervening in history at this particular turning point and she is calling men and women into *her* Society to work on her behalf.

Mother of Mercy

To Jean-Claude Colin, who never really knew his own father and mother, and who was brought up by an uncle and that uncle's housekeeper, Mary always was the ideal Mother, the heavenly Mother in whom we take refuge in our difficulties. One of his earliest sermons gives a striking description of his image of Mary:

She is the haven of salvation, safe and forever open, wherein the soul, tossed about in waves of tribulation, recovers calm, he who despairs confidence, the afflicted soul peace, the sinner mercy, the just man a shelter against all the storms that would jeopardize his integrity... She is the mother who in her tenderness is more of a mother than all mothers on earth, the mother of all Christians for whom she underwent at Calvary all the pain of childbearing, whose motherly heart is forever open to all, and whose boundless charity extends to all the ages of the new covenant, to all nations and to all peoples, comforts all miseries, meets all needs, grants all prayers (APM 241.42, quoted from Gerard Hall, s.m., *Society of Mary: Community of Memory and Hope*, Sydney, 1985, p. 25).

The Pastoral Experience

The image of Mary, the best of all mothers, whose heart is forever open to all, inspired and was in turn deepened by the earliest Marist pastoral experience: the missions in the Bugey region of France between 1825 and 1829. All his life Jean-Claude Colin treasured the memories of those early days. The joy of having touched so many hearts, and the knowledge that this succeeded because they approached people with respect and gentleness, gave a forceful orientation to his vision of the mission of the Society.

He [the missionary] makes all his charity shine forth, he shows himself full of compassion. This does an enormous amount of good and opens up their hearts... Indeed, Messieurs, I think more is to be gained by arousing their 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 (FS, doc. 102, §§ 22, 23, 24).

The happiness of people who find their inner peace back redounds upon the soul of the priest who had the privilege of showing them a God of compassion and forgiveness. “Let us put on Christ's feelings for sinners, for the Samaritan woman, for Mary Magdalene.” (FS, doc. 102, § 27)

Breaking with the Remnants of Jansenism

It was one thing for Rome to condemn Jansenism, and for the king to raze Port-Royal, but to eradicate the Jansenist attitudes of severity and to reconcile the resentment against this “interference” in Gallican liberties was another thing altogether. The early nineteenth century still found a clergy in France full of Jansenist sympathies.

In the seminary of Lyons where the group of seminarians first developed their Marist dream, moral theology was given by Fr Cholleton, who shared the severe and demanding positions of the majority of the clergy. No sooner do we get an idea of what the early Marists were all about, in their first missions, than we note a radical turnabout, one that humanly speaking is unexpected, to say the least. Colin's many talks on the ministry of the confessional, often with implicit reference to the home missions he preached as a young priest, abound in monitions that urge the most merciful approach imaginable at the time (cf. FS, doc. 171).

Colin felt supported by Bishop Devie but was proud to go even further:

His Lordship the Bishop of Belley has been of great help to me for theology, cases of conscience, ways of dealing with things in the confessional. My way of doing things is very close to his. They even say I am more broadminded than he is (FS, doc. 37, § 1).

There was no doubt in the Founder's mind that this approach was to be characteristic of the Society, and he saw it in the total context of the special vocation of the Society to minister to that "present age": a time more than ever before in need of special mercy.

In the Society we shall profess all those opinions which give greatest play to the mercy of God, on account of the great weakness of poor human nature, without however falling into a laxist theology (FS, doc. 37, § 2).

Father General's discussion with a young Marist theologian (obviously trained in the strict theology of the day), as reported by Mayet is most revealing. In what became a *cause célèbre* at the time, Colin even criticized a bishop in front of young confreres--discreetly of course--for having been too demanding. And he struggles to find a way by which the harsh treatment of a prominent man, the duc de Montlosier, could have been avoided (see FS, doc. 14).

Marists will be " ... completely empty of themselves [so that] they may be filled with graces and become in the hands of God worthy instruments of divine mercy towards their neighbour." (1872 Const. 420)

Beyond the Limits of the Gallican Church

For the sake of exploring the most merciful policies possible within the Church, the little village curate of Cerdon quickly grows into a man of wide horizons and scholarly concerns. In the context of the home missions he kept repeating:

A missionary needs learning. A priest, especially a religious priest, who feels no need to study will be held responsible for it, and will have a lot to answer for on Judgement Day. If he had done violence to himself and acquired a greater degree of learning, he could have saved a far greater number of souls... (FS, doc. 102, § 6).

This overriding concern allows him to be eclectic without becoming inconsistent. He prefers the piety of Saint Francis de Sales because it is somehow more relaxed. The piety of Saint

Alphonsus is too restrictive. On the other hand the moral theology of Saint Alphonsus is the surer guide (FS, doc. 135).

Because Rome had been influenced earlier than the French Church by the teachings of Saint Alphonsus, Jean-Claude Colin became a solid ultramontane, finding in the universal church represented in Rome support against “Gallican liberties” that were in fact not liberties at all for the people subjected to postjansenist rigorism.

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 (FS, doc. 163, § 2).

I am a Roman, and in the confessional I follow the same approach as they, the Romans, do. I am very fond of those principles: “All for souls” and “Salvation before law.” (FS, doc. 95, § 3)

A Persistent Tradition

There is a history waiting to be written: of how this original Marist tradition was passed on, both in France itself and through the French Marists who eventually settled in non-French countries and founded the Society there. Names that immediately come to mind are Fr Martin in New Zealand and Fr Piquet in Sydney. At least in the English-speaking provinces, oral tradition still carries the memory of these men who stood out against the prevailing rigorism of the majority of the clergy, mostly of Irish origin.

The specifically Marist character of their approach has perhaps not always been appreciated. The difference was at times seen to be typically “French,” forgetting that the French clergy at the time was probably as rigorist as any other. Jansenism, after all, was a French thing before it spread elsewhere.

Because its typically Marist character was perhaps not sufficiently recognized, this precious element of our apostolic and spiritual heritage may have withered in the younger parts of the Society and among younger generations. Here and there what was seen as typically “French” may have been replaced with people's own local attitudes, and in that way we have lost something that is at the very heart of our specific mission.

Now that nearly everywhere young Marists receive their theological training in consortia and theological faculties outside of Society control, it will take purposeful intervention of formators to make sure that this apostolic tradition is restored and passed on.

“I have Seen the Misery of my People” (Exod 3:7)

The Marian symbolism and the Jansenist context must not veil the fact that the mercy theme is at the very heart of both Old and New Testament self-revelation of God. From the God who has seen the misery of his people in Egypt and decides to deliver them (Exod 3:7), Yahweh who is a “God of tenderness and grace, slow to anger and abounding in mercy and fidelity, showing kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin...” (Exod 34:6), every page of the ancient books of Israel speaks of the God who even in his anger at the sins of

his people cannot forget them. “Is Ephraim my precious son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I threaten him, I must always think of him. Therefore my heart yearns for him, I must have pity on him.” (Jer. 31:20; cf. X. Léon-Dufour, s.j., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed. 1973, pp. 351ff.)

The image of his Father that Jesus paints for us is if anything more vivid. God's mercy is wide open to all, especially to those who seemed to be excluded through the overbearing pettiness of the Pharisees. His preference goes not to the self-righteous but to repentant sinners. And nothing will ever wipe out the figure of the father who, anxiously watching for the return of the prodigal son, is “moved with compassion” when he sees him in the distance (Lk 15:20).

Jesus himself, the perfect image of His Father in human terms, is the friend of sinners, Samaritans, lepers, and whoever is for one reason or another excluded or rejected. He is willing to meet with Nicodemus discreetly at night, he does not call down fire from heaven over those who refuse him shelter, his heart is moved by the widow who lost her only son, by the bereaved father and the crying sisters of Lazarus. He does not scold Judas in the garden and prays for his torturers on the cross. He truly was “the merciful high priest.” (Heb 2:17; cf. Léon-Dufour, op. cit., p. 353f.)

