

1. Spirituality: The Gospel Applied to a Time and Place By Fr. David Kennerley, SM

A Prayer

Ever faithful, Creator God, the Scriptures teach us that you are always at work sowing the seeds of new life in us. We thank you for your constant faithfulness and love for us.

Mary, first and most perfect Disciple of Jesus, encourage us to see and respond to all that God is doing in our lives, prompting us to new life.

Setting the Scene

“Jesus said, ‘Imagine a sower going out to sow...’” (Matthew 13:4). Jesus, of course was the Sower himself, and he still is, especially now through his great gift to the Church, the Holy Spirit. This same Holy Spirit, however, God has also ‘let loose’ in the world – and that means, into our lives and times! There’s a wonderful phrase that recurs throughout the Gospels’ with several variants: *“Jesus was passing by”* (e.g. John 9:1, but see also Mark 10:46; Matthew 9:27; Luke 19:1; John 1:35-36). Jesus is the sower, but he is discreet, inviting but not intrusive. What he sows is the seed of ‘new life’, a deepening of our relationship with Him, his Father and his true family: all those who hear his Word and act on it. Chief among these is Mary His Mother.

Jesus passes by, in and out of our lives, through an array of people and in so many contrasting situations, calling, inviting. Often, it is when life is changing, (or more challenging!) for us, that we will experience his call more tellingly, even urgently: becoming a parent, retiring, reaching a ‘big O’ birthday, having a teenager!!! At these times the soil lies especially ready and waiting.

What is true for all of us as individuals, also happens in particular historic settings or places. The sower comes, knowing our needs, inviting us to new life. God *“is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom, things both new and old”* (Matthew 13:52). So it is that the Gospel takes on a ‘new’ form particularly suited to the soil of each passing age. In this way, different spiritualities come to birth, take shape.

Marist spirituality took root in very changing, challenging times, in the soil of the Enlightenment, a wide-ranging movement promoting science and reason with no reference to the Scriptures and to God. One incredible expression of this movement was the French Revolution seeking mainly to promote personal rights and freedoms, and to give the ‘common man-woman’ justice and protection against the crushing taxes imposed not only by the Crown but also by the Catholic Church which had become so powerful and dominating in France.

One effect of this reaction to the Ancien Regime, the ‘old order,’ was that from 1789–1851, just when the Society of Mary was ‘taking shape,’ some seven revolutions or coups erupted in France embroiling the country and the Church. Hence the question arose: How was the Church to engage with this people, in such a turbulent time when men and women were so determined to forgo the old, including the Church as they had come to know it?

The answer that came to a small group of insignificant diocesan-oriented seminarians in the city of Lyon was that the person of Mary, mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, modelled precisely a very different way to be with people and to reach out to others across the whole spectrum of faith in such turbulent times.

An Insight

“Cardinal Castracane in Rome declared, ‘Fr. Colin is a saint. He has understood his era.’ If ever Colin gets canonized, I hope this is what they write: Colin, whose holiness consisted in understanding his era and not in turning away from it, who sought the means to touch it, to heal it, to convert it. He did not turn his back on his era, but tried to imagine a kind of presence, ‘unknown and hidden,’ which enables us to be there, as close as possible, at the very core of what is in peoples’ hearts” (Jean Coste, A MARIAN VISION OF THE CHURCH, p.338).

The Practice

“The heart of modern civilization is not its refusal of the transcendent but its sacred conviction of freedom. Leaving behind attitudes of rejection and condemnation we must look for the seeds of the Word, and preach the Gospel to this age and world as it is. Only openness, discernment and attentiveness will help us, in listening and dialogue, to discover that men and women today are in fact looking for spiritual values, sometimes in unexpected ways. By genuine conversation and mutual respect within the Church itself, we can help people, or rather each individual, to discover in his or herself, the space that only God can fill” (Jan Snijders, THE AGE OF MARY, p 82).

Possible Questions

1. Where are you with God? What seed of ‘new life’ is God perhaps nudging you to recognize and nurture?
2. Our reflection focused on the image of Jesus as the Sower of the seed. Do you have a favourite image of him (it might even be non-Biblical) and what is most attractive to you in the image?
3. Spirituality was described as “the Gospel reshaped for a certain age?” How might that simple description be helpful to you and others today?

