

Reflection from the Superior General

In some parts of our Marist world this is the season for us to rejoice with Perpetual Professions and Ordinations and Anniversaries. It is also the season of Advent. While I have been visiting our confreres in Cameroon it was a special blessing for me to be able to attend the priestly Ordination of Njong Akua Kenneth sm on the first Sunday of Advent. The ceremony was three and a half hours long so there was ample time to reflect around the themes of Advent as the liturgy unfolded in all its African exuberance.

During the ceremony there was a real sense of "Emmanuel", God among his people, in the joy and music. Introducing the Liturgy of the Word, there was a lively procession with dancing and the beating of drums as a group of people carried in something on their shoulders that looked like the Arc of the Covenant. When the procession eventually reached the sanctuary, the Bishop unveiled the "Arc of the Covenant" and to my complete surprise revealed a small boy hidden underneath the cover and carrying the Scriptures. The Word of God was warmly welcomed visiting his people as a child. Our God is both welcoming and welcomed, an Advent theme. We discover the Word of God coming among us in great simplicity when we look beneath the surface of life.

Occasions like this are family times. Parishes can come alive. Family and friends can gather from long distances. There is also our Marist family which seemed to welcome everyone with an atmosphere of warm inclusiveness. It is helpful for us to reflect on "inclusiveness" as we celebrate the blessed season of Advent as one Marist family and as we prepare for Christmas. If there have been ruptures in our Marist lives over this last year, or if we or anyone else feels excluded from the Marist family this Advent, this is a time to reach out, to reconcile and welcome each other home to our own communities



After the ceremony some mothers asked to speak with me about the situation in the north-west of Cameroon where they come from. These women came straight to the point. They spoke of their anger about the injustice that is causing a civil war in their area. They spoke of their sons heading into the bush and taking up arms. They described everyone's fear – both the young rebels and the young government soldiers are afraid, as well as the people caught in-between. Their families and the society are breaking down. The children cannot go to school. There are many single mothers carrying their children in a world of violence. The markets are closed. Their only hope is in the clear voice and self-effacing accompaniment of the Church community. However, the Church is suffering too. Three local Bishops have been kidnapped recently and all the priests and church workers, including our own confreres, are in danger. Their message was not to talk too glibly of "Christmas peace." As Pope Paul VI famously proclaimed: "if you want peace, work for justice". Advent peace calls us to work for justice.

This was the first Marist Ordination in the District of Africa for many years. This celebration is a sign of hope for us all. Advent is a time when we look for signs of hope in our own lives and situations. As we look within ourselves and all around us, it is easy to become discouraged. Advent calls us to proclaim what gives us hope, centered in Advent on the hope offered by the story of Bethlehem.

Advent calls us to the Eucharistic altar. Christ visits us in the simple ordinariness of shared words and bread and wine, transformed by Grace in the context of the Liturgy. As we Marists make this pilgrimage through Advent and Christmas let us recognize "Emmanuel", God-among-us as a small child, the Son of Mary. Let us work for welcome and reconciliation within our own communities. Let us work for peace established solidly on Gospel Justice. Let us name the reasons for our hope.

A blessed Advent and Christmas to all!

John Larsen s.m.