

you visited me” –Mt 25:36

A Temple Where I Feel the Presence of Christ

by John Bolduc, SM

The Suffolk County House of Correction (South Bay Boston) houses fewer than 2,000 detainees in 27 different units – segregation, solitary, general population, women, and men, as well as two ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement: immigration issues) sections.

Perhaps because it is Boston, priests are given open access and are welcome throughout the institution. They are free to meet, speak, sit, pray, and conduct services with detainees. They even hear confessions using the opening to the cell where food is delivered.

Visiting detainees is a pleasure for me, if only because they are so receptive (a welcome distraction, perhaps). Their openness, sincerity, honesty, and basic goodness is humbling. “When you have lost everything, you have everything,” a good Marist priest once told me. Here is a temple where I feel the presence of Christ.

In the House of Correction, there is no need for pretense, or maintaining appearances – their reputation taken away, their jewelry and wealth taken, their fancy clothes and freedom taken – all they have left is themselves. With a priest they are authentic. Their hearts are truly the Temple of the Holy Spirit. *He [God] was in the woods and the sun came up. There was a river below and mist in the cool of the morning. I felt so close to God. I knew God was with me.* Didn’t St. Teresa say that wanting to be with God was already being with God? Of course, some are satisfied with shaking hands and saying hello; but even these are extremely respectful. Maybe they feel that they do not want to mess with God!

Most, really and truly, want to talk about what is important in life. St. John, chapter four, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, is always a good place to start. It can capture the interest of seven men around a dining table for 45 minutes, especially the part about Jesus not being ashamed of the woman, not caring about losing his reputation by being caught

talking with this unclean, Samaritan, woman! Remember, to convince her that He was no better than she, it was He who asked for water-from her. He did not come as superior, but as inferior.

The detainees also want to laugh. They can take a joke and be quick on the uptake. “Father, nobody even smiles in this place. It means so much to laugh with you.”

Without jewelry they love the rosary. Little white plastic rosaries. They are used as decorations, which is hardly something bad. I also suspect they may be used for identification purposes. Two around their neck means one thing; brown (against the rules) means something else. Since many are not Catholic, I give them a sheet with instructions. Often I say, “for the beads between the large spaces, say ‘God the Father, bless us.’” I explain “us” is me, their cell mates, the guys who messed up their lives, their girlfriend who may or may not be faithful, and their little boy or little girl. I also say, “on the beads between the little spaces, just say ‘Jesus loves me.’” I tell them to do this before they fall asleep. In this place, that is such a nice thing to think about at the end of the day.

I confess that visiting the ICE unit (immigration issues) is the most painful. Not that they are badly treated in detention here, but there is fear in their eyes, dreams have been destroyed, relations shattered, the future unknown. Will they be returned to the unimaginable terror from which they paid such a high price in the first place to escape? **If you have ever wanted to look at the face of Jesus on the Cross, visit an ICE detention center.**

I write this at a time when the Church is being shamed again due to clergy abuse of people. My own ministry has never been so rewarded. So I say, “Visiting detainees is a pleasure.” Somehow being convinced that God’s love and mercy is being channeled through the Church is a pleasure. Isn’t this what the Church is supposed to be doing? And it is doing! For example, lay Catholic women and men



conduct religious services on Sunday in as many units as possible. One Catholic judge volunteers with us. A detainee said: “I go to Church services and see the guy who put my brother in prison.” There must have been a reconciliation of some sort, because he looks forward to the Sunday service.

Someone once said that there is a sufficient amount of evil in the best of us and a sufficient amount of good in the worst of us, that it hardly behooves any of us to judge the rest of us. That is true on every city street corner as well as in every unit of a correction facility. I wonder, if clerics were more ministers of Mary’s compassion and understanding and less rigorous in condemning others, maybe people would be more forgiving of others’ crimes.

The smallest amount of self-knowledge equips us to say: “There but for the grace of God go I.” So when the young lady with the big brown eyes looks into mine and says, “I try so hard to be good,” I recognize that it is often drugs that is the demon she cannot defeat. Then I have to wonder why she is in detention for dependency and another more advantaged person is still free and in private treatment for opioid dependency. The role that race plays in our justice system, and the role our environment and history play in shaping our character reminds us that none of us is self-made and entirely independent. The same human blood runs through each of us. Somehow, we are all the children of the one Father, brothers and sisters in the same human family, with Jesus our brother.

