



URBAN EVANGELISATION AND THE MARIST CHARISM TODAY

Reflections from the Marist City Centre Mission Conference and Seminar, London, 1- 5 May, 2017.

A NEW CULTURAL CONTEXT

Pope Francis's statement that we are living not in a time of change but in **a change of era** strikes a chord with Marists. In their times, Fr Colin and his companions sensed that momentous cultural changes were afoot. The changes they saw beginning have continued, and, if anything, the pace of change seems to be accelerating. In every area of life – technology, sexuality, politics, etc., etc. – we are witnessing a shifting of tectonic plates.

More and more people are living in cities. The new culture emerging is **urban** and impacts on life in rural spaces as well as cities.

Who can be confident that they know what is going on? This is a bewildering time. All the same, there is a sort of shared conviction that **this new world is not alien. Somehow we have our place in it.** This Marist instinct is quite different from those tendencies in the Church that advocate defensive withdrawal into the purity of a sect, a “flight from the world” in a literal sense. Somehow this strange new world presents new possibilities. In fact, we find ourselves wondering whether the Society of Mary was founded precisely for this new world and its culture!

We do not know what subterranean currents may burst forth in new forms when the time is ripe – “revivals” are a recurring feature of Christian history. But it is no longer evident that Christianity is at the heart of Western cultures. **A lot of traditional Christian language has become unintelligible** to most of our contemporaries. Examples are numerous – students studying literature in universities who need to be taught that the Christian holy book, the Bible, is divided into two parts called the Old and New Testaments, or that the feast of Easter celebrates the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead.



We Marists readily accept that **this new world is not godless.** The Risen One is at work. The action of the Spirit is present to reveal and inspire. Without being naïve and blind to the reality of evil, there is much goodness and searching for genuine values, generosity and unselfishness.

Speed, constant distraction, background noise, the availability of instant gratification, and so on, make spiritual or contemplative activities difficult. And yet how often we hear talk of “mindfulness”, a contemplative concept imported from Buddhism. How frequently advertisers use the language of heaven, eternity, soul.

The percentage of people, especially young people, who identify with a particular denomination such as Methodist or Catholic, is in sharp decline. Faith is no longer automatically transmitted by family or ethnic allegiance. Ultimately it has to be **a personal adult choice in a world that is multicultural and multi-religious.**



“THIS STRANGE NEW WORLD PRESENTS NEW POSSIBILITIES... WE FIND OURSELVES WONDERING WHETHER THE SOCIETY OF MARY WAS FOUNDED PRECISELY FOR THIS NEW WORLD AND ITS CULTURE!”

SOME NEEDS ARISING IN THIS CULTURE

A remark of a Colombian bishop at the Alpha Conference hit the mark – in this culture **welcoming and befriending must come before teaching and catechising**. People respond to being unbound from their fears, rather than being taught a lesson by authorities. The example of the Alpha program shows how people **need to belong**, to be included in a group of friends, especially of peers, where they can safely express themselves, and where some of them can find their way of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. At some point in life, most people wrestle with life's big questions. They need to be accompanied and find a space for authentic conversations about life and faith in an open, relaxed environment.

Without **care for people who are in need** such as the homeless, prisoners and migrants, the Gospel cannot be proclaimed. We all share in the same life, world and planet. Jean Vanier gave powerful witness to this.

People are not necessarily looking for solutions. Some situations do not have a solution. As Cardinal Tagle put it, "It's a dilemma, it doesn't need a solution."

Humility is an esteemed virtue, and people are allergic to dogmatism and pretentiousness. They seek a reassuring presence, companionship in their dilemmas.

Very frequently they are searching for "**spirituality**" and often this is seen as distinct from "religion". In a frenetic urban world people need spaces and times of **silence**, opportunities to develop interiority. They spontaneously respond to **beauty** – beautiful music, art, architecture, and the natural beauty of greenery.



"...WELCOMING AND BEFRIENDING MUST COME BEFORE TEACHING AND CATECHISING."

A MARIST RESPONSE



The discrete effective **presence of Mary** in the early church is a model for our presence in this new culture. "**Hidden and unknown**" expresses a particular sort of presence with its own asceticism. It is an antidote to

the clericalism and spiritual worldliness about which Pope Francis speaks .

We are also called to equip ourselves with the **knowledge and skills** needed to be missionaries to this culture – Fr Colin saw this as one of the hallmarks of the Society of Mary. The professionalism of *Alpha International* was a wake-up call. What knowledge and skills do we need today?

Pentecostal prayer forms and the extrovert style of Alpha brought many of us **out of our comfort zone**. But isn't that what happened to Fr Colin

when he was in Cerdon? To paraphrase Pope Francis once more, he would rather see a church that makes mistakes, and takes risks leaving its comfort zone and **going outwards**. Young people in particular can seem to us quite alien and threatening. But an involvement with the young is another of Fr Colin's hallmarks for the Society. We can go beyond our human capacities and place our confidence in the Holy Spirit, going out fearlessly into deeper waters, doing everything we can for the Kingdom.

Perhaps works involving **the Marist Family**, priests, laity, religious, women and men, working together in a common mission (the Work of Mary), will become the new norm? That was the original vision which inspired Fr Colin and his companions. We are well placed to continue to adapt this tradition to this new age. To do this we will need generosity of spirit.



CITY CENTRE EVANGELISATION – THINGS BUT OLD AND NEW

“THE PARISH IS A **COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES**, A **SANCTUARY** WHERE THE THIRSTY COME TO DRINK IN THE MIDST OF THEIR JOURNEY, AND A CENTRE OF CONSTANT **MISSIONARY OUTREACH**.” (EVANGELII GAUDIUM 28)

Some elements identified in the **treasury** of our **Marist heritage**

- We are convinced that the Society of Mary is an initiative of the Virgin Mary herself.
- Its charism is an **authentic Catholic spirituality** approved by the Church.
- We stand in a **tradition** that goes back to the first Marist missionaries, and to the saints and martyrs of the early Society of Mary.
- We are a **praying presence** in the centre of cities.
- We have well-placed sites, with **beautiful churches**, and usable **spaces** that are at a premium in urban centres.
- Marist Fathers, Marist Sisters, Marist Missionary Sisters and different categories of Marist laity already **work together**.
- We are a mobile **international** group that is already **intercultural**.
- We have a **family spirit**.
- We are open to a **variety of ministries**.
- Though we are **challenged** by ageing, we are a generally well-educated and experienced international group of people willing to work internationally.
- Ecumenical and interfaith **openness** comes relatively naturally.
- We have financial resources.
- We have already shown **energy and creativity** in different locations.

