"Jesus So Loves This Secular Age That He Sent His Mother."

Reflection #3 – Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.

I want to look at secularism from another perspective. That is the one provided by Charles Taylor in his book, *A Secular Age*, an exhaustive and scholarly study of secularism.[1] He points out that the meaning of secularism has undergone three evolutions, with the contemporary understanding of secularism marking a turning point in the history of ideas. Let's take a quick look at them.

In classical and medieval usage, secular referred to temporal or earthly matters. That is its original meaning.

Taylor identifies the second evolution of the meaning of secularism as having emerged from the Enlightenment. (That is the period of history in France when the Society of Mary was founded.) Secular in this context means detached from religion, and religion comes to mean something private and free of public consequence.

The third evolution of the meaning of secularism that Taylor identifies is gaining ascendency in our time. It signifies a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic to one in which it is understood as one option among others. And frequently, not the easiest to embrace. Taylor references C. S. Lewis, one of the great Christian apologists of the 20th century. Lewis observed that the apostles preached to their contemporaries, Jews, Judaizing Gentiles, and pagans, who, despite their differences, shared a belief in the supernatural, a consciousness of sin, a fear of divine judgment, and that human history included something like the fall described in the Book of Genesis.

C.S. Lewis notes that during the last 100 years, the public mind has been so radically altered that it accepts at face value several key assumptions of the modern imagination that are barriers to belief rather than sources of receptivity. He wrote, "I sometimes wonder whether we shall not have to reconvert men to real paganism as a preliminary to converting them to Christianity. If they were Stoics… or better still, peasants who worship the Earth, our task might be easier. That is why I do not regard contemporary paganism as a wholly bad symptom."

Recent research paints a more sobering picture. "Today, scholars are finding that by almost any metric they use to measure religiosity, younger generations are much more secular than their parents or grandparents. In responses to survey questions, over 40 percent of the youngest Americans claim no religious affiliation, and just a quarter say they attend religious services weekly or more."[2]

Fr. Colin thought that things couldn't get any worse when he observed, "The human race appears to me today to be like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten by a worm. That worm is the unbelief, the indifference which has made the world pagan a second time."

Fr. Colin understood that the Society of Mary was to be a means by which the mother of Jesus would be with the Church in this critical time like she was at the birth of the Church at Pentecost and during those early years of persecution. He believed that Christ so loves this secular age that he sent his mother. To do what? To found a religious society named after her with its purpose being to transform the Church so that it

[1] *A Secular Age* is a book written by the philosopher Charles Taylor which was published in 2007 by Harvard University Press on the basis of Taylor's earlier Gifford Lectures. The noted sociologist Robert Bellah has referred to *A Secular Age* as "one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime." (Wikipedia)

[2] *A More Secular America Is Not Just A Problem for Republicans*, Ryan Burge, The New York Times, August 25, 2021.

would think, judge, act, and feel like her toward this Secular Age that, in turn, would one day think, judge, act and feel like her toward her Son.

Having said all of this, where might there be some receptivity to hear the Gospel in this secular age? Charles Taylor cites a British novelist, Julian Barnes, as an example of being secular. Barnes grew up in post-Christian Britain. He never went to Church, had no religious experience, no religious identity, and has not received any religious formation at all. In 2008, he published a memoir entitled, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. About three times in the book, he says, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Three times.

Barnes, who is passionate about art, music, and classical music, comes to a stunning realization in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. He says, "You know, I realize that the art that I am most passionate about has been generated by people who believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again. (That belief is persistent.) whether I'm listening to Bach or St. Matthew's passion, or whether it's going to see Titian paintings in northern Italy."

At one point, he says, "You know, I'm sometimes haunted when I'm in front of these works of art or when I'm listening to these works of art by this question, 'What if I believed they were true (right)?'" Taylor expands on this, "He realizes that, in fact, the beauty that captivates him has been generated by a people who believed it (that Jesus was raised from the dead) was true. And so, it creates the situation of haunting. If Julian Barnes is a doubter, one of the things you start to realize is that sometimes doubters doubt their doubt. And in that sense, the doubter, who doubts his doubt, is haunted by the possibility of faith. That's, I think, the kind of space that we inhabit."

There is an opening and let's walk through it but look at this grace-filled opportunity through the eyes of Mary. Several years ago, the Marists of the U.S. Province composed an identity statement. Let me quote from it: "Jean-Claude Colin, acting on what he believed to be Mary's desire, encouraged us to establish a Marian Church, a Church with the heart of a mother beating at its center. At our best, we are instruments of God's mercy, working to help others taste the boundless love of the Lord, especially those who find themselves on the margins." Julian Barnes represents those who don't believe in God but miss him and are on the margins or, as I prefer, on the edge of belief.

The mother of Jesus has been sent to intervene at this particular time by her Son so that through the Society of Mary, she may bring her merciful and gentle spirit to engage the Julian Barnes of the world. In the next and last reflection, I will explore the mission of Marist School to an increasingly secular society.