

Take a second look!

In the Jesuit church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, the visiting tourist, on entering the church and looking up, sees what appears to be a curved ceiling and a massive dome reaching far upwards. It is only after some time that the tourist begins to realize that the "dome" is after all only a painting! By a brilliant trick of perspective, the visitor has been deceived into thinking that what was in fact a flat roof was a dome. It is a typical piece of Baroque "trompe-l'oeil" or visual deception. The tourist in Rome soon begins to learn that things are not always what they seem, and that it is often necessary to "take a second look" at things. Taking a second look is also an important christian attitude. When Jesus cured a man of his blindness, the man at first could see humans, but "they looked like trees walking round" (Mark 8: 24). Only after a second look did the man see things clearly. St James tells us in his letter to take a second look at the Law of God, otherwise we would be like people who take just a casual glance at themselves in a mirror and go away, remembering nothing (James 1: 25). Important things need a second look, which is why Jean-Claude Colin said that the Marist spirit could only be gained through meditation and prayer. Absorbing the spirit of Mary is a work of art and requires all the delicacy and sensitivity, as well as all the hard work of any craft. In the days of the ancient silversmiths, a piece of silver, refined by fire, was burred and polished day by day with great labour. The work was finished when the face of the silversmith could be seen clearly in the metal. The image is a useful one to help us understand the process of assimilating the spirit of Mary. Marists are the silver, and Christ is the silversmith who works on their transformation. At his side is the Woman, Mary. And as he finishes his work, he says to her: "Have a look." And there, in their deepest centre, shining in reflection is the face of the Woman, the perfect disciple of Jesus. That is the transformation Christ has in mind when he calls men and women to be Marists. And the measure in which Marists do allow God to bring about this transformation will be the measure in which the Marist project can be made to happen and be fruitful. But like any precious gift, the spirit of Mary is not something to be hoarded and hugged to oneself. Its real value becomes apparent when it is passed on to others. It is for Marists to look again and again at the image they see in the depths of their being, and reflect that image to their world.

1839

Father Colin said: "I do not condemn those who follow another way of making God loved, of working for his glory. They do right, because that is the spirit of their vocation, and each should conform himself to the spirit of his vocation. Not everyone is called to be a Marist: the Church would have good cause for complaint if it had only the little Marists to serve it! But the spirit of our Society is different. We must behave like our mother."

1842

Father Colin said: "We must study the spirit of the Society more and more. I feel, alas, that unless we renew ourselves, our treasure will run out. We must wind ourselves up, as people do with clocks to make them go. Unless we are attentive and generous, the spirit of our Society will soon be lost."

The Mayet Memoirs

Spirit for service

To cultivate Mary's spirit is also to cultivate a sense of service: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." Singing the Magnificat frees me from all self-concern: I am fully available for service. To know how to serve is another way of disappearing, of making oneself hidden and unknown. What is required for service? Two things: identify the need, be equipped to respond to it. To identify the need means having the skill to see and hear what my sister or brother wants to tell me. This presupposes that I have learned to silence all that makes noise in me: only the most scrupulous and disciplined attentiveness will enable me to perceive the pulse, the heartbeat of my neighbour on the side of the road. Nor does it suffice to be able to hear. One must also have the skills to intervene. Here again, this means lengthy apprenticeships, boring exercises, an accumulation of notions which are the price to pay to prevent service from becoming one more torment in the life of one who is suffering.

Gaston Lessard, sm

Give me your freedom

Let me tell you a story... a tale so old and so often told in many forms that the names of the people involved have been forgotten.

The story tells of a holy man coming out from his mountain of contemplation, down towards a village in the valley. As he approached the village, a peasant came running to meet him. "Are you come out of the hills?" he asked the holy man breathlessly. "Oh, if you are, then give me the stone, please give me the stone."

"Stone?" said the traveller. "What stone?"

"The stone of my dream", said the peasant. "Oh, please give it to me!" He drew breath a little and then went on: "Last night, an angel of the Lord spoke to me in a dream, telling me that today a holy man would come out of the hills and that he would give me a stone that would make me rich beyond my wildest hopes. All morning I have waited and watched... and now, you have come. You must give me the stone.... it is mine.... I have been given it by the Lord."

"Ah," said the holy man, "you must be talking of the stone that I picked up back in the mountains." And he rummaged among his few possessions. "Yes, here it is. Take it, my friend, and be glad." And he handed over a stone as big as a man's fist.

The peasant took it in trembling hands, and his eyes grew wide with wonder: "But... but.... this is a diamond! Surely the largest diamond in the world!" he gasped.

"Yes, it is a diamond," said the holy man, "and now it is yours; may it bring you gladness, since the Lord has meant it for you."

The peasant, clutching his treasure in both hands, turned and sped back to the village, his feet scarcely touching the ground. And the holy man settled down in the shelter of a tree, and drank in the beauty of the ordered valley, after the weeks he had spent among the mountain harshness.

As evening drew on, a figure emerged from the village, and with slow steps climbed up towards the tree; it was the peasant to whom the holy man had given the diamond. He came and sat down beside the holy man, and for a long time neither of them spoke. Finally the peasant reached into his pouch, took out, unwrapped and put the diamond on the ground between them.

"Here is the stone," he said, "now I want something more from you... something greater... give me what you have. Give me the power to give away such treasure, freely, gladly, without regret. Give me that freedom, that spirit which you have."

This story has its point when we come to consider our Marist Marian heritage, because we are asked to go beyond the work we do in the Church... the work of schools, hospitals, parish work, missions.... all the multiple ministries that Marists are engaged in... to the spirit that underlies and gives life to them all. The work we engage in is, in a sense, the stone we give, that others might be enriched; but what enables us, indeed impels us to give this stone, this ministry to the needs of the Church? This question brings us into touch with the Marist spirit, the animating presence of Mary, the inner heart of the Marist congregations.

Romuald Gibson, fms