The Society of Mary and Social Justice – Part 6

"This is the time of fulfillment. The reign (kingdom) of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15)

We can't understand the link between Jesus and social justice unless we consider what Jesus meant when he spoke about the kingdom of God (Gospels of Mark and Luke) or the kingdom of heaven (Gospel of Matthew), which was both the focus of his teaching and the passion of his life. The phrase occurs 122 times in the New Testament and 99 times in the four Gospels, and 90 times out of the mouth of Jesus.[1]

For our purposes, I will use the term reign of God because the word kingdom connotes a geographical place. The word reign refers to a process beyond a particular place and unfolds in time though its fulfillment will be at the end of time.

What exactly is the reign of God? It is a concept found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and is part of divine revelation. While the phrase the kingdom of God is rarely used, the concept that underlies it is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). Yahweh is the eternal king and Lord forever and ever. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize that there are four dimensions of this kingdom: It is *divine*, established, and ruled by God; *everlasting* because it has no end; *universal* because although it begins with Israel, it must extend to include all the nations of the earth; and *spiritual* meaning it is more than an earthly kingdom. It is a heavenly kingdom.[2] By the time of Jesus, though, the Jewish people had lost the spiritual dimension of God's kingdom, which they now interpreted as being entirely an earthly one.

A convenient way of understanding what the reign of God looks like is found in how the Risen Lord greeted his disciples when he appeared to them in the upper room. Rather than berating them for their failures, he greeted them with the word "Shalom." That word expresses what God desires for all humanity: justice, peace, love, compassion, freedom, the fullness of life for all, and the integrity of creation.[3] The presence of these characteristics will be found where God reigns. This is God's vision for the flourishing of humanity. While there will always be the reality of human progress, the reign of God is different. It comes from without, from another realm, a heavenly one but also grows from within. It will be advanced with human beings acting in partnership with God, which is another way of saying through the grace of God. At the same time, the reign of God will be established in fullness when Christ returns in glory.

In the very person of Christ, the reign of God has broken into this world because Christ is the very presence of God. In Christ, humanity and divinity have come together in peace resulting in humanity (Christ's human nature) not being destroyed but, instead, revitalized and enhanced. God's vision for humanity is fulfilled in the very person of Christ but at a cost. The price was his suffering and death on a cross, brought about by the ruling powers of this fallen earthly kingdom, sin and death, whose defeat was announced with Jesus' resurrection.

The reign of God will always threaten the sinful powers of this world, referred to as the ways of the world in common parlance by those who believe that sin and death are too entrenched to be dislodged. Those who follow Christ should not be surprised or dismayed when promoting the reign of God is resisted, and they suffer as a result. Disciples of Christ must be prepared to follow in the footsteps of their Master.

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[1]Fradd, Michael, What is the Kingdom of God, Catholic Answers.

[2] https://www.beginningcatholic.com/kingdom-of-god

[3] Groome, Thomas H., What Makes Us Catholic, Harper-Collins e-books, page 22.

Christians believe Easter has changed the course of history, turning it slowly toward realizing God's reign of the fullness of life for all people and creation. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection released into human history what Saint Paul repeatedly describes as "God's abundant grace" (see, for example, Rom 5:17; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Cor 4:15) and is for all people and creation. We are assured now of God's love at work in all people's lives and for free—gratis.

Jesus continues to announce, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15) but now through his mystical body, the Church. The Church's mission is to announce that Jesus is Lord and to extend the reign of God to include the current time and place in history. However, it will be established forever at the end of time when Jesus comes again in power and might, revealing his glory and majesty. Still, Jesus clarifies that the reign of God is to be realized in the present. He said as much when he taught us to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in his parables where the reign of God is likened to a mustard seed (Mt. 13:31), a pearl of great price (Mt. 13: 45-46), or that the kingdom of God is within you.

Consequently, Christians can partner with other Christians, believers of other religions, atheists, and agnostics, whom God's grace is moving to cooperate with his desire for a more just and equitable world. Note that the distinguishing characteristics of the reign of God are justice, peace, love, compassion, freedom, the fullness of life for all, and the integrity of creation. Those are universal aspirations that all people of goodwill can support and cooperate with bringing about. We see that as signs of "God's abundant grace" at work, gathering his people through a shared vision for a better world. The failure of the laity to embrace this mission leads critics of the Church to question how a just and loving God can permit injustice and other evils to go uncontested.

With all this in mind, Jesus' miracles can be understood as the reign of God breaking into our earthly realm and establishing God's reign. They had both personal and societal ramifications. In Jesus' time, anything that diminished a person, such as poverty or illness, reduced their social status, leaving them marginalized and vulnerable. Whenever he cured the sick or miraculously fed the hungry, Jesus not only relieved their suffering but also erased their shame and restored their dignity in society. Notice the social dimension of Jesus' miracles. It is not a giant leap from restoring the dignity of those suffering from poverty and illness to those whose dignity is lost through racism, sexism, sexual abuse, homophobia, migration, etc.

The Marists want Marist School to teach its students to be leaders. It is not acceptable for students to be intellectually against anti-bullying or homophobia or hazing, or racism and content with saying or doing nothing to object to what they see as wrong. To be leaders, they must intervene to stop those kinds of behaviors. They can do that by speaking up on behalf of those students who are being victimized or by reporting the incident to the appropriate faculty and administrators.

Those are the ways our students advance the reign of God and proclaim, "Jesus Christ is Lord." How will it happen "that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."? (Phil 2: 9-11) At the end of time, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. There will be no antagonism in acknowledging this truth for those who may feel that way now. Those words will come easily, naturally, and joyfully as fitting those who found the pearl of great price and sold everything to attain it." It will be the sign that the reign of God is finally established in glory and majesty. Such a vision may seem impossible to achieve in this present moment, but all things are possible with God. (Mt. 19:26)

Marist wants to prepare our students to be faith-filled, global-ready servant leaders. The Marists want them to partner with people from all walks of life to advance a new world characterized by justice, peace, love, compassion, freedom, the fullness of life for all, and the integrity of creation. That is also why

Marist School is committed to teaching our students (laity) about social justice and their responsibility to work towards furthering God's reign here on earth wherever they find themselves.

To that end, Marist encourages our students to cultivate empathy (compassion), without which the reign of God will be hindered and slowed in making its advance, resulting in countless people needlessly suffering. Service projects, mission trips, theology, sociology, history, literature classes, Reach for Excellence, and the Centro Hispano Marista quickly come to mind and are examples of how Marist cultivates the virtue of empathy (compassion) in our students. We want our students to embrace this noble task (vocation) to advance the reign of God (social justice) entrusted to them by Christ in baptism, which is also how they will sanctify the world.

Fr. Colin, founder of the Society of Mary, insisted that Marist educators form their students into *strong and faithful disciples of Christ*. In addition, they must encourage and instruct their students on how to *know and exercise their responsibilities and rights as honest and upright citizens useful to society*. Teaching them about the reign of God, commonly referred to as social justice, is teaching them to be upright citizens, useful to society.

That should be the focus of our teaching and our students' passion when they leave Marist, just as it was for Jesus. All of this is included in the mission of Marist School, which is "to form the whole person in the image of Christ through instruction grounded in religious values, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the spirit of the Society of Mary. This mission is advanced through the communal pursuit of excellence in academic, religious, extracurricular, leadership, and service programs."

Youth have a sensitivity to matters of justice and are naturally drawn not only to want to help those who are suffering but confront the "ways of the world" that make such suffering normative. They also want their voice to be heard. Marist School hears in their pleas for a more just and compassionate world the voice of the Risen Lord who announces to this age and every age, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign (kingdom) of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15)