Crossing into the Present

The special mercy of God, the special intervention of Mary, the Mother of Mercy, were needed, in the eyes of the first Marists, because of the particular sinfulness of that modern world, the world of the Enlightenment to which they knew themselves called. That new sort of world around them was “really sick,” “even more ill” than in the time of the apostles, “very bad” indeed.

The priests of the time, trained in little else than moral theology, and used to putting everything in the sort of style and with the kind of analysis appropriate for the pulpit, would not have seen it in any other way. The Enlightenment was simply a moral morass, one of unbelief, pride, earthly values, and arrogance. How else to describe it than as an explosion of human sinfulness?

Looking at the same period from our vantage point, and looking at the secularized world that grew out of the Enlightenment, we would not like to minimize the moral dimension, and the moral and religious failures that are part of the modern world. At the same time, or rather before we dare open a moral discourse on the modern world, we should acknowledge that with the Enlightenment a new civilization was born. The Church of the time faced an entirely new culture, with a world of both meaning and value so strange and threatening that the Church had a severe “culture shock.” And as culture shock often does, it took refuge in fierce moral condemnation: a state of shock that the Church has perhaps not quite overcome yet.

The Christian who steps out of the familiar world of traditional faith into the modern secularized world is not unlike the 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 perhaps are indeed sinful.

Without becoming blind to what is really sinful (in that strange world as well as in his own familiar one!) 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 the 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,” an approach to whatever... It is a mission, not to faraway exotic cultures but to the new culture, the new civilization of the Enlightenment, i.e. the secularized world of today.

“To Seek and to Save what was Lost” (Lk 19:10)

God's self-revelation as a merciful God culminates in the Incarnation. “God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him.” (1 Jn 4:9) It is the incarnation itself, as such, that fully showed the depth of God's eternal and endless mercy. And all subsequent actions of Jesus, as well as his words, are the unfolding of what he is, in person.

Not only does He speak of it [God's mercy] and explain it with the aid of comparisons and parables but, above all, He embodies and personifies it. He himself is, in a sense, the mercy of God. Those, therefore who look for and find this quality in Him have God made “visible” to them in a special way as the Father who is “rich in mercy.” (Pope John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*)

“As the Father Sent me so I am Sending you” (Jn 20:21)

The incarnation by which the Son became man and so revealed in terms of a human person, and in the way of a human life, the mercy of the Eternal Father did not end when He returned to the Father. He invested his Church with the task to continue his mission: to reveal in turn the mercy of the Father. The Church, his new visibility, his new embodiment, has to make visible, time and time again, in each new human culture, the love and the mercy of God.

This mission continues and in the course of history unfolds the mission of Christ... Groups among which the Church dwells often undergo radical changes for one reason or other, and an entirely new set of circumstances can arise. Then the Church must deliberate whether these conditions call for a renewal of her missionary activity (nn. 5, 6).

What was once preached by the Lord or fulfilled in him for the salvation of mankind must be proclaimed and spread to the ends of the earth (*Ad Gentes*, n. 3).

Surely what the Decree on Missionary Activity here describes is precisely what has happened: an entirely new civilization has arisen, deeply secularized to the point that the very existence of God and his merciful call is for many people meaningless and irrelevant. The message of the heavenly Father must be preached again, in a new language, in terms of a new culture. The incarnational movement of the Church is to start again in this new civilization. She must meet this new world on its own terms. Like Christ himself, the Church must embody and personify in her own manner of presence in this new world, in terms that this world can

understand, the Father who is “rich in mercy.” This is how we must read today the call of our Founder: “The Society must begin a new Church over again.”

“Ninety Percent of the Flock?”

Pope Paul VI once said that it was very difficult for the Pope to speak to all people at once, since they belong to so many different cultures, different worlds. We cannot do everything for everyone. But if we adopt our traditional mission, to the post-Enlightenment world, the secularized world of today, then we must stand on the side of mercy. We must represent in the Church the most merciful positions. Like our Founder we must feel the urge to explore the outer limits of mercy, push the boundaries of what is possible, as far as they will go. As Marists,

... we have to try and break down carefully all manifestations of lack of compassion within the Church itself (exclusion from sacraments of remarried couples, of divorced people, of married priests). Following Colin's intention we should try to build a community between the “just” (those at home in the Church) and “sinners” (those excluded from the Church). The first inspiration to found our Society was given to a person who would later very much need the mercy of God and of his fellow-men, Father Courveille (F. Arnold, “Like Mary, Unobtrusive and Full of Mercy,” in *The Study of Marist Spirituality*, Rome, 1984, p. 64).

The 1969-70 renewal chapter showed genuine Marist sensitivity when it called upon us to “give special attention to those who are left on the fringe of the Church's apostolic effort either because of their social condition, their unbelief, the stage of their psychological and cultural development,” etc. (DC, n. 95, b).

Large masses of people of a Catholic background simply do not feel at home any more in the Church. Pastors are impatient or simply fatalistic about them. As the bishop of a large French city said: “Ninety percent of my priests are looking after ten percent of my people; only ten percent seem to do anything about the other ninety percent of the people.” These are the people for whom the traditional language of the Church about God has become simply and sincerely meaningless. The distance between what the Church expects of them (or what they think the Church expects of them) and their whole way of life has become too great. What they pick up of the Church's teaching on faith and morals is so far from their own set of meanings and values that they gently slip away from further participation in the life of the Church. They belong to a civilization that has to be evangelized anew and, like any new civilization, on its own terms.

New missionaries are needed, with a new approach, to manifest the mercy of the Father in such a way that it will be understood and then draw modern man to respond in faith and love. The culture of modern man contains treasures laid there by a bountiful God, as much as any other human culture: seeds of the Word that need to be identified and then “gladly and reverently laid bare.” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 11)

In the Secular City

Villages are small communities. They cannot survive without a degree of uniformity. A small community of people who mostly know each other disintegrates if the range of permitted behaviour becomes too wide. The large city is different: it tolerates an incredible variety of

behaviour. Modern secular man has learned to live in big cities. Tolerance for people to be themselves, live their own lives, think for themselves, is very much a virtue in the secular city.

Is the Church still a village thing? Built on the sociological assumptions of village life? Assuming a degree of uniformity that the inhabitants of the secular city experience as oppressive? Where they find little of the genuine forbearance that marks city life? A recent congress on evangelization of the secular world said:

Liturgy is to celebrate the faith... but faith is so different today for people: often hesitant, seeking, fragile, and with varying degrees of intensity, varying points of emphasis. Perhaps we must be open to more variation in what is liturgically available so that faith can be celebrated as it is.

A sociological study of reasons people have for giving up religious practice showed a remarkably high incidence of reasons connected precisely with what people see as intolerance: whenever people think the Church is not inviting, not open to all sorts of people, exclusive. It is not that high moral ideals are not appreciated. The point is that they don't want the door closed upon those who disagree or do not live up to the highest ideals.

Isn't that what our Founder taught us?

There is a great deal to be done among these men. But you have to offer them a helping hand, go along with what is needed and not be too demanding... I take a broad path; I wait till their faith grows (FS, doc. 40, § 4).

The Church in the World

Modern life takes place in a highly structured world. The density of populations and the complexity of society demand an impersonal and bureaucratic organization. We occasionally dream of another sort of world but we soon learn that the modern world cannot be reduced to more personal interrelationships. In fact only a highly impersonal and legalized system can put the brakes on partiality, favouritism, and corruption. People in developing countries are learning, in a very hard way, that a system of interlocking personal relationships such as was usual in the "good old days" is not suitable in modern society. It soon leads to the exploitation and oppression of whoever does not have the right connections in high places.

Corruption often does not start as corruption. On the contrary, it begins as a generous attempt to do the right thing for people to whom one has legitimate social obligations. It ends in depriving the rest of the people of what is their due in distributive justice.

Modern secular man has learned to accept a bureaucratized world. He has learned to *function* in that world. He knows there is no other way for modern society to proceed.

He *functions* in that world, but he does not invest his soul there. He can weave his way through the anonymous tangle of the modern world, but that is not where he *lives*. Modern man lives and invests his soul on another level: where he has freely built another network of personal relationships and friendships. Secular man has learned to keep those two worlds separate: the world of objective norms and constraints, and the world of personal life and commitment.

