Tell Me Again What the Society of Mary Is To Do?

The Essence of Marist Spirituality - Part Two

Many observe that they like the Society's spirit and values but want to know, “What are we supposed to do?” Here is where it gets tricky.

Fr. Colin never said that the Marists were founded for one ministry, such as hospitals or schools. Though he would comment that if the Society were no longer involved in the education of youth, then that would be a sign that the Society had lost its way. Fr. Colin had even considered having the Marists make a vow for education, but he never followed through on that. In his heart-of-hearts, he didn't want Marists to be involved in parishes fearing, and with good reason, that parishes would be harmful to religious life. Yet, he did assign Marists to parishes. The Marists went to the foreign missions only because we were asked to and not because Fr. Colin specifically envisioned the Society of Mary as doing that. The first Marists were involved with home missions, but Fr. Colin never said we were founded for that particular work.

When he did speak about what works the Society of Mary should be engaged in, he was rather vague. Marists were to go where the need was the greatest, with a particular preference for the poor and the marginalized. So then, if the Marists appear to be vague about the precise work we are called to do, that is because Fr. Colin himself was vague, as were many other religious founders.

However, I think it is possible to get some clarity as to the mission of the Society of Mary. Of course, the joke about the three blind men who come across an elephant comes to mind. Each one feels a part of the elephant and comes up with a different description, and they end up fighting with each other as to who is right. That sums it up when we Marists are trying to agree on our mission. Every Marist has a part of the truth but can never seem to put it together so that we can all agree.

Yet, I think we can still speak with some clarity. Let me take a stab at it. Marists find their identity in Mary, who has called them by her gracious choice to think, judge, feel, and act like her in all things, and, in turn, that we may think, judge, feel, and act like her towards her son.

The mission of the Society of Mary is to be the presence of Mary in the Church and in the world today. Marists are called to be men and women of faith and to participate in the mission of the Church to evangelize this age of unbelief and indifference. This is done in a particular way, in the spirit of Mary, referred to as the Marist Way of living the Gospel.

From this comes how this mission is carried out: through particular works such as high schools, chaplaincies, parishes, GED programs for Hispanic adults, and a school that ministers to children with learning disabilities, etc. But these particular works or ministries are lifeless unless they are infused with the spirit of Mary. The spirit of Mary was so important to Fr. Colin that the 1872 Constitutions of the Society of Mary was his attempt to describe the spirit of Mary. He also explained how Marists who are animated by this spirit should act, dress, etc...

Why was this so important to Fr. Colin? All of us have been to a restaurant where the server made it clear that they would rather be doing anything other than serving you. He may have done everything correctly and promptly. He may do everything correctly, take the order, make sure the table is appropriately set, deliver the meals to the right person, respond swiftly to any requests and bring the bill in a timely fashion. But if these duties are performed with a surly or disinterested attitude, customers pick up on that and complain about the poor service. Some may not return because of the attitude of the waiter or waitress.

Again, the waiter or waitress may do everything correctly, but a poor attitude or spirit with which these things are done can undermine what would otherwise be regarded as good service.

At the time of Fr. Colin and the early Marists, the Church was doing all kinds of good works. Masses were being celebrated. Sermons were preached. Confessions were heard. Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages, Ordinations, and the (then) Last Rites happened. But the attitude or the spirit with which they were done was stern and demanding, leaving people feeling distant and oppressed.

This is why Fr. Colin would talk about the need for a new Church. What did he have in mind?

That is the topic for the following meditation.