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My Prison Ministry – An Instrument of Mercy

by René Iturbe, SM

As a Marist priest, I serve the Archdiocese of San Francisco in the ministry for Restorative Justice. The Mission Statement reads: “We provide people affected by crime, victims and offenders within our communities, support to heal through prayer, prevention, intervention, and guidance. We believe that peace and justice are attainable when both parties receive the services needed to heal and advance themselves within our society.”

My ministry calls me to plan and present retreats and liturgies for families of the incarcerated and to call upon volunteers to help. My main focus is spending time with inmates in the jails. How do I spend this time? I meet with an inmate usually in an interview room where there is privacy, or sometimes at their cell door, or at a table in the common area.

“Speaking one day about care for the poor, about preaching in the prisons, in the workhouse, etc, he said, ‘How I want the sons of the Blessed Virgin to be known like our Lord by that mark: pauperes evangelizantur.’ (Evangelizing the poor). He laid great insistence upon this saying, ‘I love the abandoned works, hidden and secret, I love the poor.’” – *A Founder Speaks: Spiritual Talks of Jean-Claude Colin*, n.23, p. 85

These inmates may be Catholic, have a Christian background, another religion, or no religion at all. The inmates whom I meet have either asked the coordinator of the county jails to see me, have met me through the celebration of Mass, or have heard about me by word of mouth from other inmates. I bring Communion to the inmates, offer an opportunity for confession, provide scripture study on the readings for the coming Sunday, and extend an opportunity to read and discuss the Bible. Sometimes, I simply bring the opportunity for conversation as they often speak about their lives and the charges leveled against them. What is most important is to LISTEN to what they have to share.

Often, inmates wish to continue to meet with me each week, and as time passes, the relationship becomes deeper. Many of the criminal charges against them stem from an addiction of one type or another. Frequently they have burned the bridges of relationships with family and friends.

Sometimes they have never thought about a relationship with God. Often the God they believe in is not the God of Jesus but rather one they have created through the lack of proper instruction and from ideas passed down from elders. Their ideas of God approach a kind of magic rather than faith.

The inmates’ ages range from 19 to 66. There is always a group which has psychiatric problems. Some are scared. Others have lost hope. Many feel ashamed from their accusations. Some are not able to read, and others span the continuum of education from those not having finished high school to those who have a bachelor’s and even a master’s degree. Some inmates have a public defender assigned to them, others have a private attorney appointed by the court to work pro bono, and still others have a private attorney whom they pay.

The inmates span every ethnic group. The ability to speak Spanish has helped me with the few who speak only Spanish. However, there are very few who have no command of English. Many have children that they long to see. Several have waited as long as four years or more to have their case completed. Waiting for this is a frustrating daily grind for the inmates. The new Humphrey Law in California, where the bail has to be commensurate to the economic level of the individual, has been helpful. Most cannot afford the normal bail that is set. Almost all inmates need a program of one kind or another to prepare them to re-enter society. While there are programs offered for further education and recovery from addiction, waiting to get into the programs is a long ordeal. I spend some time making phone calls to lawyers, programs, and families. I spend most of my time, however, accompanying these individuals trying to let them know they are not alone, there is hope, and that this time in jail can be used in a positive way

for the future. This experience keeps me in touch with my own vulnerability and how the Spirit of God works.

I cannot fail to mention my experience of the correctional system itself. This for me is the most difficult part of the ministry. I am powerless before the system. What do I mean? There are inspections and lockdowns which come out of nowhere, meaning that I must leave the facility. Occasionally, deputies inform me that an inmate is now not available to see me. Most deputies are very good about finding a private space for me to meet with an inmate when someone else is using the regular interview room. However, there are some deputies who give me the impression that I am just one other person they’re forced to deal with. Some do understand that if I do my ministry well, the inmates will be in a better frame of mind, and therefore make the job of the deputy easier. Deputies themselves need ministry. Their job is not easy, and they receive a lot of abuse.

Why do I feel this is a Marist ministry? The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, is the most concrete expression of what is necessary to experience or not to experience the Kingdom about which Jesus speaks. What you do or don’t do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do or don’t do to me. The Marist Charism is meant to amplify an aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. An often used expression to clarify our Charism is to be “an instrument of mercy.” As has been frequently said, mercy is the other side of the coin of justice. Many in our society consider those in our jails and prison systems to be the least in our society, and some would not consider these inmates persons deserving to be in our society. Marists walking with the inmates (the least) is very much at the heart of the Gospel. We Marists walk with inmates so they are able to experience the love and mercy of God. We are to be the instrument for these inmates to grow in belief that God is their creator, who has begun something within them which is good, and that God continues to call it forth no matter how often we (inmates and us as well) have been unresponsive and acted contrary to the call.

