

At the margins

The God whom one learns to “taste” in prayer is the God who said, “I have seen the misery of my people” (Ex.3: 7). This is the God who is depicted as a prodigal Father, welcoming both the forgiven son and his unforgiving brother. This is the God who said, “What I want is mercy, not sacrifice”. This is the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, the one who “came to call sinners, not the just”, describing himself as the Good Shepherd who was more happy over finding one lost sheep than over the 99 who didn’t stray from the path and lose themselves. So, to experience God in prayer is to meet this sort of God and to be drawn in compassion towards those who are or feel themselves to be in any sense at the margins.

At the first anniversary service for the Jesuits slain in San Salvador in 1989, Jon Sobrino described the legacy left by the Jesuits who had been shot on the University campus. Two qualities in particular were striking: humanity (not hiding themselves from Salvadorean poverty), and mercy (not working in the first instance for the good of the University or of the Society of Jesus, or even of the Church, but for the poor, without any ulterior motives). Sobrino’s description of mercy is significant, because it begins where it should: at the basic level of human existence. This seems to be the point of Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan. The fundamental reason for the Samaritan’s coming to the help of the beaten man was not a religious motive. It couldn’t be, since the Samaritans were not recognised as “religious” people. Jesus even hints that there could be many excuses found in the name of religion for *not* helping the man. But the reason for helping was simple: here is a fellow human being suffering and in need. The compassion of Jesus is the compassion of one who keeps going to the most forgotten corners of the world, and who can’t rest as long as he knows there are still human beings with tears in their eyes. And the sort of compassion Jesus asks of us is a compassion which goes directly to those people or places where suffering is most acute, and builds a home there. If Jesus is known as the Good Shepherd, it is predictable that His Mother would be known as the Mother of Mercy. Mary’s place is where mercy is most necessary, gathering people who are at the margins of life, and in particular gathering people who find themselves at the threshold of the Church, somehow unable to enter more fully into the life of the Church. Mary the Mother of Mercy invites us to take on this attitude.

October 9, 1842

Father Colin said, “I feel impelled towards the poor classes, towards country missions, towards the poor of Lyon. To seek out outcasts, give catechism instructions, to help the beggars.... These are the thoughts that pursue me.”

September, 1853

Father Colin said, “The spirit of the Society leads us to choose the poorest foundations, because it is in these places that we can do most good in a hidden way; there is more good to be done there and with greater certainty.”

The Mayet Memoirs

The abandoned

The Marist will reach out to the poor, the neglected, and the outcast: women in their struggle for a place of dignity and equality in society, to those suffering material poverty, racial or social oppression – the migrant, the homosexual, the prisoner, etc – and to all who face alienation and lack of meaning, striving to bring them together in a union of love and mutual care.

The Church in every age has cared for the poor. The new aspect of today’s call is that we must not simply do something *for* the poor, but that we make community *with* them.

John Jago, sm

You must be close to the people, beside the people, living their daily problems intensely, especially when they are suffering and in difficult moments and situations.

Pope John Paul II

Woman at the threshold

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition there is a touching legend about Mary of Egypt, the famous saint of the fourth century, who spent 47 years in the Desert living an ascetical life. Her life before her conversion had been that of a sinful woman. The legend goes like this: "Once there was a ship fitted out to take pilgrims from Alexandria to Jerusalem, for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Many pilgrims gathered to set out for Jerusalem. Mary went on board ship: but she was not going to worship Christ. She knew there would be many travellers on the ship, and many more in Jerusalem. She would be able to give them a good time. She was beautiful and she was willing to share her body with those who would pay. Mary went on board with no money. Why should she have money? People would gladly pay her fare. The voyage by sea was dangerous, but with her for company, who would notice the dangers? She came into Jerusalem and soon found lodgings. Who would not give her room? So day and night passed merrily in the Holy Land. When evening fell, and it was time for the vigil, the pilgrims went into the Church and Mary went with them. Mary felt at home with them, just as she had done in Alexandria and on the ship. But now the men who had enjoyed her company on the voyage were quite different. Now they wouldn't speak to her. They avoided her. They feared contact with her, as if she were impure. And each time she tried to enter the church she was pushed



back, not by the people, but by some sort of force that stopped her at the threshold of the church. She went away from the door and stood in the church porch, her heart full of bitterness. She now understood. The others could go to Christ, but she – with her past life – she could not." Now the story goes that in the porch of this church there was a miraculous Icon of the Mother of God. In the Icon, tears flowed from the eyes of the Mother of God down onto the eyes of Jesus. People in despair and all those who were outcasts used to wait there for a sign, and would bathe their faces in the tears from the Icon. A tear fell from the eyes of the Mother of God on the bitter heart of Mary. She felt a warm glow, like a candle in her heart, and she crossed the threshold, the tear glowing in her heart. The people in the front made way for her. The legend finishes with these words: "Who knows the pity and sorrow of the Mother of God! She who lives in light and radiant beauty comes willingly to us in the dark, even into Hades with us, weak sinners. She stays with us in our daily troubles and worries. The miraculous Icon is still there, in the entrance to the church." Perhaps that's a good way of seeing where Marists find their place – at the threshold of the Church, as a point of meeting, a point of healing for those who for whatever reason find themselves unable to enter more fully into the life of the Church.

In the spirit of our Founders, we shall have a special care for the poor and underprivileged. When faced with a choice of works which seem equally necessary, we shall not be afraid to accept the one which appears least attractive and rewarding in the eyes of the world.

Marist Sisters' Constitutions n. 36