

Reflection from the Superior General

Advent is the time of the "Christmas crib" in Italy. Inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi himself these scenes of the nativity in Bethlehem – often transposed into modern settings - portray in exquisite detail and with great artistic flair the profound truth that God has come among us as a little baby of lost, migrant parents. These cribs in Italy help people to understand and express the mystery of the incarnation in a simple, human scene.

"God emptied himself taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are". (Phil. 2,7)

I witnessed in my recent visits both to Toulon in France and to Dakar in Senegal other expressions of the Christmas message. In Toulon, since the very beginnings of our Marist history, we have been involved in education so that now there are three large, dynamic schools all proudly calling themselves "Marist". In Dakar, Marists are famous for founding one of the best schools in the country. It now educates thousands of students and boasts of many illustrious graduates. One whole suburb that has grown up around this

school is called "Marist". There is a Marist mosque, a Marist restaurant, a Marist gasoline station. There is a street called "Pères Maristes". The retired Cardinal and the present Archbishop are Marist graduates and they spoke of the great Marists they had known. So many Marists who gave their lives to education are venerated.

However, both in Toulon and Dakar we have had to relinquish our former institutional strength in education. As in so much of our Marist world, there are no longer any Marist Religious administering these schools. Taking the place of our former powerful presence I met Marist confreres who speak more of



accompaniment of people, humbly and faithfully. We still walk among the staff and students as chaplains for as long as we can. In Toulon, especially, there is any number of lay staff who are calling themselves "Marist". In Dakar we are working with lay people to open a new school on the peripheries of the city. We are also committed to education among the many young people of the streets. We may not be as institutionally "great" as we once were, but perhaps we are living a more contemporary expression of the Good News of the Christ Child, "God among us". It is close to the beautiful and profound mystery we contemplate when we gaze upon the crib.

We need now, as always, to undertake any Work of Mary as professionally as possible, with competence, transparency and accountability. However, there was always the danger that we become "Marist Incorporated". Many people have lost their faith in powerful institutions. The humble child born on the peripheries of the Empire, in Bethlehem, offers Good News for these same people.

Much of our former work is now undertaken by professional Lay People, a considerable number of whom want to call themselves "Marist". This frees us to respond wholeheartedly as Marist Religious to the call of the 2017 Chapter: *"Like Mary, we are called to be missionary disciples, bridge-builders, instruments of reconciliation, bearers of the Good News, especially to the poor and the youth"*. (Gen. Chapter 2017, no. 6).

Sister Mary SM, from Ireland, told me in Dakar, Senegal, that she much prefers celebrating Christmas in a Muslim country where any celebration must be discreet. This enables her and others, she says, to focus simply on the beautiful, profound mystery of Christmas.

The humble Bethlehem scene invites us to let go of any of the trappings of power and to walk alongside people simply, discovering with them "God-among-us", the migrant baby, vulnerable in the crib.

A blessed and gracious Advent and Christmas to all you all. Let's be praying for and with each other.

John Larsen s.m.