The Marist Way of Understanding Pentecost

"All (the apostles) were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers"(Acts 1:14).

The Feast of Pentecost has special significance to the Society of Mary because it sheds light on how we understand our role in the Church and what image of Mary we want to portray to the Church and the world.

In the above description of the Church gathered at Pentecost, it is reported as a matter-of-fact, without any fanfare, that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is present with the apostles and disciples of Jesus. She is not listed first, but only after the apostles have been acknowledged along with certain women and before the brothers or cousins of Jesus are mentioned. In other words, Mary is neither at the forefront nor the center of attention. She is in their midst, and in such a way that were we to intrude upon the scene, she would not be the first one our eyes would behold.

We know she joined the early Church in prayer, including the Eucharist. We can also assume she shared her memories and insights about Jesus and pitched in to prepare the meals and do other domestic chores. No doubt, her presence was a great support to the early Church. At the Annunciation, she had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Jesus. At Pentecost, she is again overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, who gives birth to the Church, the mystical Body of Christ. The Church will now be the recipient of her maternal care.

The Society of Mary is meant to express her presence and maternal care for the Church today. That requires Marist religious and laity to go beyond imitating Mary by doing something even more profound. They are to think, judge, feel, and act like Mary. That is how they are to be her presence in the Church today.

Marists, too, are to be present to the Church just as she had been amid the newborn Church at Pentecost. As she was the support of the infant Church then, she remains a support to the Church now, especially in those areas of our country and our world where the Church is struggling to be born or is under attack. This is her work, and consequently, this is the work of the Society of Mary. It is to be done not in any old way but in the spirit of Mary.

How do we describe this spirit of Mary? There are several aspects to Mary's spirit, but let me focus on one. The Archangel Gabriel greeted Mary with the words, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." In anticipation of the graces from Jesus' death and resurrection, the Archangel Gabriel acknowledges that Mary's very being was in complete harmony with God's purposes. She enjoyed this special grace because of her unique role in salvation history. In other words, God could ask anything of Mary, and she showed no resistance. Her human nature was surrendered entirely to or in sync with the divine life at work in her, just as Jesus' human nature was in harmony with his divine nature. Mary was and is not God. However, God could express anything he wanted through her human nature, just as anything Jesus expressed in his human nature was an expression of God. That is why she is considered a model of discipleship and a saint par excellence.

Saints are men and women who have achieved a similar level of oneness with God, and many religious orders have saints as their founders or foundresses. (The Marists regard Mary as the foundress of the Society of Mary.) As I just said, Mary is the saint par excellence. What she is, the whole Church hopes to

become. That is why she is a model of discipleship. As great as they may be, all the other saints would readily acknowledge that she is the first among them.

Marist religious and laity seek to breathe in her spirit so that Our Lord may accomplish His purposes in us as He did in Mary without resisting. Try to live this way for one hour, and you will quickly realize this is no easy task. What a powerful force for transforming the world according to God's purposes if all of the members of the Church lived in the spirit of Mary. That is why our founder, Fr. Jean-Claude Colin, wanted the whole world to be Marist. He understood how much God could accomplish through men and women who were as open and responsive to the Holy Spirit as Mary was.

Many titles of Mary reflect her exalted position in heaven. While we Marist religious and laity reverence all of her titles, we prefer the humble and lowly image of Mary, hidden amid the apostles and the other disciples gathered in prayer in the upper room while waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Society of Mary models itself after this image of Mary that emphasizes how she is so obviously "one of us." When asked to describe what it is about the Marists they appreciate the most, many laity will identify how Marists, religious and laity, seem like "one of us" or "down to earth." This is the Mary we seek to emulate and whose presence we strive to be in the Church: a presence that does not speak so much to her exaltation as Queen of Heaven as it speaks to her being a handmaid of the Lord. It is not a question of either/or but one of emphasis.

This is why the Feast of Pentecost is so important to Marist religious and laity. Her presence in the upper room reveals how the Society of Mary is to be present in the Church today. We are not a religious order with vast numbers of members, many works, and impressive institutions that bring it power and status. In other words, it is not for us to have an exalted position within the Church. In the words of our founder, we are the little Society of Mary - a lowly handmaid of the Lord. It is for Marists to be hidden amid the Church as Mary was at Pentecost, and whom the lowly will identify as being "one of us."