How to be a Marist in a Secular World

Reflection #1 – Fr. Bill Rowland, SM

"See to it that no one captivates you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to the tradition of men, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ." (Col 2:6-8)

I want to spend a few moments with you reflecting on secularism, what it is, how it contradicts our faith's basic tenets, and how easy it is to be seduced by it. I liken it to carbon monoxide poisoning. It is toxic to our souls, and we run the risk of being unaware of its impact until it is too late. Mass attendance drops, prayer becomes extinct, spiritual reading ceases, interest in acquiring an adult understanding of the faith wanes, seeking a robust relationship with God, and responding generously to the call to discipleship are jettisoned to the periphery. Just as carbon monoxide poisoning is deadly to the body, secularism is deadly to the soul. As a spiritual illness, it is called sloth or acedia, one of the seven deadly sins. Sloth is a malaise, indifference, and even revulsion to responding to God's overtures. (CC#2733)

What is secularism? It has different meanings to different people. I will use the definition presented by Dr. Matthew Petrusek, a presenter for the Word on Fire Institute, who gave a series of talks entitled "Re-enchanting the Secular." He begins with a consideration of materialism that he describes as "…the view that what fundamentally defines existence, including human existence, is matter and only matter—no soul, no spirit, no transcendent love, certainly no immaterial God. Just stuff." He goes on to say, "But for our purposes, materialism and secularism go hand in glove… Secularism is the name we give to the social, cultural, moral, and even political landscape that materialism generates. Or, put another way, materialism is to secularism as, say, gravity is to falling objects: if we take materialism to be true, then secularism is its unavoidable consequence."

Let's look at how this unavoidable consequence plays itself out in judicial prudence. Bishop Robert Barron, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles and founder of Word on Fire, comments on the Supreme Court's decision, Casey v. Planned Parenthood (1992). Justice Kennedy, a Catholic, writing for the majority, in that case, said, "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of human life."

Bishop Barron observes, "The basic sin, the original sin, is precisely this self-deification, this apotheosizing of the will… Frankly, I can't imagine a more perfect description of what it means to grasp at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Justice Kennedy is right, individual freedom completely trumps objective value and becomes the indisputable criterion of right and wrong. And if the Book of Genesis is right, such a move is the elemental dysfunction, the primordial mistake, the original calamity."

I want to invite you to travel back in time with me to the Garden of Eden and listen in on the conversation between the serpent and Eve.

> Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden'? The woman answered the snake: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.' But the snake said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! God knows well

> that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil." (Gen. 3: 1-5)

Notice how the serpent sows the seeds of suspicion and distrust between Eve (Adam) and God. God had given Adam and Eve access to all the trees in the garden except one. They were forbidden from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God intended to protect them lest eating the fruit from this tree would cause them to die. That means that we don't make ourselves, our personal experience, or our freedom the basis of determining what is good and evil. Only God has that knowledge. He is the standard. Death (disaster) follows when we rebel and make ourselves the ultimate determiner of good and evil; death (disaster) follows.

The serpent twists God's prohibition to mean he wanted to prevent them from becoming like God as if this development would be a potential threat to the Creator. To avoid this, God wants humanity to be kept in ignorance. That perception of God has led atheists to proclaim their gospel that announces God is dead. They argue that God must die. Only then can humanity be truly free to mature and flourish.

One of the consequences of this secular mentality is the emphasis on individual freedom or empowerment, a word that enjoys great popularity today. Father Thomas Ellerman, S.M. '58 makes this observation: "The problem with secularism is that it does not appear inimical, but rather benign as did the serpent in Genesis. The serpent seemed to be concerned about Eve and her rightful empowerment. Even God should not deny her anything. Genesis shows us entitlement gone wild. We should not be denied anything and have every right to claim everything for ourselves. It is based on two illusions--individualism and rationalism. It fails to recognize that we are fundamentally connected to the rest of reality and not separate from it, and it makes the limits of our reason the limits of what exists. Secularism denies further purpose, grace, Mystery, and the future divine transformation of all creation. While seeming to enhance human dignity and worth, it affects our Weltanschauung and our ethical decisions without knowing its influence. Now you know why Fr. Colin recommends three consciousness examens a day. Marist life, the Christian life, must be one of heightened and critical awareness."

With the above background, my following reflection will consider what it looks like to examine consciousness in a secular world.