



MARIST VOCATION YEAR

4

For the Marists, the first one who followed Christ in his 'self-emptying' was Mary. She did not claim the right to be honoured and glorified as his mother, but accepted obscurity. She was content not to be seen and made 'no noise', as Fr. Colin liked to say. In other words, she remained 'hidden and unknown'. Or, to quote Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort: 'Mary is God's echo. When we call out to her, "Mary", she answers, "God".'

Here is the pattern for the Marists. In the last analysis, Colin, in recommending the 'hidden and unknown', wants us to empty ourselves of our egos, ambitions, sensitivities, our self-seeking and our self-regard. We will thus create an interior space, so that, as far as possible, there are only Jesus, his Father and their Spirit living in us and working through us. To live 'hidden and unknown' is to live with outstretched empty hands, able to receive and to pass on, but not to grasp.

Justin Taylor, s.m.

HIDDEN AND UNKNOWN As the Heart Attitude to Be Present in Our Life

If a Marist is talking about Marist spirituality, it will not be long before the phrase 'Hidden and Unknown' will occur. This expression seems to sum up so much that is characteristic of the Marist approach. It was frequently on the lips of the Founder and occurs many times in his writings, sometimes referring to the individual Marist, sometimes to Marists in general. In the Constitutions that Fr Colin left to the Society of Mary, he wrote a section (Article 50) on 'The Spirit of the Society' that describes a number of key qualities of Marist life and rises to this climax: 'Let them [so combine] a love of solitude and silence and the practice of the hidden virtues with works of zeal, that even though they must undertake the various ministries helpful to the advance of souls, they seem to be unknown and indeed even hidden in this world.'

'Hidden and unknown' is not the motto of the Society: it is not a Marist's object in life to remain hidden and unknown. Rather that is a quality that should imbue the Marist's whole life, form his or her heart and shape their approach to their ministry and indeed to everything they do. But what does it mean? That is not self-evident, and the phrase can be misunderstood. In the last sixty years or so, much has been written about 'hidden and unknown' as a way of entering into dialogue with the modern world and with the women and men of today. It is also, and perhaps in first place, an attitude of heart, the key to a spirituality that may be the Society's principal gift to our Church and indeed to the world. That attitude of heart shapes the Marist response to the call to walk with Jesus and to be sent in Jesus' name.

It may come as a shock to Marists to be told that the expression 'hidden and unknown' was not coined by Fr Colin. It is in fact a phrase that occurred quite frequently in the sort of spiritual reading that was familiar to him and his contemporaries. Its pedigree is even older. In his Letter to the Colossians 3:3, Paul writes: 'You have died, and the life you have is hidden with Christ in God.' This is the origin of the idea of the 'hidden life', which is a frequent theme in spiritual writing. It is supplemented by meditation on the 'hidden life' of Jesus at Nazareth before the beginning of his public ministry. Indeed, even God himself is 'hidden', according to Isaiah 45:15.

With Jean-Claude Colin, however, the words 'hidden and unknown' are placed in relation to the world. In classic spirituality, the point was frequently to be hidden from the world. For Fr Colin, on the other hand, as we saw in the quotation from his Constitutions, Marists are to be 'hidden and unknown in this world'. The words therefore prescribe a way of being present – and indeed active – in the world.

There is a parable told by Jesus that seems to express well what is meant. This is the parable of the yeast, or leaven, that a baker hides inside the lump of dough (Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21). The leaven remains unseen, yet the living organisms within it affect the whole quantity, causing it to 'rise'. (Indeed, if the leaven remained on top of the lump to be seen, it would remain inert and useless.)

Another passage of Scripture that throws light on what Fr Colin meant when he used the words 'hidden and unknown' is one in which the words themselves do not occur. This is the great hymn in St Paul's Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2: '*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.*'

The essential words in this passage, which help us to understand the 'hidden and unknown' are: 'he emptied himself'. Paul's meaning is this: Jesus had a right to be treated with divine honours during his lifetime on earth but, far from grasping at them, he renounced them and accepted to be treated as an ordinary human being. He followed out the logic of this choice even to a painful and humiliating death.

According to St Paul, Jesus' self-emptying is an example for every Christian, who should have 'the same mind' as Christ Jesus. That is, being prepared not to regard even something to which one has a right as 'a thing to be grasped'. Far from seeking power or prestige, those who want to follow Christ should rather 'humble themselves' – let us say, be content with the lowest place – and become obedient.