The Marist Way of Promoting Interreligious Dialogue – Part Three

> "The Catholic Church aims to promote respect and collaboration between different faiths and religions. In our globalized world, interaction between people from different faiths and religions is becoming more and more important. In 2018, the Superior General of the Society of Mary established the "Marist Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Reconciliation."[1]

From its very beginnings, the Society of Mary has looked beyond the national borders of France, where it was founded. Pope Gregory XVI approved the Society of Mary in 1836, understanding that the Marists would send missionaries to the South Pacific. The Marists are a "household name" to people in Oceania, Australia, and New Zealand. Using today's parlance, the Marist brand or footprint in those countries is similar to that of Marist School in metropolitan Atlanta.

I want to highlight three countries where the Marists have missions and Christians are decidedly in the minority: Senegal, Cameroon, and Thailand. That aligns with the 1988 Constitutions of the Society of Mary. "Marists are called to establish the Church where it does not exist and to renew existing communities rather than to participate in its activities where it is already established with sufficient resources."[2]

Marists have been in Senegal, Africa since 2005 when the Marist Family (Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, the Marist Sisters, the Marist Laity, and the Marist Fathers and Brothers) opened the Nazareth Center. Its mission is to provide a place to rehabilitate street boys in Dakar city and home economics for girls in poor neighborhoods. It is called Keur Nazareth or the Nazareth Center.[3]

In 2018, the Marist Fathers and Brothers School Project opened in Ndiakhirate – Senegal.[4] Quoting from an article written for *Today's Marists* in 2019, Fr. Didier Hadanou, SM, District Superior of Africa, observed:

> Today, there is a great need to teach our children in Africa how to live together despite our differences of color, religion, and culture. *Thus, we Marists have decided to establish a secondary school for 2,000 students, for both boys and girls, and for Christians and Muslims together, in a country where Christianity is not the majority. This is a way for us, we hope, to promote a living together in harmony and peace on our Continent."*[5]
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> *We are hoping in time to build a small chapel, to establish a community, and to establish a strong Christian presence there."*
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> We also maintain a school in the remote village of Cameroon called Voundou in the Diocese of Bafia, which we opened as a primary school five years ago."

The Marists recently opened a Marist Mission in Ranong, Thailand. Because of its position, Thailand attracts many people from Myanmar. They are drawn to work there, mostly in fishing-related industries. The Marist Mission in Ranong assists these migrant workers through education, health care, and a community center. And while these Marists primarily assist Catholics of Myanmar origin, assistance is also offered to the neediest people regardless of their creed, age, or ethnic origin.

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[1] https://www.maristsm.org/interreligious-dialogue/
[2] 1988 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, #14
[3] https://jpicblog.maristsm.org/street-boys-new-life-dakar-senegal-africa
[4] https://maristfathers.org.au/images/1018_Bulletin_CSM_Ndiakhirate-11-engl-c.pdf

[5] 97% of Senegalese are Muslim.

Ninety-five percent of the population of Thailand is Theravada Buddhist; Muslims comprise about four percent of the population. The number of Christians in Thailand is minimal.[6]

I mention these countries because they are where two of the four great world religions[7] are dominant: Islam and Buddhism. The Society of Mary is down to about 800 members worldwide. Those in the first world are nearing retirement. Still, the Marists keep their eye on the prize and bring Mary (her spirit) to where the Church struggles to be born or reborn.

Within the context of the Marist Way of Promoting Interreligious Dialogue, I want to point out three characteristics of the Marist mission to these countries that impact how the Marist want young people to be educated at a Marist school. We, too, want to keep our eyes on the prize, which is to form our students into faith-filled, global-ready servant leaders.

First, these new ventures demonstrate the Society's willingness to leave its comfort zone and enter another country whose language, culture, and religion are strikingly different. We want to introduce our students to this missionary spirit by providing them with mission trips to undeveloped countries where they will struggle similarly. Hopefully, this will help them to empathize with people they will meet in this country who are from other countries and must struggle to adjust to a different culture, language, diet, etc. That has already borne fruit with the creation of the Share the Journey Club, which ministers to the needs of refugees and immigrants.

