

Fr Jim Carty SM has just completed his second 'camino' walk.

At 78 years of age, Fr Jim walked 700km along rough, mountainous paths of south-west France, raising funds for 'Wilai' and stateless children like her.

Resting from his long trek, Fr Jim is spending a few weeks at the Marist retreat of 'La Neylière'.

From here, his reflections move onto the current plight of the Rohingya people of Myanmar....

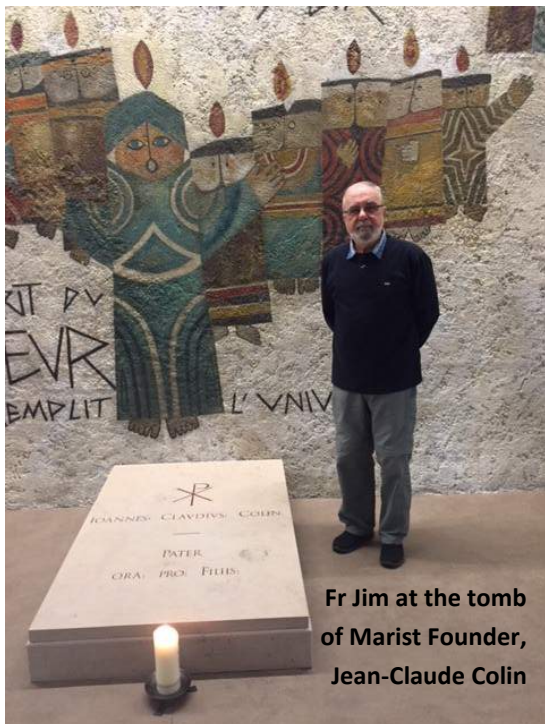
Why: me here, and them there ?

Good morning, from what must be the vestibule of heaven as opposed to Dante's vestibule of hell. The place, La Neyliere, is one hour from the city of Lyons, a place purchased by our Founder in 1850, for retreats and recuperation for missionaries returning from the Pacific. He died here and is entombed in the chapel awaiting to be declared a saint!

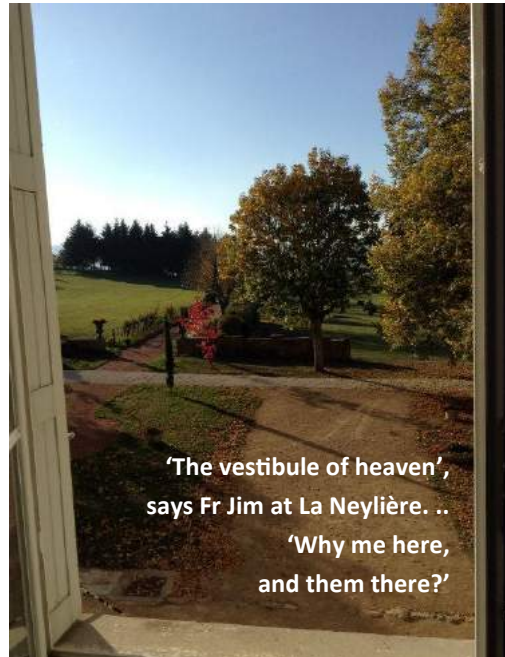
The weather, ever since I arrived here five days ago, has been idyllic. Beautiful sunny Autumn days, moderate temperatures, sleep inducing cool evenings (even the locals are unsure as to when they have had such a succession of "days like this") and the hospitality exceptional.

A few years ago, the Marists of the European Province, like so many other Religious institutes, were faced with the stark choice: refurbish or sell and move on.

Fortunately, they chose the former and with the help of the Marists from around the world set about preserving and restoring the past (I am writing this blog in what was the study of the Founder just next to his bed room) and



Fr Jim at the tomb of Marist Founder, Jean-Claude Colin



updating the facilities to accommodate groups both day and longer term, and in very creative ways enabling greater flexibility. For example, for the past few days a group of astronomers have been here- they come twice a year and were over the moon, as it were, two days ago with the galactical massive collision of two stars, whose size, speed and power were really beyond reckoning, but as one told me: confirmed Einstein's theory of relativity.

