The Same Church but with a Marian Face

The Essence of Marist Spirituality - Part Three

I ended the last meditation on how Fr. Colin believed it was time for the Church to start over or to start fresh. In that sense, he wanted a new Church but one with a specifically Marian face. What did he mean by that?

Keep in mind that the fundamental and original insight about the Society of Mary, as articulated by Fr. Colin, was that the Marists are to be the presence of Mary in the Church. She was heard to have said concerning the Society of Mary, "I was the support of the newborn Church; I shall be so in the last times." Being her presence goes beyond imitating her virtues to identifying with her. That is why Fr. Colin wanted Marists to "think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel, and act like Mary in all things." Paramount for Marists is that they think, judge, feel, and act like Mary toward her son. Being Mary is the essence of Marist spirituality.

In Article 49 of the 1872 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, which was painstakingly written by Fr. Colin and reflects his mature thinking about the Society, it is written, "*…let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…"*

The image of breathing in and breathing out is significant. Marist School alumnus Fr. Tom Ellerman, S.M. '58, likens inhaling to contemplation or prayer. Exhaling, he says, is akin to the apostolate or ministry. He notes that we must inhale before we can exhale. This prioritizing of the importance of contemplation is contrary to the contemporary emphasis on work, being busy, productive, active, or engaged in ministry or the apostolate.

The one-sided emphasis on being active usually comes at a price: the relegation of contemplation to being secondary or unnecessary. Some clergy, religious, and laity have said, "My work is my prayer," thereby eliminating the need for prayer or contemplation altogether. Inhaling and exhaling are not identical. At the same time, inhaling and exhaling, while distinct, form one complete motion. Both are necessary if we are to live.

What are Marists to breathe in? Marists are to breathe in Mary's spirit of humility, self-denial, and intimate union with God. We call that prayer or contemplation. What are Marists to breathe out? They are to "breathe out" an ardent love of neighbor. We call that ministry or the apostolate or service.

How do we do all that? Here we move from breathing to thinking. Fr. Ellerman says Marists are to get into "Mary's head." This is very Ignatian, and for Fr. Colin, meditation is critical. He was very much concerned with an interior change or conversion of Marists. That is why Fr. Colin wanted Marists to "think, judge, feel, and act like Mary in all things." For this to happen, Marists must be emptied of themselves.

Fr. Colin gets this idea of self-emptying from Jesus and Mary. In the Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul

refers to Christ as having taken on the condition of a slave, an emptying of self to take on our humanity.[1]

In Luke's Gospel, we hear Mary responding to the Angel Gabriel, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to Your Word.” (Luke 1: 38) Here, Mary empties herself and breathes in the second person of the Trinity. Note, too, that Mary's last recorded words in the New Testament direct the Church to follow her lead and, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:5)

As we Marists strive to make the whole world Marist, we must also strive to make our interior world Marist. This means emptying of the self. What does that mean? It means emptying ourselves of anything that would be anti-Christ, opposed to the values of God's kingdom, and prohibiting us from responding to God selflessly or generously like Mary when she said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to Your Word.” (Luke 2:38)

This self-emptying affects us intellectually, emotionally, as well as our actions. It is the path that leads to union with God, which is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

That is the essence of Marist spirituality. Marist spirituality is being Mary. It is a certain or Marist Way of being in the Church and the world, a way of praying, thinking, and living. When you think, judge, feel and act like Mary in all things, you will end up being Christ-centered. To think, judge, feel, and act like Mary is to think, judge, feel, and act like her toward her son. Fr. Colin asks Marists to conform their lives to Christ, as Mary did. And you can't be Mary if you don't breathe her spirit into your being.

How do we do that? In my following meditation, I will give you some Marist spiritual exercises to practice that will help you to think, judge, feel, and act like her in all things. And that goes hand in hand with breathing in her spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor.

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[1] “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus. Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as 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.” (Philippians 2: 7-8)