

The Marist religious vocation is to go from place to place. It was how Jean-Claude Colin described the whole Marist enterprise when he presented his outline in Rome in 1833. It was one of the ideas that fired the imagination of the seminarians in Lyon in 1815. They had been impressed by the story of the life of St Francis Regis, a missionary who preached in the country areas of France. The same phrase, "our vocation is to go from place to place", appeared in the Constitutions which Colin wrote before his death, and still appears in the Constitutions of the Marist Fathers today.

The statement implies freedom from the things that may tie one down physically; freedom from possessions and from property. But also, freedom from the interior attitudes which make it difficult or impossible to move from place to place: freedom from the desire for comfort, or the desire to settle. Freedom from fixed, fixated ideas. Freedom from doing things the way we've always done them. It means being willing to be not quite "at home" anywhere in the world, it means not settling down, not settling for the status quo, but being willing to be unsettled as a permanent attitude. Marist Religious take the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience not only so they can be like Christ, but in order to be "more effective instruments of mercy" for others. The vows are to free people to be open and on the move.

As Laity we are also called to be instruments of mercy. It got me wondering about the ways that our Lay vocation calls us to go from place to place. Does it even apply to us? It certainly applies to me in this role, but how does it influence our general understanding of being Lay Marists? Reaching out to isolated rural communities like the first Marists went into the Bugey, is constantly nudging me in prayer. How might we as Marist Laity reach out to rural communities in New Zealand? Whenever Colin spoke of saints who could be patrons of the Society, he always spoke of people like Francis de Sales, Francis Xavier, Francis Regis: outstanding missionaries with deep concern for people who also went to the boundaries and beyond for the sake for the Gospel and did so with a sense of urgency.

Fr Frank McKay says that in 1846 Fr Mayet noted in his journal that during a Council meeting, there was a remarkable interchange when the idea of the Society of Mary accepting a Parish was supported by some members. Fr Colin "stopped short, as if he staggered", then, "in a tone of indescribable authority", he let forth a tirade against what he regarded as an attack on "the fundamentals of the Society". Fr Mayet noted that "I have rarely seen him so worked up" and records Colin as saying: "Gentlemen, if ever you start calling into question the fundamentals of the Society, the Society is lost!" There are parish priests in the Church: that is not our mission..." Colin's reasons for refusing parishes were based primarily on the fact that what Marists are called to do involves freedom for mission. They are called to be an auxiliary force in the Church; not tied to settled ministry of maintenance rather than mission.

So that brings us back to ourselves as Laity, we are often called to be settled in a place, but we are also Marist and missionary. We seek both to reach out to people in need of God's love and mercy on the margins and care for those who are faithful and committed to Christ; always with a desire to encourage and uplift them so that they too may go out. In a sense there is a breathing in and breathing out; a support of the church and a reaching out beyond the church, beyond our parishes, right out to the margins of our communities. Now I know around NZ Marist priests and brothers have been leaving parishes and people wonder 'why,

why?" But perhaps we are being called to encourage them to respond courageously to the very fundamentals of the Society of Mary. Marists are not simply there to maintain a parish. For those of you blessed to be in a parish with Marist priests, how much more it falls to us then, to enliven every aspect of parish life with our Marist missionary dimension. If your parish was once a Marist parish, how can you continue to imbue Marist missionary outreach into its legacy for the future? The whole of New Zealand was once a Marist Mission, so none of us are left out of that call.

It is interesting that Father Colin's most frequent references to Mary, are to Mary at Nazareth and in the early Church. Frank McKay says "I think this is because Colin did not wish to prescribe, to spell things out too much. He wanted Marists to meditate together on the mystery of Mary and to use their creativity. For him Marists are never tied to any one ministry any more than Christ was at Nazareth. The central Marist mission doesn't change; the ministries through which it is carried out may. Colin wanted Marists to have the freedom and mobility to meet the changing needs of our society, to be mobile people with little baggage." Now when we translate that to ourselves as Laity; how can we be people of little baggage? How can we be people who don't get locked into our little cliques of friends or our comfortable way of running through our week, our social life, not stretching out to new people, new experiences? At Church on Sundays, are we always sitting in the same seat? Maybe Try something as simple as sitting somewhere different. You'll meet completely different people. You may even be asked if you are new in the parish. Stretch yourself into different circumstances for the sake of the Gospel and see what the creativity of the Holy Spirit can do. We have that simple Marist maxim; "no to greed, no to Power and no to Pride", and it's central to who we are as Marists.

Mary moved from place to place. She was a refugee, it was hard for her to build a home and to settle, but then she did settle in Nazareth and continued to ponder things in her heart. Perhaps her times of moving from place to place helped her be free enough to endure wagging tongues about Jesus, and to have the courage to stand at the cross with hope and help the early Church to go out on mission.

So how do we as Lay Marists, explore this idea of being free to be 'as' Mary in the world? Are we Free to set aside some comforts? Can we look at who is on the margins in our parish, and wider community and explore together, in prayer and creativity what we may be called to do. How can we build a friendly welcoming mercy focused church on mission? The ways may be very different to how it was done even ten, twenty or fifty years ago. But every year we are asked by Colin and by Mary to look at the great needs of our time and then to pray, be open to the Spirit, surrender as Mary and explore how can we be instruments of mercy today?

I know that gives me plenty of food for thought. Remember though, if your stage of life, health or current circumstances means active mission is not an option, you can still be involved in sharing your stories, your dream, your Marist Spirituality; maybe baking a cake, smiling at strangers, being a mentor and most especially sharing your prayer that the needs of our time can be met with mercy and the love of God.

God bless, thanks for listening, Bev.