This dichotomy is new. In earlier, simpler days, it did not exist. The Church moved, successfully, on a level where both the objective norms and the personal commitments contributed to provide a complete environment for life. The Church was a perfect society, endowed with whatever was needed to give a satisfactory framework for life. No longer so. The “perfect society” theme was gently dropped from preconiliar drafts. The Church is no longer a “perfect society” alongside of the state, and often in competition with it. We have learned to think of the Church as something of another order, a Church in the world.

To engage in a fruitful dialogue with modern man we must step out of the world that is ruled by objective norms, verifiable and subject to public controls of one sort or another. On that level the Gospel no longer makes any sense. The Gospel, and its messengers, must move to the other level, where modern man lives, where he invests his soul and his deepest concerns. The missionary to the modern world, like his confrere working among non-Christians (!), is not concerned with quantifiable results that show in sacraments administered and parish statistics. He is concerned with the unmeasurable growth of faith and appreciation for Gospel values. In our worry about the survival of the parish we may be tempted to ask, And is it going to get people back to Sunday mass? If we do we have not yet fathomed the missionary character of this new undertaking.

A Church after the Model of Mary

The two “worlds” we just mentioned, i.e. the “perfect society” regulating people's lives, and the less “objective”, open, and tolerant one, can also be characterized in parallelism with the two dimensions of every human mind as Jung has described them. The *animus*, the male dimension, is rational, it relies on proper planning, sound administration, objectivity, legislation. Achievement is what counts. Results are to be quantified and checked. The *anima* is the female perspective, the motherly one. It is person-oriented. Not the achievement counts, but the person who does his best...

It can hardly be a coincidence that the new Church our Founder wanted to promote for the evangelization of the modern world was a Church after the model of Mary, a woman and a mother. We do speak of “our mother the Church,” but the male factor dominates: in leadership, in policy making, in sacramental ministry, in the announcing of the Word. Perhaps it has to be that way, but does it also have to mark the Church so strongly?

Is this why modern people find it so difficult to think of God? Would a Church that is a little less “manly,” more like a mother, more like Mary, be able to bring God down from the objective and administrative image to that of personal relationships and forbearance, where each person's individual itinerary counts more than how far he has reached at a given moment?

“Stooping Down”

A male-dominated society, run on masculine principles, cannot but neglect that other aspect of God that is so central to His self-revelation. Isn't it striking that, when God's mercy is mentioned, so often female imagery takes over?

I led them with reins of kindness, with leading strings of love. I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek, stooping down to him I gave him his food (Hos 11:4).

Does a mother forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you (Is 49:15).

Enough for me to keep me soul tranquil and quiet, like a child in its mother's arms, as content as a child that has been weaned (Ps 131:2).

And when Jesus wept for Jerusalem he could only put it this way:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused (Mt 23:37).

If God made us to his own image and likeness, and if he made us into men and women, then He himself must combine both dimensions. Jean-Claude Colin would be the last one to appreciate modern feminist theology, but he did see that a Church sent to evangelize the modern world had to be a Church after the model of Mary, a Church that will also manifest “the female dimension of God.” (F. Arnold)

4. HIDDEN AND UNKNOWN

The Age of Mary

If during the eighteenth century people had nurtured illusions about their age, that *siècle des lumières*, then surely the great Revolution had taken care of them. There was no doubt in the ecclesiastical minds of the time that theirs was a very special period of history, one of particular evil. The young seminarians at Saint Irenaeus's seminary in Lyons were strongly urged to rise to the occasion. The examples of Saint Ignatius and Saint Vincent de Paul stood out and called for followers, this time “following the example of the Queen of Saints.” (cf. OM 1, doc. 33)

One group of seminarians at least was responsive. They gathered to devote themselves to the challenging call. They did not, however, rally to the project formulated by a seminary staff member to found a diocesan congregation under the name of Society of the Cross of Jesus. They adopted instead the project pushed by one of the students, Jean-Claude Courveille: a Society of Mary, to match, in some way, the Society of Jesus. They already accepted the name “Marists.”

The idea that a new foundation, for the purpose of converting this new world, would be an expression of the merciful Providence of God, was part of the call. It did not take long before the image of Mary, at the centre of the reflections of the little group of Marists, gave a rich development to this theme of mercy (*ibid.*, lines 10, 35). Mercy was to become the leitmotif of their apostolic approach, as we saw in the last chapter.

More than once, the students were reminded, the world had been saved by a miracle. Why not now? Did twelve apostles not convert the ancient pagan world? (*ibid.*, line 13). Add the figure of Mary and the little group soon sets out to meditate on Mary in the midst of the apostles. Mary was the one who this time took the initiative, she chooses her team: they will work in the way she did, be present in the Church as she was among the apostles, adopt her ways.

Hidden and Unknown

In the meditation of one of the group, Jean-Claude Colin, the merging of the two themes, i.e., the apostles facing a pagan world, and Mary in their midst, soon led to unexpected insights. By character rather shy and withdrawn, preferring to follow others rather than give the lead, inclined to hide away by himself, the young priest discovered the spiritual depths of hiddenness, the hidden and unknown place of Mary in the midst of the apostles, his own role in the little group: “hidden and unknown.” (cf. *Antiquiores Textus*, fasc. 1, p. 15)

“When God speaks to a soul, he says many things in few words. So it was with the saying, Hidden and unknown.” (OM, doc. 819, § 122) As was the case with the option for mercy, so again here: pastoral experience soon added depth to the maxim. The shy and withdrawn priest found that, far from hampering his ministry, his low-profile approach proved to be quite effective. This discovery confirmed and strengthened the vision of a new beginning, like the apostles, like Mary in their midst: small and unassuming, but perfectly adjusted to a new pagan

world. The Society of Mary, embodying divine mercy, now had a clear course set out for the future. This new world is not entirely out of reach, provided we implement the method followed by Mary herself, and the early Church.

Let us take courage and work hard, but always “hidden and unknown.” ... The Society must begin a new Church over again ... The Society of Mary, like the Church, began with simple, poorly educated men... (FS, doc. 120, § 1)

Really in actual fact, Messieurs, it is the way to take over everything. It was the approach that the Church followed, and you know that we must have no other model than the early Church. (FS, doc. 119, § 9)

She [Mary] is our model. Let us do a great deal of good, but like her let us do it “hidden and unknown.” (FS, doc. 120, § 2)

Messieurs, the times we live in are in some ways more difficult than those of the apostles... how greatly we need the help of the blessed Virgin. Let us imitate her, following the spirit of our vocation, let us hide ourselves so as to do good (FS, doc. 154, § 4).

We should remember our maxim: “hidden and unknown.” Today this is the only way to do good, we should bear that in mind. Let us imitate our holy Mother who did so much good during her life and the apostolic life of her divine Son, but without anyone talking about it (FS, doc. 157).

The Society is called to do an enormous amount of good. It must be faithful to its vocation. To be small, “hidden and unknown.” The times call for that, we must accommodate ourselves to our times (FS, doc. 158, § 1)

But Emptied Himself

Just as the crucial theme of mercy (cf. previous chapter) is central to God's self-revelation in both the Old and the New Testament, and provides the ultimate rationale for the incarnation, likewise the maxim “hidden and unknown” has its roots in the theology of the incarnation, as long as we see it not in the first place as an ascetical principle or a devout way of life, but as the main axis of our apostolic mission to the secularized world. Which is how our founders saw it!

All missionary activity, as we have learned from the Second Vatican Council, is of an incarnational nature. Each time the Gospel is being preached to a new civilization, the incarnation repeats itself, not of course of the historical Jesus, but of the Risen Lord in his new embodiment, the Church. In his Church the Lord continues to enter mankind, constantly, each time again, as missionary activity reaches new peoples, or meets newly developing civilizations. And each time the pattern of the incarnation repeats itself.

