Becoming Aware of Living in a Secular World

Reflection #2 – Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.

In my last reflection, I considered what secularism is. I concluded with the emphasis from Fr. Thomas Ellerman, S.M. '58 on the dangers of secularism and the rationale for Fr. Colin's insistence that Marists engage in three examens of consciousness a day.

Engaging in the spiritual practice of three consciousness examens a day fits in nicely with this year's Marist Way theme, "Living Our Faith in Simplicity and Humility." This spiritual practice is humbling because it assumes there is a God whose mercy, forgiveness, and love we depend upon. That is offensive to the secular mindset that prefers the word mistake rather than the word sin. Why? Because it protects our self-esteem by emphasizing how good or godlike (without sin) we are. Remember, a mistake is not a sin. Humility, as I have described it, has no place in the secular lexicon.

Examining our consciousness is also living our faith in simplicity. Today, there is much written about the importance of simplifying our lives, which can be helpful. From the standpoint of our faith, though, to live simply is to live so that every aspect of our lives—economic, political, religious, relational, emotional, etc.—is properly ordered to serve God's purposes. There should not be any conflict between how we act outside and what we believe (faith) interiorly. To live simply is to live so as not to conflict with God. If you want to simplify your life, then live as a friend of God.

Let's follow Fr. Colin's admonition and examine how secularism can undermine our faith even as we find ourselves in church on Sundays. For example, we hear so much about people following their dreams and emphasizing their freedom to live as they choose. "Don't Tread on Me" is the banner that leads the secular charge. Now you can understand why talking about vocations is so difficult. I am talking about vocations in a broad sense to include the Sacrament of Marriage, the single life, priesthood, religious life, and career or life choices. Vocation talk assumes God exists, is involved in his creation, and has a vision for our lives that is more expansive and challenging than the ones we devise for ourselves. Happiness is the fruit that comes from when our lives are in harmony with God's designs for us. Secularism sees this as an infringement on our autonomy. When young people, but not only young people, are presented with vocation talk or the concept of doing God's will, for many, their immediate, visceral reaction is suspicion and distrust. Where did we see that before?

Since this secular mindset is in the air we breathe, we breathe it without knowing it. That there is a life beyond this material world may not always be denied explicitly. When asked if he believed in God, a character in a movie said, "I go to church sometimes." (Not exactly a ringing endorsement.) Think of all the films, music, etc., where that sentiment is expressed in many different ways, all of them having a corrosive effect on faith.

This secular mindset plays itself out in its understanding of success. Children receive the best education to make a good amount of money to acquire many things to impress a future spouse and be happy in life. That becomes the measuring stick for determining success. It becomes so easy to slide into living *only* for this life without even being aware of having crossed over to the "dark side." What would that look like?

Many years ago, a priest told the story about a family with whom he was close, so he felt comfortable asking the parents if they had ever encouraged their sons to be priests. "Oh no!" said the mother, "We want them to be successful." As Fr. Ellerman noted, "The problem with secularism is that it does not appear inimical, but rather benign as did the serpent in Genesis."

Let's examine how a secular mentality plays out in the arts. Of the thousands of movies that have been produced, characters die or are killed with no consideration of what happens after death. They die, and that's it. No matter how honorably or deceitfully some may have lived, they all share the same fate. They die with no one protesting the unfairness of it all.

Members of the clergy may be included, usually at a funeral service or a wedding. They either say nothing or mumble prayers that sound like white noise more than anything else. That reflects the secular bias that belief in the Transcendent is an outdated concept that still hangs around. They have nothing to say of any importance to the secular world that believes there is only this material world beyond which there is nothing. Depicting the clergy this way reveals the disdain and the disbelief that secularism has toward the Transcendent.

Since there is nothing beyond this material world, the Church becomes just another human institution, like a book club that we can choose to attend or not attend. No big deal if we belong or not. The idea that the Church is a divine creation whose members have been called to be the body of Christ, to share in his divine life, and to participate in his saving work is, well, hidden and unknown even to some regular churchgoers.

Then, of course, the secular emphasis on personal freedom and rationalism has consequences, as Fr. Ellerman described in my previous essay. It has created this brave new world where we can't agree on anything. We fight about everything: what is true and what is false, what is reality and what is not, what is fact and what is opinion or fiction, what is orthodox and what is unorthodox, and even what it means to be Catholic or Marist. Everyone has become their own magisterium, aggressively advancing their personal truth. It is no wonder that one of the immediate consequences of eating from the one tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden was violence: the murder of Abel by Cain.

I grant you that all of the above is a negative assessment of our current situation. It reflects Fr. Colin's assessment about his time that gave birth to our own when he said, "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."

Yet, Fr. Colin believed that the Risen Christ so loves what we call this secular age that he is sending His Mother to intervene and that the Society of Mary would be one way her presence would be felt. He understood that the Church needed to undergo a conversion to better speak to this secular world. He envisioned that only a Church with the face of Mary could adequately speak to this secular age. For Fr. Colin, that means not just looking like Mary but thinking, judging, acting, and feeling like her in all things. Just as Fr. Colin recognized that the secular society needed to be transformed, so, too, did the Church and specifically into a Marian Church that would be able to best reawaken the longings for the Transcendent that God has planted in us believers and unbelievers alike.

In my subsequent reflection, I want to consider how the understanding of secularism has evolved, the unique threat this current rendition poses, and how to engage the secular mentality in a religious conversation.