"As if Hidden and Unknown in the World"

The Society of Mary and Social Justice – Part 7

I want to end this series of meditations on social justice (advancing the reign of God) by linking it to the Marist Way of evangelizing this secular age. Let me begin with a story that Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI, shared during a retreat he conducted for us Marists.

He told the story of a French-Canadian woman, Vivian Dupree, who once spoke at the University of Ottawa. She is not a theologian. She works in hospice and is often found on the streets after the fashion of St. Teresa of Calcutta. She gave a compelling talk though she began by admitting how intimidated she was by speaking to all these theologians. She, of course, was not one, but she said, "I'll tell you what I do. I work with the poor in the streets of Quebec City." She said she was a Christian and Roman Catholic. What she said next is what I want you to think about. She said, "My outreach to the poor comes from my faith, but I can go on the streets for three years and never mention Jesus' name. I believe God is mature enough that he doesn't need to be the center of our attention or consciousness all the time." She is employing a strategy that Fr. Colin wanted the Marists to use when engaging this secular age. He gave a name to it. He called it "as if hidden and unknown in the world."

Well, her comment certainly sparked a reaction. Some were taken aback, thinking that the Church must proclaim Jesus is Lord and asking how that can be done if his name is never mentioned. The Church does proclaim Jesus is Lord whenever the liturgy (sacraments) are celebrated, prayers are said in his name, wherever Catholic or Christian schools, hospitals, and orphanages are found, at Eucharistic Congresses and Corpus Christi processions, and in the lives of the great Christian witnesses and saints. These and all the ways the reign of God is advanced should be seen as proclaiming Jesus is Lord. Nothing is wrong with that, but we need not lead with that when introducing Jesus to a secular world.

As I mentioned earlier, Fr. Colin favored another approach and, consequently, is the preferred way of the Society of Mary. He said Marists should be "as if hidden and unknown in the world" because he believed God could accomplish more by working "under the radar." This aspect of Marist spirituality has been the least appreciated and most misunderstood aspect of the Marist Way of living the Gospel, even though it has its roots in Jesus.

You will recall that Jesus lived quietly, humbly, hidden and unknown for thirty years in Nazareth, a remote and nondescript village in Galilee. When he began his public ministry, he taught with authority though he had not studied the Hebrew Scriptures under a respected rabbi. People sensed or intuited that there was "something else afoot" in Jesus. He performed miracles and acted as though he was the Lord. That led his critics to accuse him of claiming to be divine and blaspheming. They crucified him for that reason and for accusing him of being a king though his kingdom is not of this world. The Son of God was in their midst, and no one recognized him. It was as if he was hidden and unknown in the world. Fr. Colin's preference for Marists to be "as if hidden and unknown in the world" originates in Jesus himself and in Mary, who was a "willing accomplice" in carrying out this divine strategy to save the world from Sin and Death.

Jesus did not adorn himself with the trappings of the rich and the powerful that earthly kings use to lord it over their subjects. He shunned being seen and known in those ways. Instead, he was approachable, non-threatening, available, empathetic (compassionate), and someone with whom sinners felt welcomed and hopeful, perhaps for the first time. Jesus touched the lives of countless people, most of whom did not

recognize him as the Son of God and Lord (King) of creation and history. He would agree with Vivian Dupree when she said, "I believe God is mature enough that he doesn't need to be the center of our attention or consciousness all the time." That describes how Jesus lived his earthly life: in the background, out of the spotlight, as if hidden and unknown in the world. That also describes his mother, his first disciple and model of discipleship.

St. Paul beautifully captured this strategy's wisdom in his letter to the Philippians, "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2: 5-8)

The wisdom of secularism either denies the existence of God or, if there is a God, remains uninvolved in creation. That is akin to sending God into exile. That is the secular version of being hidden and unknown in the world, which is meant to serve as a grave for God, believing and even hoping there is no possibility of a resurrection.

But as the psalmist points out, "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." (Psalm 2:4; 37:13; 59:8). Speaking in today's parlance, God says, "No problem!" Rather than seeing this as a defeat, this plays into God's hands. That is because God does not seek to overpower us but to woo us into loving him, who loved us so much that he sent his only son. (1 John 4:9)

The movie "You've Got Mail" exemplifies the wisdom and effectiveness of being "hidden and unknown in the world." Watch the film and see how the character played by Tom Hanks uses the strategy of being hidden and unknown in courting and winning over the affections of the character played by Meg Ryan. The Risen Christ, through his body, the Church, is trying to court this secular age by continuing to employ the strategy of being as if hidden and unknown in the world. This strategy is both clever (wise) and gentle. It embodies the wisdom of Jesus, who said, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and gentle as doves." (Mt. 10:16)

We want our students to graduate from Marist as men and women of faith dedicated to the sacred work of making the world more just and peaceful and collaborating with like-minded people whose motivations for doing so may differ from theirs. We want Marist students to be conscious of their vocation given to them in baptism to conform their lives to Christ and by adopting as their own the mission of Christ to advance the reign of God. That begins with announcing to the often-unruly populace of their inner life (soul)—their feelings, thoughts, actions, and judgments—that Jesus is Lord.

We want them to pray for those moments when their secular collaborators will recognize or intuit that there is more at work in their work for justice and peace than meets the eye. The suspicion that "something else is afoot" may bring about a conversation that St. Peter encouraged women and men of faith to engage in when he wrote, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3: 15) You can also equate gentleness and respect with as if being hidden and unknown in the world.

Every Catholic and Christian should have had such a conversation with at least one person while on this earth. For spouses, that begins with each other. For parents, it starts with their children and, in both cases, expands outward. When our students leave Marist, we send them into the world with that expectation. We send them as missionaries to this secular age to advance God's reign and do this critical work from within the context of faith. That door is always open to those for whom the very notion of God, let alone a God

who is slow to anger and rich in mercy, is working towards recreating the world where justice and peace are its hallmarks, is a God too good to be true. That is also a God worth knowing, trusting, serving, and, most importantly, loving whom Jesus reveals in his very person and whose mission the Church has been called to make her own by proclaiming, “This is the time of fulfillment. The reign (kingdom) of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:5)

Marist School sends its graduates to do this work in the spirit of Mary, as if hidden and unknown in the world. Its wisdom may be questioned, but not by Mary. She learned it from her son.