His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,

and became as men are;
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

In this hymn Paul shows us the very heart of God's redeeming mercy: in order to save us he stooped down to our level, he did not cling to his status of being God's equal but emptied himself. This *kenosis* does not imply that he obliterated himself, that he ceased to be himself, but that he refused to cling to a definition of what he was and what rights he was entitled to, in order to go out towards the human and sinful other, take the form of the servant, and become vulnerable unto death as we are (J.M. Laporte, s.j., "*Kenosis and Koinonia*", in *One in Christ*, 1985, p. 102).

Missionaries have known it for a long time: "Incarnation is the truth undertaking what its comprehensibility requires." (K. Cragg) For God's Word to become comprehensible, thunder and lightning are not very effective, as events at Mount Sinai had shown. Rather, it has to strip itself of whatever stands in the way of it being understood, appreciated, accepted. The new Church that Colin dreamt of, in order to be able to bring the Word to this world, would have to become another sort of Church, stripped of what may be rightfully hers, for the sake of her mission today.

Jesuits in Disguise... (FS, doc. 89, § 14)

Colin knew it well. Approaching the modern world along the same lines as had been customary in the past was counter-productive. Early Marist thinking in this respect is best understood if we see how they often spoke of the Society of Jesus.

Jean-Claude Courveille conceived of the Society of Mary as a parallel to, or originally as a replacement for the Jesuits, disbanded by Clement XIV in 1773 and allowed to reassemble only in 1814 by Pius VII. Many years later, this is how Courveille remembered an early sort of spiritual experience of Mary speaking to him:

As I always have followed my divine Son in everything, and have followed him to Calvary... now that I am with him in glory, I imitate him in what he does on earth for his Church of which I am the Defender... As in a time of terrible heresy... he called upon his servant Ignatius to form a Society that would carry his name by calling itself Society of Jesus, and those who are part of it Jesuits... in the same way I want... that in these last days of godlessness and unbelief, there be a Society consecrated to me, which carries my name, whose members are called Marists (OM 2, doc. 718, 5).

It was Jean-Claude Colin who interpreted the parallelism in an entirely new way. For him the Society of Jesus became the example of what to do, but also of how not to do it. After 1814 the Society of Jesus continued to arouse the resistance of an increasingly anticlerical world. In 1820 it was suppressed in Russia where it had survived from 1773 to 1814, in 1834 it was banned in Portugal, in 1848 the Jesuits were the first who had to flee from Rome.

Marists were to do everything the Jesuits did but “hidden and unknown,” i.e. without drawing attention to themselves, without evoking antagonism. In 1845, when anti-Jesuit feelings ran high in France, he said:

We must not attract attention to ourselves just now. People say, “We must do good,” but I say that in the age we live in we must do good in the way that our Rule intends we should do everything: hidden and unknown... Before a few years are out we shall be accused of being Jesuits, Jesuits in disguise... We must not be frightened by it, but we must not give provocation (FS, doc. 89, §§ 6, 13, 14).

“Everything the Jesuits have done, that is what the Society must do,” with three points of difference, of which the third is: “Marists must be in this world hidden and unknown.” (FS, doc. 98, §§ 2-7)

In the pulpit let us not seem domineering, or else we shall alienate people. Man is more than ever jealous of his freedom and his independence (FS, doc. 99, § 1).

The more modest we are, the more we shall be doing God's work. Every age has a certain arrogance, and ours has more than its share... It is only by being unassuming that we can achieve success nowadays (FS, doc. 102, § 33).

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 now 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.

Jealous of his Freedom... (FS, doc. 99, § 1)

The heart of the new civilization, born in the Enlightenment, and grown into our modern secularized world, is indeed its respect for the free decision of the individual person. Neither secular society nor Church, not even the family, may impose values or convictions. Each person reserves the right to be persuaded. All who pretend to have the right to settle how others will judge or act are by that very option disqualified, be they parents, scholars, governments, or clergy.

Today the family can no longer assure the transmission of the faith: each generation needs to be evangelized anew. No wonder infant baptism is questioned. And who has not witnessed the trauma of parents who, in spite of even the best example of fine Christian life, see their teenage children drift away into a lifestyle or into convictions that the parents cannot even understand.

A Spiritual Renewal?

Is this picture not already dated? The optimism of the 1960's seems naive in the late 1980's. Fear and uncertainty have replaced the hubris of technology and unlimited economic growth. Are we entering a post-secularized age?

Here and there people draw our attention to the return of religious values, even of the sacred as such. I believe that in certain cases this represents indeed a faith reborn through grace. But in other cases it is no more than the backlash of being thrown into the post-Christian world on the part of people who simply cannot cope (R. Dumortier, in *France S.M.*, June 1985, p. 6).

It could indeed be true that rational mastery of the world has reached the point where the *emancipated homo technologicus* is prepared to consider his limits. Breaching them could lead to nuclear suicide, to destroying our ecology, or to interfering with the biological integrity of our species. There could be an opportunity. Questions of ultimate meaning and concern, and the possibility of acknowledging absolute norms can be broached.

But apart from the people who, in Fr Dumortier's words, "cannot cope" and take refuge in a simplistic fundamentalism, modern man is, for all that, not ready to be dictated to. The heart of modern civilization is not its refusal of the transcendent but its sacred conviction that no solution is in any way worth considering unless based on freedom.

And this is the world that Jean-Claude Colin was prepared to meet, and on its own terms.

The most Radical Challenge History has Witnessed (John Paul II)

There would seem to be a rare case of incompatibility between this modern world and the Catholic Church! Does it not belong to the basic self-understanding of the Church to have the answer? Has the Church not been entrusted with the charism of truth, with the deposit of the faith, with the assurance of indefectibility?

How then can it meet even halfway a culture that rejects in principle any readymade answer, presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis? How can it invite to "faith", if "faith" as such appears to be the problem?

How can such a culture grant even a first hearing to a Church that seems to exclude a priori the idea that whatever she proposes for consideration is open to discussion?

Pope John Paul II may at times use rhetorical exaggerations, but when he called the challenge of the modern secularized world "the most radical" one in history, he was speaking from the heart.

The Holy Father's despair reflects very well the thinking of the Extraordinary Synod of December, 1985. The final declaration complains:

In the so-called "First World", in spite of the fact that the doctrine of the Church has been so profoundly and extensively explained, why is it that a certain estrangement of the Church is manifested? ... And even where the Church raises her voice against the social injustice, etc., it cannot be denied that not all the faithful fully and totally identify with the Church... Especially the young consider the Church in a critical way, as a mere institution...

And that is putting things mildly!

The Mission Statement of our 1985 General Chapter echoes the Synod when it says:

Today the societies to which the great majority of Marists belong are radically challenged by the powerful currents of secularization... In all its forms it challenges the preaching of the Gospel.

What is missing, unfortunately, is the recognition that it is precisely to this secularized world that the Society of Mary is sent! This is the very purpose for which the Society was founded... We should acknowledge that we are now coming into our own. And acknowledge it with joy. Until the faintly plaintive note of that opening sentence turns into a clarion call, the Society of Mary will not recover the vigour of its beginnings. What else but these “powerful currents of secularization” are what Jean-Claude Colin called the “present age,” the “end of time,” the “age of Mary,” in which the boundless mercy of God is presented to a new civilization? A new incarnational movement in which the Word again strips itself of its rights and prestige to become “as men are,” the men of today? With their weaknesses and their strengths, the ambiguities of all human cultures? And should they who know themselves called to make their own the concern of Mary, mother of mercy, for the Church of their time not respond to Mary's desire to be through them a support for the Church “in this time of uncertainty and confusion” just as she has always been since the days of Pentecost? (1985 Draft Constitutions, nn. 3, 5)

Another Voice

The 1985 Extraordinary Synod, by its very newsworthiness, drowned out another voice: the symposium of 120 bishops from 24 European countries, held from the 7th to the 11th of October, 1985, to reflect on the evangelization of secularized Europe today (cf. *The Tablet*, London, 12 Oct 1985, pp. 1074f; 19 Oct 1985, pp. 1103f.).

The symposium called for a new Christian apologetic giving due consideration to the true, the good and the beautiful, healing and controlling the great values of western humanism. But the modern world must be met “without any sense of moral superiority or condemnation.” Leaving behind attitudes of rejection and condemnation we must look for the seeds of the Word, and preach the Gospel “to this age and to the world as it is.” Only openness, discernment, and attentiveness will help us, in listening and dialogue, to discover that men and women today are in fact looking for spiritual values, sometimes in unexpected ways.