By having an exchange program with Marist students from Germany, France, Mexico, Spain, and Peru, our students are provided with other opportunities to have cross-cultural experiences with the same goals in mind. These exchange programs are supplemented by students joining Chinese, French, German, Lebanese, Spanish, and Latin America Studies clubs. Each of these clubs represents the languages students can learn at Marist to equip them to flourish in an increasingly multicultural society.

Secondly, the Society of Mary purposefully chose these new missionary ventures to embed Marists in predominantly Buddhist or Muslim countries. Because these ventures are relatively small, the Christian presence is of little threat. That opens the door for religious conversations between the Marists (Christianity), Buddhists, and Muslims they serve.

Marist School purposefully looks for ways for students to engage in interreligious dialogues. That happens through the course on World Religions and by visiting a mosque and the Jewish Temple in downtown Atlanta.

Another way interreligious dialogue happens is through the student organization *Peace by Piece*.[8] As described in its description, "In 2015, Pope Francis called for dialogue with non-Christian religious traditions ‘a school of humanity and a builder of unity.’" In that spirit, the Peace by Piece program is designed to foster respect for and an understanding of other religious traditions' richness and integrity and eliminate discrimination and harassment because of differences in race, religion, or condition in life.

This is in keeping with the Society of Mary's commitment to interreligious dialogue when the Marist Commission for InterReligious Dialogue was founded in 2018. Six members meet monthly with participants in Thailand, Australia, Japan, Rome, the United States, and elsewhere. Marist School faculty member, Mr. Brendan Murphy, is a commission member and focuses primarily on Jewish-Christian dialogue throughout the state of Georgia and beyond through partnerships with the Archdiocese of Atlanta, local parishes and synagogues, and other organizations.

[6] https://www.countryreports.org/country/Thailand/religion.htm
[7] Judaism, Islam, Hind-Buddhism, and Christianity
[8] https://www.marist.com/school-life/student-activities

Brendan Murphy's seminar, *History and the Holocaust*, includes a pilgrimage called Bearing Witness, which takes the students beyond the classroom to the concentration camps in Prague, Krakow, and Munich. One of the students, Grant Gaffney '22, described its influence on him, "To be able to chart the path of the Nazi movement offered invaluable insight to my understanding of the emergence of hate-fueled ideologies and the importance of a strong sense for empathy and individualism."

With the significant help of the O'Haren and Ross families and with the leadership of Brendan Murphy, Marist School obtained only the second rendition of the bronze sculpture, *Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time*, crafted by Joshua Koffman.[9] On October 28, 1965, at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church proclaimed in a landmark document called *Nostra Aetate, "In Our Time,"* that God's covenant with the Jewish people had never been broken.

Inspired by the *Nostra Aetate* declaration, the statue *Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time* reimagines Christian-Jewish relations. It expresses a deepening appreciation of a divinely given mission to bear witness to God's faithful love. Having this sculpture on campus is a visible sign of the school's commitment to promoting Jewish-Christian relations and a deepening appreciation of the mission shared by both communities to bear witness to God's faithful love.

The third element of the Society of Mary's missions in countries where Christianity is in the minority always includes service. That includes typically education, but not always. The Society of Mary wants to meet the real needs of the people where the Marists find themselves. At some point, the question will be asked why the Marists have left everything to live with and help them, at which point interreligious dialogue begins.[10]

Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue are essential components of a Marist education and are integral to the mission of the Church and the Society of Mary.

They are also integral to the mission of Marist School:

> The mission of Marist School is to form the whole person in the image of Christ through instruction grounded in religious values, the teachings of the Catholic Church, *and the spirit of the Society of Mary*.

[9] https://www.marist.com/news-detail?pk=1445089.
[10] For more information about this style of evangelization, go to my reflection, "As If Hidden and Unknown in the World" https://marist.myschoolapp.com/ftpimages/216/download/download_7976030.pdf.