

The world as mission

Whether the pioneer Marists went to Oceania or whether they stayed in France, they were entering into a totally new culture. Each day the missionaries in Oceania were made aware - sometimes painfully - that they did not think or talk or behave like the people they lived with. The task ahead of them was to accept the people on their own terms, and to draw the Gospel out of this new and foreign culture. But even at home in France, the Marists who preached in the Bugey mission began to realise the same thing: even in their own country, among people who spoke the same language, a new culture had begun to appear, a culture with its own ways of thinking and judging and acting - a culture which found no place any longer for God. The Revolution in France and the Enlightenment in Europe had created a different world. There was not too much difference between the people of Oceania who were beginning to find God in their lives, and the people in parts of Europe who had somehow lost sight of the God who had been so much part of their lives. What the missionaries found right on their doorstep in France was a culture just as foreign as the cultures in Oceania, and an absence of God just as great as anything they may have imagined in any foreign lands.

The striking thing is that today a good deal of the modern world resembles the Bugey area of France: a whole world of people who may have been baptised and may have lived for a time as Christians, but whose faith has been fragmented or stifled by the secularised world we live in – a world with a completely different set of values and standards, a world which excludes the Gospel or the presence of God, yet which at the same time desperately seeks the power and mercy of God. The missionary who comes to this modern global mission territory will need to come with the attitudes of a mother handling the sensitivities of her adolescent child, accepting this world on its own terms without condemning it, speaking to this world in terms it can understand, trying to give flesh to the Word of God. From the beginning, some Marists had answered the call to step out of their own culture and go to foreign lands. But even those who remained in their own countries had to step out into another culture, and to recognise the seeds of the Gospel in the secularised world they had found at home. The symbol of the Bugey mission is a powerful symbol for Marists who are called to be missionaries wherever they may find themselves.

September 23, 1846

Father Colin said: "Let those who will stay in France, in Europe, console themselves. There is no need to go to Oceania to find suffering and danger. Are the majority of Frenchmen any better than the natives of Oceania? Have they any more faith? Better morals? Those of you who have travelled through France know well enough. Let us work, then, all of us, with new zeal, some in France, others abroad.... St Francis Xavier achieved sanctity in the Indies, St Francis Régis in our own country."

The Mayet Memoirs

Culture shock

The Christian who steps out of the familiar world of traditional faith into the modern secularised world is not unlike a missionary stepping into a culture totally strange to him. Especially if this strange culture has not yet been deeply influenced by the Gospel he will be tempted to get a very negative impression, one in which behaviour and values that are simply strange to him arouse the same indignation as things that are perhaps indeed sinful. Without becoming blind to what is really sinful, he must gradually learn to appreciate the positive values that hide behind patterns of behaviour that are foreign to him, and that can be true "seeds of the Word" and stepping stones to faith. We have learned to see the way of life of peoples far away as simply "other cultures". We should also have learned that "other cultures" are constantly being born, to the extent that culture change today has accelerated. The heart of Marist identity is indeed not a "way of life".... It is a mission, not to faraway exotic cultures, but to a new culture, and that is the secularised culture of today.

Jan Snijders,sm

The modern world a new culture

In an article he wrote for lay Marists in France, Marist Father Jan Snijders points out that the Marist project came to birth during the momentous upheaval of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is the natural “parent” of the secularised age we now experience at least in most parts of the western world. Jan Snijders indicates that the Marist approach which was so successful in the beginning, is just as relevant if not more relevant than before. He puts before his readers seven propositions:

1. The whole of the modern world is a new “culture”.
2. The apostle of today in the modern world needs the same attitude of openness as any missionary in any new culture.
3. The new culture has not yet been effectively evangelised: it too needs the Gospel.
4. Though this new culture needs the Gospel, it does shelter the “seeds of the Gospel”, which need to be recognised and cultivated.
5. One of the best helps for this delicate activity is to follow the example of Jesus who became human and “hid” himself in the human condition. (Phil.2:6-7) In Marist terms this is the attitude of being “hidden and unknown”.
6. Our Marist tradition helps us with its stress on Marists as “instruments of Mercy”, who do a great deal of good in a hidden way.
7. This is the “new church” which Marists are called on to build.

Not dead but absent

The many millions of people who have drifted away from the Churches, in anger, or in indifference, or simply in perplexity, are by definition out of reach to clerical ministry, nor do they usually want to have anything to do with priests. Most unbelievers of today are not convinced and militant atheists. They are the nice people next door who just don’t know. They are baffled if the subject is brought up at all and quite happy to stick to the available evidence as far as they see it. And that means they get along quite nicely without religion....

... Our modern world is honestly and sincerely profane.... God is not so much dead as absent; and not absent as one who should be there. He is absent as a sort of misunderstanding that has fortunately been cleared up.

Jan Snijders, sm



In countries which have become dechristianised, it is our task to show young people and adults the true face of Jesus Christ and his Church.

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