Rev. Robert R. Brett, SM

U.S. Navy Chaplain

During his time in Vietnam, Lt. Robert Raymond Brett, SM, always stood firm – firm in his faith, firm in his duty, and firm in his devotion to his men. He would be there to provide whatever care his Marines needed, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual, regardless of what was going on around him. That was why he had joined the Navy: to be where the men in combat needed him most.

According to his family, Bob had always wanted to be a priest. Born in 1936, Bob and his four siblings, Joseph, Francis, Rosemary, and Anastasia, grew up in the Philadelphia area, where he attended Catholic schools before entering the seminary at St. Mary's Manor in Pennsylvania. He made his profession in the Society of Mary in 1956 and then went on to study at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He graduated with a bachelor's in philosophy in 1958 and was ordained at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1962. Shortly thereafter, he earned a master's degree in Latin.

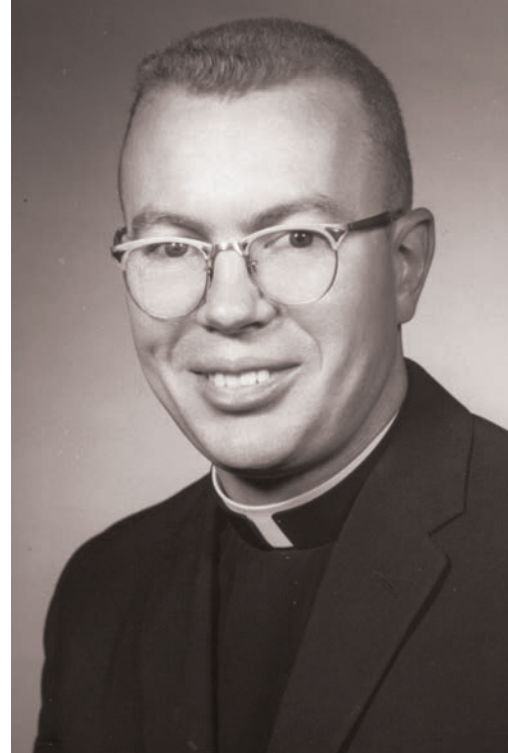
Five years after his ordination, he realized that he needed to do more to support the men and women serving in Vietnam. He joined the Navy as a chaplain. After chaplaincy training in Newport, Rhode Island and Marine training at Camp Pendleton, the now Lt. Robert Brett requested overseas duty and assignment to a Marine unit in Vietnam.

It was customary for each infantry battalion to be assigned a chaplain, and Father Brett was assigned to the 26th Marine Regiment stationed at Phu Bai. He arrived in Vietnam in September 1967 and moved to Khe Sanh with the 26th Regiment in January 1968. He was well-liked and highly regarded by the men he served. The men respected him because they saw him wherever they were, not only at the Masses he performed every Sunday. While his base was at Hill 558, where the 26th Regiment had their command post, it was common for Father

Bob, as the Marines called him, to be out at the Marine positions, regardless of weather or enemy fire. In his book *Walk With Me: A Vietnam Experience*, Lt. Col. Jerry Kurth remembered the risks that Father Bob was willing to take to minister to the men of the 26th Regiment after they had suffered an attack that caused many casualties: "Around 7 a.m. a couple of choppers arrive at Hill 558 to pick up the replacements. Just as the last replacements board, Father Brett runs up to a chopper and tells the pilot that he will be accompanying the replacements. He never bothers to ask permission or seek approval; he just feels he is needed on Hill 861A after their ordeal."

For most of Father Bob's time in Vietnam, Private First Class (Pfc) Alexander Chin could often be found right next to him. Chin was a 24-year old Pfc Marine from Maryland who, because of his religious beliefs, had transferred to a non-combatant post. He was not willing to take another life, but he stood by Father Bob and together they risked their lives ministering to their Marines. The two performed every conceivable religious duty, from baptisms and communions to confessions and last rites. As the base was being attacked, Father Bob would have to perform multiple Masses to make sure all could attend. He sometimes said Mass ten times a day, and each service was always packed. Kurth called him "utterly tireless as well as utterly fearless." Before his death in 2011, Kurth told Father Bob's family that Father Bob moved around to be with his troops, regardless of what any commanding officer ordered.