The modern world can be evangelized, the symposium said, with the qualities described by Paul VI, i.e., simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially towards the poor and the powerless, obedience and humility, detachment and sacrifice. By genuine conversation and mutual respect within the Church itself, we can help people, or rather each individual, to discover in his or herself the space that only God can fill.

To this splendid commentary on Colin's “hidden and unknown” Pope John Paul II answered first with some faint surprise, “You have not taken the concept of crisis as providing an explanation of today's Europe...” Perhaps feeling a stranger in the secular city, he says that that mission can only be undertaken by missionaries who “share the joys and hopes, the anguish and sadness” of secularized man. At the end he warms to his theme with a statement that could have been taken straight from *A Founder Speaks*:

To achieve an effective work of evangelization we must return for inspiration to the very first apostolic model. We contemplate that founding and paradigmatic

model in the Cenacle: the apostles are united and persevering with Mary as they wait to receive the gift of the Spirit (*Osservatore Romano*, English Weekly Edition, 21 Oct 1985, p. 311).

By Virtue of its Own Truth (Dignitatis Humanae, n. 1)

Obviously, the Colnian message of the “hidden and unknown,” is not a voice calling in the wilderness. Although very novel in its day, it is clearly in line with other developments that have taken place in the Church recently.

Colin was a contemporary of Pius IX and, especially after the events of 1848, that Pontiff was not inclined to give much room to religious freedom, a thing that, as was stated in the Syllabus, would lead straight to indifferentism (cf. DZ 2979). Nor did he think the Church should look for a lower profile for the sake of being better understood.

Growth towards respect for the free decision of the human person, even in matters of faith, proved to be slow, and only in the Second Vatican Council did the breakthrough come. Even the tough and well argued resistance of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre could in the end not stop the Decree on Religious Freedom. In fact it passed with 2307 votes against 70!

The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes entrance into the mind, at once quietly and with power (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1).

Freedom of religion, in conciliar teaching, is based on two principles: human dignity and the nature of faith. Human dignity is known both by reason and through the revealed Word of God. It is not respected unless the human person can decide in conscience, free from all constraint.

Moreover, it is in the very nature of religious acts, especially of faith, that that they should be “internal, voluntary, and free.” As a consequence, we must therefore say, the quality of religious assent depends on the extent of freedom with which it is given, and whatever is done to respect and foster the freedom of assent is as such evangelization. Far from being a concession to “poor human nature,” or to the wickedness of the times, as Colin might still have put it, we can now say that it belongs to the core of our mission to avoid anything that could seem domineering or peremptory. Whatever diminishes the free and joyful assent of people, affects the quality of the faith.

“Let us not look at what the societies who have preceded us have done, for when a society comes to birth it is for a particular need.” (FS, doc. 152, § 1) Presenting God's Word in simplicity and humility, simply putting it forward, without debating, that is what the Society is called to do. Let the truth speak for itself and do not stand in its way (cf. FS, doc. 92, § 14). That is the “hidden and unknown” of Marist apostolate for every man who choose to do Mary's work:

Let us be small, let us be humble. If in the pulpit we try to gain a victory and take him by storm our man reacts against it and slips through our hands... (FS, doc. 92, § 16)

A New Church

Every institute exists for the Church and must enrich her with its distinctive characteristics, according to a particular spirit and a specific mission (n. 14).

The very charism of the Founders appears as “an experience of the Spirit,” transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened, and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth (*Mutuae Relatione*, n. 11).

Our Founder was far too loyal and prudent ever to criticize the Church. But he also knew that the customary triumphalism of his days, and the ways of the Ancien Régime were inappropriate to the modern world that he saw coming. His message of “hidden and unknown” was more than an internal one for use within the Society of Mary.

The Church in her wisdom accommodates herself to the misfortunes of each age, and by proceeding tactfully she may be able to obtain more reparation than she might do otherwise (FS, doc. 14, § 15).

Let us take courage and work hard, but always “hidden and unknown...” The Society must begin a new Church over again. I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church (FS, doc. 120, § 1).

“We do not consider we are better prepared than others to face the immense tasks which await the Church.” (DC, n. 129) But insofar and where the Church is meeting with the modern secularized world, we must know that we have a special contribution to make, both in our own ways and in promoting this approach in the Church around us. If every charism is given for the good of the Church, as Paul teaches, then we should not hesitate to spread it, again gently and unobtrusively.

A Kind of Sacrament (Lumen Gentium, n. 1)

One of the finest fruits of twentieth-century theology, and one that became a key element in conciliar thinking, is the rediscovery of the sacramental nature of the Church. To be a “sacrament” and a “sign” is what makes the Church something other than a mere human institution, because it reveals the Church as having a dimension of mystery, a function of referring to our “intimate union with God” and to “the unity of all mankind.” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1)

But a sign becomes effective as sign only to the extent that it signifies. In other words, a sign must be transparent. It must not draw attention to itself. Insofar as it does, it stands in the way of its own effectiveness.

Perhaps the 1985 Extraordinary Synod was referring to the same thing when it said that because of a one-sided presentation of the Church, she is seen often as an institutional structure,

not translucent to the presence of Christ. This is close to the core of the Colnian vision: a Church and apostles who are totally translucent, being hidden and unknown themselves.

They [Marists] learn from him [Colin] and through him from Mary, how to approach the work of evangelization so that the Good News may be received in all its power and clarity. Fired with apostolic zeal for the Kingdom, they follow their Lord in emptying themselves of all self-interest so that nothing will prevent the Word of God being heard (1985 Draft Constitutions, n. 22).

Trust in God Alone

This idea... “hidden and unknown in the world” must have a great influence on all our conduct. We must not boast of what we do, not rely on men, not consort with men for natural ends. Let us not make ourselves well known... Let us place all our confidence in God and the Blessed Virgin. After all, is it our own work that we are doing? (FS, doc. 174, §§ 5-7).

The reverse side of “hidden and unknown” is to trust in the Lord himself. If it is true, as the Council teaches, that truth will impose itself by virtue of its own truth and by nothing else, then we should have more trust in the power of the truth itself. It does not need any outside bracing. In fact, modern man becomes suspicious of anything presented as “true” which is then not allowed to speak for itself.

Trust in the power of God's Word. Trust also in those we address. If God himself endowed each person with reason and conscience, and allowed each person the freedom to decide, should we, who are at best only his messengers, not do the same? Why hark constantly to the dangers of individualism and subjectivism? It was the Almighty God himself who, in creating us as He did, took the risk in the first place!

We can safely, with the Council, declare the desires of modern man for responsible freedom to be greatly in accord with truth and justice (*Dignitatis Humanae* n. 1). Provided we strip ourselves of self-interest and remain hidden and unknown ourselves, the Word of God will be heard, quietly and with power.

5. A TREE WITH MANY BRANCHES

A Prophetic Vision

So far we have seen how the awareness of the particular needs of “the present age,” i.e., the famous period of the Enlightenment, can lead us who have inherited the Marist sense of mission, into mission to the modern secularized world of today.

The need of this new world for a particular outpouring of divine mercy announces the urgency for new attitudes of forbearance and understanding as the Church today comes to grips with what is more and more seen to be a truly new civilization to which the Gospel must be preached anew and in new terms.

Mary, the living symbol and personification of divine mercy, will take a personal interest in this world, exercise her mission of mercy, and for that purpose launch her own Society to work on her behalf.

Her Society will exercise that mission of mercy in a typically Marian way: hidden and unknown. The merciful approach implies that nothing should be done in such a way that its acceptance is made more difficult than necessary. Hence, the triumphalist Church of the counter-reformation and the baroque, relying on prestige and an alliance with political power, will have to yield to something less provocative. As it is, it is not likely to get even a first hearing from modern man. In its new incarnational movement the Church, and its messengers, must go through a new kenosis. It must become a Church that is hidden and unknown, stripped of power and prestige until nothing stands in the way of the Word being heard.

