**Marist School's Mission to an Increasingly Secular Society**

*Reflection #4 – Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.*

Now, I want to address Marist School and its mission to an increasingly secular society within the context of the Church's mission to evangelize and the Society of Mary's participation in that mission. Let's look at the first part of the mission statement of Marist school: "The mission of Marist School 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."

If there was ever a time when our students would need to explain their faith to non-believers, that time is now. Aware that they will be encountering individuals who don't believe in God but may still miss God, our students must, in the words from 1 Peter 3: 15 -16, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence…" We want our students to be knowledgeable and conversant about their faith but not *only* for their spiritual well-being (salvation). We want them to possess the confidence and skills to share it with those who miss God and, consequently, live in darkness and the shadow of death, all the while longing for a reason to hope there is more to life than death. They are longing to hear and believe some good news, the same good news that we have heard, believe, and know as the Gospel.

Now, let's look at the second part of the Marist School mission statement "This mission is advanced through the communal pursuit of excellence in academic, religious, extracurricular, leadership, and service programs." For our purposes, I want to direct our thoughts to the pursuit of excellence. We ordinarily associate excellence with achievement. However, I want to associate excellence with beauty.

Fr. Colin wanted students at a Marist School to excel in all the facets of education. Why? Well, he believed that God deserved our very best. When we dedicate our gifts and talents to serving God's purposes, we also signal our desire for God to enter into our lives. The secular mentality is to view this as God infringing on our autonomy, reducing our stature so that God's can be enhanced at our expense. The reality is our cooperation with God's grace has the opposite effect.

In the Book of Exodus, Bishop Robert Barron points out that Moses is walking in the desert when he notices a burning bush and draws near to take a closer look. The bush is on fire, but it is not being consumed. Instead, it is being enhanced, transformed, or repurposed into a living sign of God's presence. When we allow the fire of God's love to consume us, our gifts and talents are enhanced, not suppressed. When the moral quality of our lives reaches the heights of excellence, God's kingdom is advanced. People will take note. They will draw near. They will want to know how their lives can be like that: beautiful and a living sign of God's presence. That is what the Julian Barnes' of this secular world miss, what they hope for and desperately want to think can be true for them, too.

That is the message from on High that the Church has been charged with announcing. We were chosen by Christ and given that mandate in baptism. Jesus put that message into words for us when he proclaimed to his relatives and friends at Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4: 14-30)

Read in the words, good news to the poor, freedom for the oppressed, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for prisoners, as referring to the Julian Barnes of the world, who live blind, imprisoned, impoverished and oppressed by a secular ideology that has led them to deny God but who still miss him.

That is why Fr. Colin wanted Marist educators to teach the humanities, science, technical skills, critical thinking, and life skills. The Church needs believers who are scientists, artists, athletes, businessmen and women, educators, public servants, economists, etc., who are embedded in every facet of society to contribute to human progress and human beings flourishing. The Church also wants students to speak the languages of the different disciplines. That is how they can gain the respect and trust of their peers so that when the occasion presents itself, they can give an explanation to anyone who asks them for a reason for their hope, but do it the Marist Way, with gentleness and reverence.

From what you have just read above, it should be evident that a Marist education propels students to engage the world and not flee from it. It is imperative that Catholic values and thinking inform and influence decisions that can affect every stratum of society. Without that voice being heard, a secular ideology will go unchecked, and its impact on society will have profound adverse effects.[1]

In *The Standards and Criteria for Marist Owned and Sponsored Schools*, the Marists make it clear that "a Marist education should aim to help students confront social injustice such as racism, sexism, and intolerance as well as safeguarding human life from conception to natural death. In addition, a Marist education should teach students how to collaborate with other men and women of goodwill no matter their creed, race, or social standing…"[i] We want our students to know and articulate the Catholic position on social justice issues and work to attain them with all people of goodwill. As I said earlier, a Marist education intends to propel our students to engage the world, not flee from it. That is what the Marist School's mission to an increasingly secular society looks like.

Let me conclude with this thought. Fr. Ellerman, S.M. '58 points out that the antithesis of the secular worldview is Mary, the model of discipleship and our mother in faith. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you" is a rebuke to the spirit of this present age that would deny the existence of God or argue that God must die so that we human beings can maximize our potential and not only live but, flourish. The Angel Gabriel hails or salutes Mary for being full of grace; that is, close to God or filled with the Spirit of God. In other words, Mary is the model of what it looks like when, from the secular perspective, one's entire life is "infringed upon" by God. Let's be clear here. To be a Marist is to want God to "infringe upon us." To be a Marist is to want to be full of grace or on fire with God's love. To be a Marist is to say with Mary, "Let it be done to me according to your word," and genuinely mean it today and every day.

When we allow the fire of God's love to consume us, our gifts and talents are enhanced, not suppressed. When the moral quality of our lives reaches the heights of excellence, God's kingdom is advanced. People

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[1] John Henry Newman implied long ago that the future of morality is dependent on the strength of our individual and collective conscience, which in turn, is dependent on the strength of our belief in God (see Newman *Proof of Theism* ed. by Boekraad and Tristram). If Newman is correct, then the confrontation of secularism today will require a two-step process—first, a strengthening of belief in God and Jesus Christ, and then a concerted effort to restore the weakened ideas of deadly sins, virtues, and principles (the formation of conscience). Failure to respond to this challenge will lead to an even more rapid decline in religion and moral standards that will bring the United States to the same level as Western Europe within fifteen to twenty years – more than 55% unbelievers with a concomitant decline in Christian moral standards – a pessimistic scenario at best, for world culture. From *Confronting Secularism Today*, Fr. Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.

will take note. They will draw near. They will want to know how their lives can be like that: beautiful and a living sign of God's presence that they may only sense at this early stage of their transformation. That is what the Julian Barnes of this secular world miss, what they hope for, and desperately want to think can be true for them, too. They know all too well that God's absence has chilled the landscape of their souls, leaving them to walk in darkness and under the shadow of death. All of that is being tacitly acknowledged with the words, "I miss him."

I like to think that Jesus anticipated those words of Julian Barnes and had this secular age in mind when he said, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Luke 12: 49) That is another way of understanding Christ's mandate given to us in baptism. For that to happen, we need to be on fire with God's love so that our lives will be beautiful and a living sign of God's presence. That is what the Julian Barnes of this secular world miss, hope for, and desperately want to be true for them, too.

I suppose that is the ultimate goal of a Marist education. No matter your profession, career, or vocation, you have been chosen to do that particular work so you can be in a position to, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it (the Marist Way) with gentleness and reverence." (1 Peter 3: 15 -16)

That is a work of Mary to which the Society of Mary has been called to undertake. We are to engage with this secular age in the spirit of Mary, which is to think, judge, act, and feel like her in all things so that this secular world will one day come to think, judge, act and feel like her toward her son and his vision of a just and peaceful world that will come in fullness when he comes again.

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[i] *The Standards and Criteria for Marist Owned and Sponsored Schools, p.13, #215 – 216.*