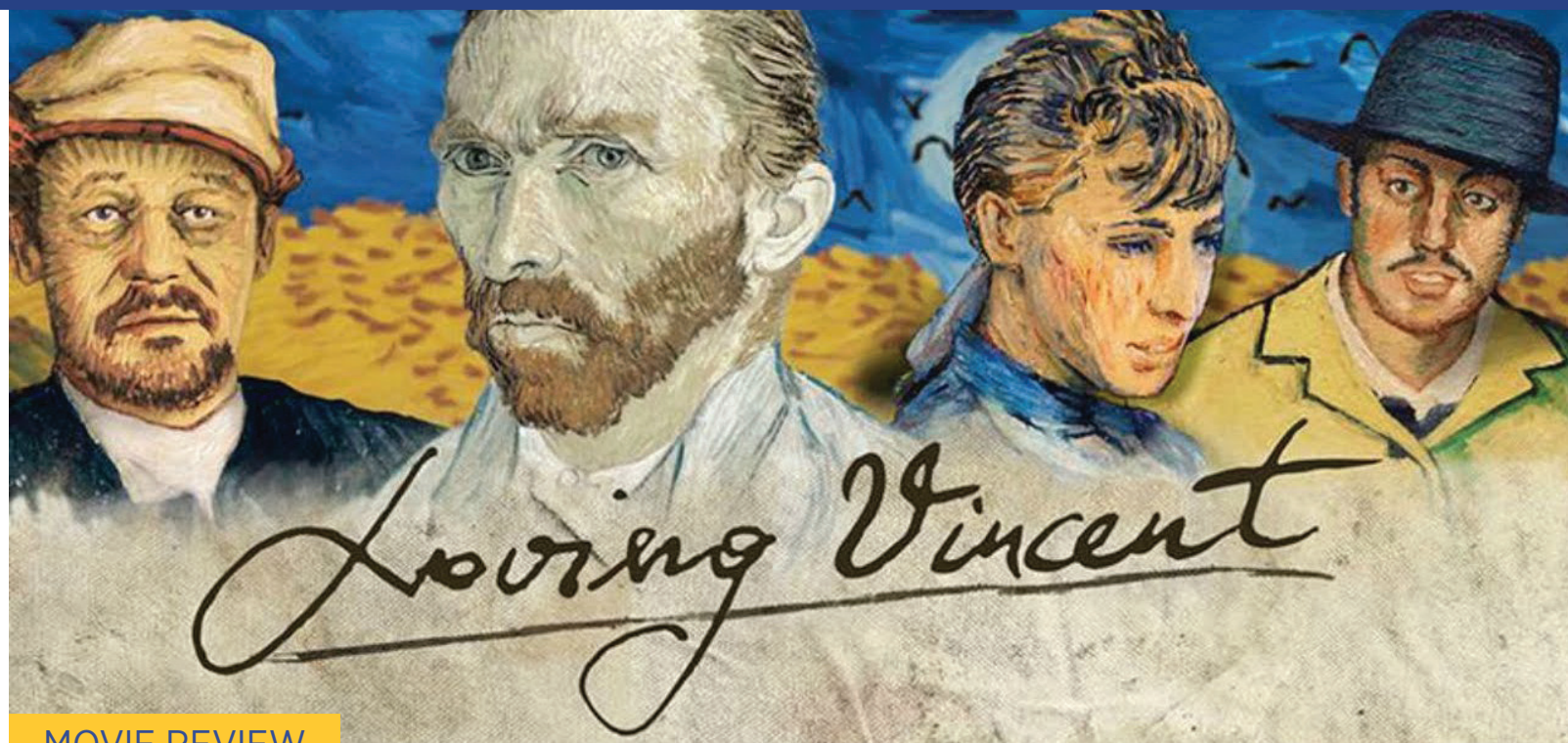
The Siege of Khe Sanh began in January 1968, just after Father Bob and the 26th Regiment had arrived in the area. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces attacked the Marine base on January 21, beginning a massive coordinated attack that would last for 77 days and take the lives of more than 200 American troops. As always, Father Bob was in the thick of the action, ministering to his Marines.



On February 22, Father Bob and Pfc. Chin were at the Khe Sanh Combat Base awaiting helicopter transport back to the command post at Hill 558. Kurth had not wanted Father Bob to leave Hill 558 but relented when Father Bob accused him of "preventing him from doing his duty as a priest." As the chopper landed and Father Bob and the others made their way to it, NVA rockets began hitting the base. As the rocket fire increased, Father Bob told the helicopter to take off. He headed back to the trenches, with Chin at his side. Almost immediately upon their arrival at the trench, a rocket struck directly on the trench. When the smoke of the rocket attack cleared, eight men lay dead in the trench, including Father Bob and Chin.