So far the picture is fairly consistent. We now meet an element that does not fit in so nicely, at first sight. It seems out of place, a postscript. The first generation, which received the original inspiration, was not too clear either on what to do with it. They nevertheless were convinced that, in some unforeseeable way, it was part of the total picture, a crucial part even. More than anything else this could be seen as a guarantee of authenticity.

It was an image more than an idea: a tree, sometimes with many branches sometimes with three, sometimes with four (trying to adjust the image to the surmised implementation?).

Someone reminded him that he had said the whole world must be Marist. He said, “Yes, God the Father has appointed our Lord as judge of the living and the dead. The Congregation of Jesus is a simple body. With the Jesuits you must have talents and many other things. In the Congregation of the blessed Virgin it is not so. She is the Mother of Mercy. Her congregation will have several branches. It will be open to all kinds of people.” (FS, doc. 2).

A clumsy text, revealing some strange associations of ideas: Jesus the judge versus Mary the mother; judgment and the Society of Jesus; the elite character of the Jesuits and the easier

admission to the Society; and finally this tree with several branches in contrast with the non-composite structure of the Society of Jesus. Colin's core vision is very compact, so far ahead of the practicalities of life that at times it seems incoherent.

Cover the Whole Earth

We are now in the age of Mary. Yes indeed, for this is the age of indifference, unbelief, an age of crime, of false learning, of this earth. Nowadays the inhabitants of the earth are bowed down towards the earth, stuck to it, breathing for it alone. This is why in these last days she has appeared with her hands stretched out towards the earth, with her hands full of rays, which stand for graces, being poured forth upon men. What gratitude should we show to Mary for having chosen us to spread her Society comprising the three branches, because Mary intends to cover the whole earth with her mantle (FS, doc. 78, § 2).

In this allusion to the apparitions of Mary to Catherine Labouré and the description of Mary as she was subsequently shown on the miraculous medal, we have a similar sort of non sequitur. Whence this unexpected reference to the tree? The Marist vision contains here an element of a prophetic nature: those who tenaciously hold to it do not know themselves what to do with it! How to insert it in a logical way, how to implement it in a feasible structure.

Rome Has no Idea

There was an attempt, of course, to establish immediately a Society of Mary comprising sisters, brothers, and laity as well as priests. The first drafts of the constitutions had this in view. But when it came to implementing that ambitious project Colin was not very sure of himself. On the one hand he was not sure really what God wanted with that strange tree. At the same time he was sufficiently frustrated to give vent to one of his rare criticisms of Rome: "In Rome, Messieurs, they do not have any idea of the religious societies in France." (FS, doc. 60, § 8) As if this sort of thing was commonplace in France!

It is perhaps better simply to say that the founding generation itself had no clear idea either. They somehow knew that the project entrusted to them had to be like a tree with several branches; that this had something to do with the particular outpouring of mercy over this threatening age; that it would show the Society of Mary to be rather different from the Society of Jesus... but for the rest?

The Third Order

The utopian aura around the tree with several branches showed when Fr Eymard took on the organization of the Third Order. He did what everyone else was doing with Third Orders: groups of pious laity who in various ways share the spiritual life of the "first orders." No one had thought of anything else at the time, probably nothing else was possible.

Whether Jean-Claude Colin could have done anything else himself is at best very doubtful. Still, he was aware of the gap between the real Third Order led by Fr Eymard and his own dreams. The reality fell short of the dream and Colin took his distance. The story went around that he was "against the Third Order."

At the general chapter of 1854, just before a successor was to be elected, Fr Eymard insisted that Colin express public support for it. Colin was evasive, and when he finally did speak on the subject, it was in a very different way: in fact we should work for all Third Orders, even favour the others, and if someone wavered between ours and another we should encourage him to enter the other!

Still, the Marist Third Order should spread over the whole world, and everyone was empowered to receive members in it. He connected it again with the curious remarks, made years ago, that the whole Church including the Pope should be Marist (cf. FS, doc. 189).

Things were Moving too Quickly (FS, doc. 189, § 2)

The only way Colin knew to justify his remarkable attitude towards the Third Order was so say “things were moving too quickly.” What did he mean with this remark? Was Colin the type of person who could only dream and backed off whenever any idea was plunged into reality? Certainly not. He could be very decisive.

The only conclusion is that the right ideas and structures were not yet available. An adequate implementation seemed impossible, even to imagine. Any implementation at the time was next to a betrayal.

The problem was that Colin was at one and the same time unshakably loyal to the Church as he knew it, and very critical of it. As a consequence, his criticism found no expression except in utopian, even eschatological terms: the whole world Marist... a Third Order spread all over the earth. All these clues are clear. The Society of Mary was not to be the sort of clerical congregation as had become the norm since the Reformation. Unlike the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, etc., the Society of Mary had to break through the restraints of that clerical pattern, and for the sake of its specific mission.

But Colin had neither the audacity to question the clerical structures of the Church as he knew it, nor the theological resources to outguess a century and a half of future theological growth (who had?). Pastoral work was the business of priests. Who else?

And nevertheless the pointers are there: Divine Mercy in these last days is for everyone, everyone can enter, even unbelievers will have their place inside this utopian Society of Mary that did not at all coincide with the congregation of Marist priests. Only heretics were out! Of course, he had not really met any... (cf. FS, doc. 120, § 1).

Crossing the Hermeneutical Bridge...

If we cross the hermeneutical bridge into the present, and reread our founding texts in the light of our own time, then their true meaning shines forth immediately, and much more clearly than for Marists a century and a half ago.

The laity are no longer “the grateful objects of clerical ministry” they used to be (Hebblethwaite). “The Church is not truly established, and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ, unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy.” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 21) There is no need really to tell the laity, as the new Code of Canon Law does, that there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ's faithful and that all contribute to the building of the Body of Christ. The laity, insofar as they still are interested in

the Church, are entirely convinced of that principle already, and more likely to wonder if the clergy themselves believe it. Colin could not have dreamt of the laity as anything but “grateful objects,” but now that every Christian is acknowledged as a subject as well as an object of mutual ministry, the door is open to a true understanding of his prophetic vision.

This is of significance in the very mission of the Society as we have come to recognize it: a mission to the secularized world as such. “We need to reach out to society,” said Cardinal Hume, “but more directly and immediately to individuals.” 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 couple next door who just don't know. Ordinary people without intellectual ambitions, they have no intention whatsoever to imitate Prometheus in challenging the gods: they 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. The Church's concern to open a dialogue with the complacent unbeliever leaves the latter rather puzzled (Hebblethwaite).

As religious educators in high schools know only too well, to be a professional believer, as priests are seen to be, more or less disqualifies one as a partner in dialogue. On the contrary, to live a sincere and joyful Christian life, wherever one lives and works, without pretence or sense of superiority (“hidden and unknown!”) is the only effective pre-evangelization. The apostolic Church which so rapidly spread throughout the pagan world of the first century knew it well, as is clear from the wise admonition of Peter holding up the example of a reverent and chaste life that wins over even without a word those who refuse to obey the word (cf. 1 Pet 3:1; *Evangelii Nuntiandi* n. 41; *Ad Gentes*, n. 11).

Marist Renewal for Mission

The canonical restraints of the early nineteenth century soon led to the breaking up of the one Marist project: each branch went its own way, in response to the needs and opportunities they saw. The priests' branch naturally became typically clerical, oriented towards priestly ministry in a simple and unobtrusive way. We all lost sight of our specific mission, as we kindly disregarded the founders' rather dramatic descriptions of the “present age” and its evils. Fr Favre succeeded only too well (cf. *supra*, Chapter 2).

However, a Favre-type Society may have little relevance to the world and the Church today: it can gently join the 70 percent on the way to extinction (cf. *supra*, Chapter 1). The need is for something else: a Colin-type Society rediscovering its mission and regaining its specific character, which is tailored to that mission. The vision of the tree and its many branches is essential to that character because it is essential to the mission.

In fact the Marist movement has been going into this direction for some time. Our instincts were right, even if we lacked the daring to articulate boldly our particular calling. Surely the time has come to take up the dreams of the seminarians in Lyons and implement them in ways that were neither open nor thinkable at the time?