Today there was also a group of close to a hundred lay folk from eight nearby villages for mass and a main sit-down meal. They have been volunteering for years to assist pilgrims who visit Lourdes. Also, a Marist named Xavier has been here for some time recuperating from some debilitating illness after working in Africa for 41 years- exactly what the Founder had in mind.

And then there is me. A blow in from the Camino spending time in reflection, solitude, prayer and long walks- up hills and down dales but without sticks or boots. And with a nagging sense of the guilts. The contrast could not be starker and confounding. And here is why:

As I passed through Lyons station the other day I purchased the only English language Newspaper I could find (the New York Times and the front-page photo and article said it all.

"SHAKEN ROHINGYA RECALL ATROCITIES"

What follows is one of the most graphic, gut wrenching, series of atrocities I have read.

I had hoped to attach the full article but have been unable to access it. But I feel compelled to share parts of the story to in some way explain my angst.

Firstly: a direct quote:

"Hundreds of women stood in the river held at gun point and told not to move. A pack of soldiers stepped toward a petite young woman with light brown eyes and delicate cheekbones.

Her name was Rajuma and she was standing chest high in water, clutching her baby son, while her village in Myan-

mar burned down behind her.

"You," the soldiers said pointing at her.

She froze and squeezed her baby tight.

In the next violent blur of moments, soldiers clubbed Rajuma in the face, tore her screaming baby out of her arms and hurled him into the fire.

She was then dragged into a house and gang raped. In the next room two of her sisters were similarly dealt with and along with their brother and mother were shot.

She lay unconscious left to die. She managed to flee naked, after having witnessed their deaths, to eventually make it to a camp in Bangladesh like 10s of thousands who have fled.

It was in this camp that Rajuma was able to tell her story. These atrocities have been corroborated by dozens of others who have reached the relative safety of the camps."

Secondly: The story of Rajuma continued.

Rajuma, now sits in the camp totally bereft of everything. She cannot read or write. She does not have a single piece of paper to prove who she is or that she was born in Myanmar. This may be a problem if she applies for refugee status in Bangladesh, which has been reluctant to give it, or ever tries to go home to Myanmar. She thinks she is around 20, but she could pass for 14- painfully thin, with wrists that look as if they could easily break.

She grew up in a rice farming hamlet called Tula Toli, and said the place had never known peace. The two main ethnic groups the Buddhists Rakhines and the Muslim Rohingya-different religions, different languages, different food and have always distrusted each other.

Rajuma has been reduced to the status of a non-person-just like Wilai. Who will reach out to her, just one among such a vast number of desperate people?

So why should we be concerned? Check out the recent history and one finds the fingerprints of the colonial powers who moved in to profit and exploit these lands. History is a great teacher, sadly it's lessons are not always heeded.

So **thirdly:** a Scottish academic recently wrote a book on the Rohingya in which he explained that much of the animosity could be traced back to World War II, when the Rohingya fought on the British side and many Buddhists in the Rakhine fought with the occupying Japanese. Both sides massacred civilians, all within living memory.

The allies won the war and the Rohingya hoped to win independence or join East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) which was also majority Muslim and ethnically similar to the Rohingya. But the British eager to appease Myanmar's Buddhist majority, decreed that the Rohingya areas would become part of a new, independent Myanmar (then called Burma), setting up the Rohingya for decades of discrimination that has now developed into one of the worst cases of "ethnic cleansing".

So here I am sitting in a first-floor room on yet another

perfect Autumn morning, sun streaming in, having shared a typical French breakfast with confreres and friends. I do so in the knowledge of the grim and merciless reality that engulfs the Rohingya.

Why me here? Why them there? Am I in some way more worthy? Is it providence? Is it karma? Is it luck? I sit here in sad impotence knowing that those with the power to make the changes necessary, seemingly unwilling to do so. There are of course organisations on the ground responding to the almost impossible task of providing shelter, food and medical care for the constant flow of refugees- reportedly as many as 50,000 in one day recently.

But I cling to one small effort to help make one life safe and give hope to Wilai and others in a situation like her-like Rajuma.

Finally, once again I want to express my abiding gratitude to you, gentle reader, for being a companion on the Way. Your generosity and support have made it possible and indeed worthwhile.

Au revoir

Jim