Father Bob was buried on the grounds of the seminary he had attended, and Chin was laid to rest in a family plot in Princess Anne, Maryland. In 1998, the Brett family moved Father Bob to Chaplain's Hill in Arlington National Cemetery. As a sign of their gratitude for the faith, devotion, and courage of Chin, they petitioned to have him buried right beside the chaplain. In 1999, Chin was buried with full military honors on Chaplain's Hill. Father Bob and Chin are side by side, just as they were so often in Vietnam.

Article adapted from : Lark, Lisa A. *All They Left Behind: Legacies of the Men and Women on the Wall*. M.T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2012



MOVIE REVIEW

“Not As We Know It”

Prayerful Reflection with the Movie *Loving Vincent*

by Brian Cummings, SM, Director, Pā Maria Marist Spirituality Centre, Wellington, New Zealand



“It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it” is one of those sayings that goes with being of a certain age, old enough to know the series *Star Trek* and young enough to remember that it is Mr. Spock speaking to Captain Kirk in the quote. Except it actually is not. The saying comes not from the TV series but from the 1987 song ‘Star Trekkin’ by the British band The Firm. Regardless of its provenance, the saying is iconic for a certain generation and applicable to a wide range of events and situations, including movies.

Loving Vincent is a case in point. It is indeed a movie, but not as we usually know movies. Interestingly, it was nominated for the 2018 Academy Awards in the ‘Animated Feature Film’ category, but that was perhaps a case, as much as anything, of not knowing quite where it should fit.

It is certainly a feature length film. It is, kind of, an animated movie but not as we know it. *Loving Vincent* (directors: Hugh Welchman, Dorota Kobiela) is the first entirely hand-painted feature film. Created by 125 artists, and 10 years in the making, the movie required real actors to be filmed in front of green screens, and then nearly 65,000 frames to be painted to reflect the style of Vincent van Gogh.

The technique employed is a variation of rotoscoping (animating over the top of pre-shot footage) used in such movies as *Waltz with Bashir*. But *Loving Vincent* takes this technique where no one has gone before (to echo *Star Trek* once again). The result is a stunningly beautiful movie which almost seems to have a life of its own and is quite unlike any other animated movie. As a result, a viewer is both entranced but also left somewhat overwhelmed by what it is he/she is experiencing.

Unfortunately, the impact on the viewer doesn’t quite extend to the content of the movie. It’s essentially a detective story set one year after Vincent van Gogh’s death, and it revolves around one man (Roulin) attempting to discover the truth about Vincent’s final months and apparent “suicide.” Whereas the visual impact is vibrant and alive, the story line tends towards the stilted and clunky. While unfortunate, the unevenness of the storyline doesn’t negate the strength of *Loving Vincent*. It is both fascinating and beautiful to look at, and its major achievement is to immerse the viewer in a new way of considering what a movie might be and how it might impact its audience.

Marist founder Jean-Claude Colin didn’t know of Mr. Spock and nor would he have said, “It’s the Church, messieurs, but not as we know it.” However, as with a modern audience viewing *Loving Vincent*, Colin wanted Marists to look at the Church through new eyes and to see what might be possible: “The Society of Mary must begin a new Church over again. I do not mean that in a literal sense, that would be blasphemy. But

“The Society of Mary 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”

– *A Founder Speaks: Spiritual Talks of Jean-Claude Colin*, 120

still, in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church” (*A Founder Speaks: Spiritual Talks of Jean-Claude Colin*, 120).

As French Marist Francois Drouilly points out in his book *15 days of Prayer with Jean-Claude Colin*, the Founder had two keys aspects in mind when he made his bold statement. The first was the state of the Church, run down and fragmented at the time the Society of Mary was getting under way. The second was Colin’s vision of the new-born Church at Pentecost, with Mary at its heart.

Between these two “poles,” as it were, Colin realized that the Church could not continue exactly as it had been. As Drouilly highlights, Colin considered certain characteristics essential to his idea of a “new Church.” It must point back to Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; it must be a community that excludes no one; it must be flexible in its approach and language; and it must be focused outwards rather than inwards on the institution.