Brothers and Priests

In the priests' branch itself, the Brothers can make a very important contribution today by providing a counterweight against the inevitable temptations of clericalism. There is no better remedy than really living in community, priests and Brothers, accepting each other, working as a team. Where provinces have truly advanced in this direction through a consistent policy of admission, training, and apostolic involvement, the fruits are unmistakable. If priests are sincere in their determination to work in a Church in which the laity come truly into their own, then we need them right in our communities.

The Marist Family

The commitment of men and women, ordained priests and laypeople, religious and people living married life and “secular” professions, all to the same mission of embodying Mary's intervention in this present age, that commitment was part of the core of the original Marist vision prior to the divisions imposed by history.

This does not mean we must try to do away with the divisions. All our founders soon realized that other structures would be unworkable. Cardinal Castracane was right.

It does mean that we should try to grow closer together as together we rediscover our common mission - to the secularized world as such; a common undertaking - the work of Mary; a common superior - Mary; a common message - the mercy of God for the people of today; a common approach - hidden and unknown; a common desire - to involve the whole people of God.⁽¹⁾

It cannot be without providential guidance that the Marist Family has grown closer together already in the last twenty-five years while beforehand we seemed to be drifting ever further apart.

The Society of Mary and the Laity

The laity has from the beginning had a central place in Marist thinking even if the priests could not imagine other ways of involving them than in a “receiving” role.

Even today, more than twenty years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council, official Church policies, not to mention Church language, is struggling to find a new balance. We do not know how to define “lay” except in negative ways: non-cleric, not in holy orders (which puts professed brothers and sisters among the laity), non-religious (which leaves the religious nowhere!). What then is a layman? Can we not think of him except as a “monk in a bowler hat?” (Bishop Butler) If the laity has come of age in the Church then theology will have to do better than define them as “is not.” Who wants to be an “is-not?” (Kathleen Bliss, quoted by Hebblethwaite)

The disarray of theological language reveals a disarray of thought. It may sound plausible to say that the laity is involved in the order of creation, and the clergy in the order of redemption. It may sound plausible to exclude clergy (and religious) from the world in which they happen to live, and the laity from the sanctuary, but these can provide little more than ad hoc solutions for practical problems. Eventually theology will have to do better than that.

It is encouraging that the 1985 Mission Statement could say, “Most provinces have expressed a desire for a closer collaboration with the laity.” More important is that recently representatives of the four Marist religious congregations have drafted a joint statement in which they say:

The Founders of the Marist Fathers and of the Marist Brothers, the Foundress of the Marist Sisters, and the Pioneers of the Marist Missionary Sisters were all involved in either founding, supporting, or participating in the early attempts to establish Marist lay groups ... all four Marist religious congregations have continued to take an interest in promoting a Marist laity... In the wake of Vatican Council II, this interest has increased.

The joint statement sees this interest in an apostolic perspective, namely

to envisage a new Church, powerless and vulnerable, but for all that better able to reach the hearts of modern men and women, and ready to involve lay people in its apostolic projects.

If we are serious in our Marist project to anticipate among ourselves and to promote a Marian Church, a Church after the model of Mary, who was a layperson and a woman, then it is part of our vocation to explore in practice and in theory a renewal of the Church that goes beyond the clerical structures inherited from before the laity came of age. This is not a matter of personal preference or whatever. It is an indispensable condition of effective mission to the modern world.

In his efforts to promote a Catholic university Newman once wrote to a friend, in 1873:

You will be doing the greatest possible benefit to the Catholic cause all over the world if you succeed in making the University a middle station at which clergy and laity can meet, so as to learn to understand and yield to each other - and from which, from a common ground, they may act in union upon an age which is running headlong into infidelity.

Hidden and Unknown

Genuine lay involvement means that the fences we have built around our clerical and religious “reservations” have to come down. The “age of the laity” is not a matter of less work for priests and religious. It is however a matter of giving up more. Humanly speaking priests and religious will be the losers. We have to be stripped of power and initiative, of a clear task and exclusive zones of responsibility. We have to become smaller, less important. The Church in the age of the laity will not be a Church without priests or religious, but they will have to be more “hidden and unknown” for the Church to grow.

Here are some excerpts from a fictitious diary in which a priest writes down his experiences as he is given several extra parishes to care for and lay men and women take over more and more tasks:

Spent an evening with the parish volunteers. They chose Corinthians 12, 13, and 14 and we shared our reflections. It was immediately clear to them that the people in Corinth were not invited by Paul to do their bit. The Holy Spirit enabled them to do so immediately, Himself. They told me, "The Church, Father is not you, but all of us..." They are very comfortable with it all, they gained ground. Nobody asked how I felt about it...

A full church today. Lots of people. I did not do any readings. I did not preach. The liturgy was all arranged for me. But it is of no importance, provided the Gospel is proclaimed and fully (free paraphrase from Zulehner, *Priestermangel Praktisch*. 1983.)

6. GOD ALONE

A Common Vision

At the beginning of these reflections I said that the renewal of the Society is not in the first place a matter of individual conversion (cf. Ch. 1). It is a point on which there could be disagreement. I still hold that it is so. Even if all Marists made great progress in constant personal conversion, the Society could easily disintegrate and take off into different directions for lack of a common vision and the appropriation of a common mission. Perhaps this has happened to some extent.

Having said this the next step is to acknowledge that a "common vision" is nobody's vision until it is in fact appropriated by each of us. And that does imply personal conversion and commitment. If the mission to Oceania, and to other mission fields, was in some aspects at least a matter of efficient spreading of re-sources, of planning and well thought out policies, the mission to the modern world is more directly a by-product of something else we seek for its own sake: intimate union with God in radical detachment from everything else.

God Alone

The theme "God alone" provides the cloth on to which in our founding texts the other major Marist orientations are embroidered.

If you wish to serve God, you must see him alone, you must be independent of creatures... We should exist before God, as if there were none but he, seeing him alone, walking boldly by faith (FS, doc. 9, § 3).

Let creatures mean nothing to you, my son. Look to God alone (FS, doc. 26, § 3). We should thank God for having sown our path with contradictions. That will teach us not to place any store by creatures, to look to God alone, to act for God alone (FS, doc. 39, § 8)

That word "simplicity" says a lot. I understand by it not seeing anything but God, acting only for God, never having creatures in view, seeking even to blot out thought of creatures (FS, doc. 59, § 5).

In 1841 he was playing with the idea of founding a retreat house. Realizing that ordinary people are not able to fit into the rigours of a Carthusian or Trappist monastery, he saw an opportunity for the Society, namely to provide a place where people, especially Marists themselves, could spend "some time concerned solely with God." (FS, doc. 41, § 4)

Let us have mortification of our desires, of the senses, of our thoughts, coupled with the right intention. Let us keep only God in sight (FS, doc. 102, § 9).

In the Sight of God

The "God alone" theme came to Colin from well known currents in seventeenth and eighteenth century French spirituality (cf. OM 2, doc. 574, 1) but it is an integral part of his understanding of Marist life. It is also the point at which Marist spirituality is most explicitly anchored in the Gospel.

The Second Vatican Council taught solemnly that "the final norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel," and that the Gospel therefore is "the supreme rule" of all religious (Perfectae Caritatis, n. 2). The Council expressed thereby what all religious as well as their Founders had always professed. "...basically the rules of all the Orders are similar, for they are founded on the Gospel." (FS, doc. 98, § 8) The riches of the Gospel cannot all be lived to the full by everyone at the same time. They inspire people in different ways, in different priorities. For Saint Francis it was: "Go and sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me." (Mt 19:21) For Marists the priority lies in Jesus' admonitions concerning the most important features of Jewish piety: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer.

Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice... do not have it trumpeted before you... your almsgiving must be secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you... When you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place... When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father... will reward you (Mt 6:1-18).

Jean-Claude Colin saw the core of Marist life indeed in this context:

We must always remain hidden and unknown. Let us not be concerned with our honour. If we do good, we shall have merit in the sight of God (FS, doc. 152, § 1). ...let us have her [Mary's] spirit, let us do good "hidden and unknown in this world." May the world not know of our works, but the eye of God will see them from heaven and we shall be rewarded for them (FS, doc. 116, § 8).

But I Say to You...

At the root of Jesus' teaching lies his experience of God his Father. God is real, a real person to whom Jesus relates vividly and intimately. As Son of God, he is pure relatedness to the Father, as incarnated Son of God he still was pure relatedness to the Father, expressed in terms of human life and human experience. To one for whom relating to the Father was his very existence, the hypocrisy of pretending to pray while in fact one is attracting people's attention was too much of a contradiction to tolerate. Fasting in order to be seen doing so, giving alms while looking over one's shoulder to make sure one is seen, are things done by people for whom God is not a reality. If God is for real, then any pretence in his regard is an abomination. Then we cannot take outward observance of any law as a substitute for authenticity: "You have heard that it was said, Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit perjury, thou shalt not commit adultery... but I say to you!" Therefore we cannot stand before the altar and nurse a grudge against someone at the same

time. It destroys the reality of God: he ceases to be real here and now for me. If God is real, then there can be no other motive, no other incentive, no other interest. His massive presence blots out everything else. We stand for God alone.

Radical Authenticity

There is a very radical search for authenticity in the Gospel, dominating everything else. It strips away all sham and hypocrisy. It is relentless; it is the only point on which Jesus' forbearance and compassion turns into intolerance.

However deeply our modern world is marked by sin, there is a remarkable affinity to the Gospel value of authenticity. All modern philosophies are, in one way or another, marked by a deep distaste for whatever is not truthful. Debunking is in the air; perhaps we have become too cynical, but we do share this loathing for make-believe.

Existentialism was a search for authenticity. It valued an ethics of truthfulness over the search for "objective truth." To act according to what you are was the ideal. Not to pretend to values or beliefs you did not fully share. Before that it was Freud who threw suspicion on many things in life that paraded as virtue and disguised less healthy dimensions of man. And in the last century it was Marx who ripped the mask off all ideologies that attempted to legitimize, or at least hide, the exploitation of the working classes.

Are not the seeds of the Word there? Is modern man seeking the absolute good, the good for its own sake, in unexpected ways here? If so, does the "God alone" theme which is the mainspring of Marist life, provide here the connecting link with the spiritual hunger of modern man? But in that case the central outlines of Marist spirituality, the ministry of mercy, the breaking up of clericalism, and the "hidden and unknown" must in turn not be mere "tactics." They are the natural implication of a sincere and total relatedness to God, and God alone.

Citizens of the Secular City

The Marist founders were not citizens of the secular city they set out to evangelize. Faced by this strange new civilization they experienced a severe culture shock and as a consequence they could not describe that world except in dramatic language. Perhaps it was all that dramatizing that led people later on to discount this central aspect of the Marist mission.

Marists today often feel the same way. We do not see the modern world in the same light. We know there is a lot of good among people today, even if they are estranged from the Church, even if they have become quite irreligious. Most of us are, after all, born citizens of that secular city ourselves. And in any case, like good missionaries, we have learned that the first impressions of a strange civilization were due as much to culture shock as to proper understanding. Once the good missionary gets to know the local ways, he discovers all the good aspects of the local culture. He no longer just loves the people in some dutiful way: he begins to like them, he admires them.

Most Marists today feel quite at home in the secular city, and that is how it should be. As Pope John Paul II said, the evangelization of the modern world can be undertaken only by those who share the joys and the hope as well as the grief and the anguish of secular man.

This strength can at the same time be our weakness. The secular city can swallow us. We can like it so much that we be-come uncritical and take over all its values and meanings. In Shuzaku Endo's novel *Silence*, the Japanese magistrate says to the apostate Jesuit missionary, "It was not me who broke your resistance. It was the swamp that is Japan." The secularized world can be like such a swamp. We can sink away in its depth. In our attempt to bring the Gospel to the modern world, that world can take the Gospel out of our own hearts.

The Absence of God

Our modern world is honestly and sincerely profane. The religious reference is simply irrelevant, of no importance, of no use. There is no demand for this product on the market. The world does not celebrate the death of God, as Nietzsche imagined it would. His name does not refer to anything real. 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.

It was Bonhoeffer who said, "The specific religious experience of the modern world is to live before God the absence of God." (quoted by R. Dumortier, *France S.M.*, June 1985, p. 5) The absence of God is a fact in the lives of many of our con-temporaries. In our own lives as well He easily fades into a vague background: because we are part of this world. To adopt that absence and "live" it, before Him, is our vocation. That means to establish a vivid and intimate presence in the midst of that absence; to maintain that relationship in the silence of a world that goes on, again in Bonhoeffer's words, "as if God did not exist;" to remain tuned in, with passionate intention and attention, to a wavelength that is silent in a narrow band between loud music and interesting news.

Here Colin is definitely our spiritual master where he speaks of God alone; of mortification of our desires, of the senses, of our thoughts coupled with the right intention. Not looking for inner consolations, for exciting ideas, one remains steadily turned towards Him, for His sake.

If you get nothing out of it, neither taste, nor enlightenment, nor consolations, well, ... carry on just the same. Such a meditation is always of greater benefit than you think. Sometimes you will have been as dry as a bone, even for a long time: you will not have had the slightest en-lightening moment, and then, when the time arrives, you will speak well (FS, doc. 9, § 3).

This is what he meant by "walking boldly by faith," a life of intimate union with God that easily overflows in effective witness of God's presence in a world from which He seems to be increasingly absent.

God Alone

We maintain the presence of God by shedding everything else. He will not share his presence. God is present in our lives to the extent that he alone is there. The religious who is committed to seek God does so in and through the vows: to live the detachment inherent in celibate chastity, in surrender to the community of what we earn and get, in letting someone else have the last word in arranging our lives.

In a Christian world, religious vows may have been powerful reminders of the ultimate values of life, of the reality of a future Kingdom that is not wholly of this world, "a visible proof to the world of the unfathomable mystery of Christ." (*Mutuae Relationes*, n. 10)

To our secularized contemporaries life under religious vows is at best odd; it makes no sense. But to the religious himself, or herself, religious commitment is all the more meaningful: the daily crucial decision of how real God is in one's life.

CONCLUSION

Father Favre succeeded. He did turn the Society of Mary into "a congregation of pious priests, living under a broad and easy rule, organizing home missions, running colleges and available for apostolic works within a limited area and of a commonplace style." (see Ch. 2) Also, it looks as if this Society of Mary is on the way to extinction. It is not very clear why it should continue. Does it have a real role to play in today's world, in today's Church?

Favre's Society is also Colin's Society. It is what Colin's Society became. But is it what Colin and his fellow founders had in mind? To see what Colin had in mind, to hear his call again, we must interpret: we must strip his language from its preachy moralizing style, we must get to its heart: not a way of life, not a set of devotions, but a mission. Not a mission not to whatever turns up. No, it was a very definite mission, the mission to a particular age in which a new world was born, the world of the Enlightenment, in which man came of age and consequently rejected a faith that he felt treated him as a minor, and a Church that he felt refused to respect his adulthood. That world is still the one in which we live; in fact, our world has only drawn the full consequences of the turn it took in the Enlightenment. The mission for which the Society was founded has not come to its end: it is only now showing its full urgency.

After the prophet Jonah had passed through the secular city of Nineveh, he was disgusted: "Please take away my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living." And he went out of the city and made himself comfortable to see what would happen to the city. So often the sin of Jonah is still rife among us. But God's mercy was deeply moved by the multitudes in the secular city. And he was not impressed by the superior attitude of the Jewish prophet and the privileged position Israel claimed for itself.

Jean-Claude Colin did not try to escape from the call to evangelize the secular city. He recognized the compassion of God in Mary, the Mother of the Lord, taking a renewed interest in this world. He was led to see new possibilities in a Church shorn of triumphalism, stripped of prestige involving everyone, ready to meet that world on its own terms.

It is up to us, his sons and daughters, to hear his invitation anew, and take up the mission entrusted to our Society.