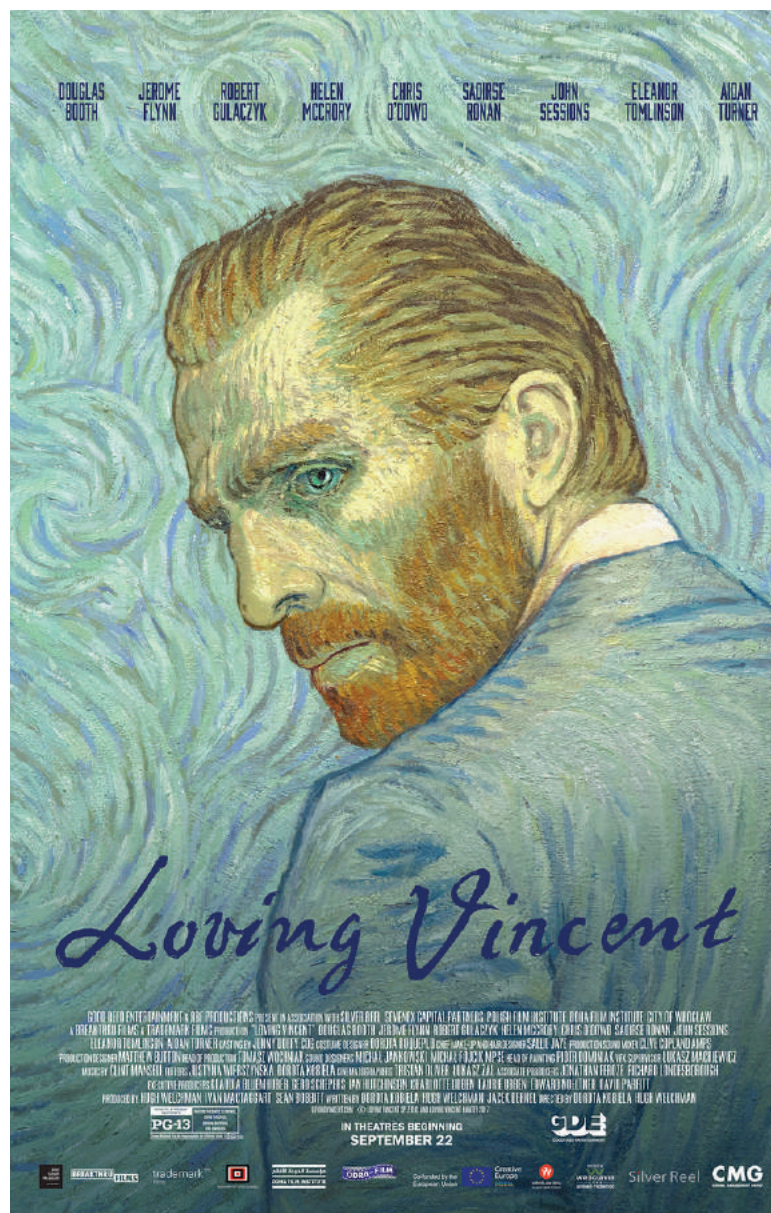
Added to these characteristics was Colin’s vision of “the whole world Marist.” This “new Church” is not the initiative and the responsibility of priests and religious only. All people, all Marists, are called to belong and to proclaim it.

It was a revolutionary view when Colin voiced it, and his awareness of how it might be misinterpreted is seen in his qualification that he does not mean a “new Church” in a literal sense (“that would be blasphemy”). Nor does Colin weaken when he says, “yet in a certain sense, yes, we must begin a new Church.”

Perhaps Colin’s vision sounded more revolutionary in his own day than it does to us today. Still, we hear frequently from Pope Francis a similar call to become a “new Church.”

For example, “Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘new’” (*Evangelii Gaudium* No.11).

Or “We seek to find in the treasury of the Church whatever is most fruitful for the ‘today’ of salvation. It is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances, and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another. The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial “today” of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every



situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light.” (*Gaudete et Exsultate* No.173).

The call for us today, as it was for Marists in Colin’s time and has been ever since, is to move beyond the challenges and the possibilities of the concept of a “new Church” and to work towards actually making it a reality.

The qualities that Colin sought in the “new Church” are as valid today as they were in his time. We must be guided by the Holy Spirit. We must be open to everyone. We must be flexible and adaptable. And we must seek humility and forgiveness rather than privilege and power.

As with viewing *Loving Vincent*, we are being called to go beyond what we are used to, what we imagine “has to be,” and to consider “what could be.”

Today, more than ever, the Marist charism has something to offer people. It introduces them to new possibilities within which we can say “it is the Church, but not as we know it.”