

Marian Youth in 1995

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The international character of Marian Youth is extraordinarily rich in its cultural diversity, by its sharing in the new evangelisation and its involvement with and for the poor.

The Marian Youth of 1995, whatever their history are now moved by a double call:

- to bring back young people now far from the Church and especially those who are in difficult circumstances.
- to take Mary as a companion along the way to the Church and to life.

The Movement tries to give responsibility to the young people of today to organise themselves to bring to birth, where they are living, the New World, that civilization of Love in the gentle enthusiasm that is the way of the Virgin Mary.

The character of the Marian Youth throughout the world differs according to the different countries. It is known by various names: M.Y. (Marian Youth), M.V.Y. (Marian Vincentian Youth, Marian Vocational Youth), Association of the Children of Mary Immaculate, Association of the Children of Mary, V.M.Y.(Vincentian Marian Youth).

Setting

The movement is present on five continents. It is growing in some countries, in others it is shrinking. At the present moment the recorded numbers mount to about 200,000. The Movement brings together young people from five years of age and is open to university students and even adults in some countries. Most of the M.Y.'s are from a poor and simple background. The majority are girls (about 60%). They meet together regularly in little teams or groups in different places according to their set-up: parish-halls, institutions, base communities, schools, places where they live, chapels. Organisation is provided by responsible lay people, young and adults, seminarians, priests and sisters.

Structure

The presence of the Movement in the different countries seems linked, for the most part to the presence of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters

of Charity. At the same time it is noticed that other congregations, lay-people, priests in the parishes are drawn to the movement on account of its Marian spirituality, its closeness to the poor and the solid formation which it affords. The structure of the Movement differs a little from country to country. There is always a central office, a committee, a central organisation, or a national team. Its composition differs according to the place and to the make-up of the Movement. Thus some teams are composed entirely of Sisters, others of Sisters, Lay People and Priests.

Links With the Church

Local Level. The Movement is closely connected to the local churches. It is actively engaged in the parish pastoral activity and participates in catechism teaching, preparation of the liturgy, special drives, etc.

Relations with the clergy seem, in general, good even if some priests show resistance to the movement for various reasons. On the other hand, meeting with other organisations present on the ground gives an opportunity of working together. This collaboration demands that they look together at the situation before them so as to give answers that are new and adapted to the poor and to the Church of today. Take for example Brazil the Base Communities.

"... On the occasion of the Congress of 86, the challenge to join in the Base Communities grew and some M.Y. groups joined the Popular Movements. Sharing experiences and studies of "The New Way of Church" took place. These changes led the Movement to enter into a new stage of looking again at its life and asking: 'are we faithful to the Marian Vincentian spirit?' The studies of the beginnings, of the spirituality, of the history of the movement prepared the way for the new congress whose objective was the redefinition of the norms and the aims of the M.V.M.

The congress of 1989 was a new stage in the deepening of this searching for new answers to the call of the poor and the Church today which in turn brought a new approach and a new Marian vision ...

Important conclusions: It is essential to preserve the spirituality of the Movement: To Jesus by Mary. Living this spirituality in the option for the poor in the example of Mary and Saint Vincent. Being poor and/or making the option for Jesus Christ in the poor. The means of action used by each group can be different but the end must be the same.

Diocesan Level. The movement is also involved in different ways in pastoral activity on the diocesan level and takes part in such works as the synod, youth work, special drives, etc.

Official recognition of the Movement by some Episcopal Conferences indicates the interest that the bishops take in the aims of the Movement as a means of evangelisation of the youth of today.

National Level. In some countries the national leaders of different movements meet regularly with the Episcopal Delegate in charge of the Lay Apostolate to exchange their experiences, reflect on topics which currently challenge the christian faith and prepare seminars on a national level.

International Level. On account of its international character the Movement continues to be linked with the Pontifical Council of the Faith in Rome. It is invited to send delegates to international seminars like the World Day of Youth. In this context too, the national centres of the M.Y. received a questionnaire concerning their role in the New Evangelization.

Human and Christian Formation. In every country, the Movement has the privilege of taking part in human, Christian and apostolic formation.

Given the world in which they live today, new challenges must be taken up because the faith and the values of yesterday are being called into question; and no longer do the young have reference points. They are thrown off their balance on emotional, family, relational and religious levels. They have become prey to all sorts of pressures and ideas current in society; their social environment, political propaganda and numerous religious sects. That is why, a catechetical method, devised under different forms (team-work, week-ends, meetings, camps, retreats or person to person sharing allows the young people and their leaders to put in place the bases for a life that will be both human and christian. At the same time a formation in Marian devotion is given through the celebration of the Marian festivities on the occasion of the feasts of Mary. This leads to a deepening in doctrine, in pastoral practice and especially in the message of 1830. The novenas, the steps, the processions, the pilgrimages, the recitation of the rosary, and the distribution of the Medal of Mary Immaculate will all form part of this formation.

Along with this formation for all the members a continued and more intensive formation is provided for the leaders during sessions, congresses, seminars etc. (sacramental, biblical, liturgical, theological, ecclesiological, socio-political, study of Church documents...).

Apostolic Commitment. This initial and continued formation is steeped in the ethos of the movement, awareness of Marian spirituality and linked to the privileged witness of Saints Catherine, Vincent and Louise.

A theme for the year is chosen by many countries in terms of the Church and current topics. This allows the young people and the leaders to advance together and helps them to

make the link between life and faith. Formation and apostolic action go together for all the M.Y. of the world and more precisely: action for and with the poor. This M.Y. service progresses from commitment in their own lives to a regular commitment to action: visits to slums, to leprosaria, to the aged, to prisoners, to hospital patients, to poor families, to the blind, to the isolated, teaching people to read, helping children at school, work with children's groups, summer camps for the young, popular missions, etc. The Poor themselves form part of the team, active in their own surroundings and beyond them, one example among others, in India:

"... young boys and girls, members of the Association are illiterate. Working with our Parish Priest we tried to establish the Association in the villages (Bodopoda is surrounded by thick forests and high mountains without means of communication or other services for the villages in the district), and fourteen villages responded. The Association is taking deep roots. In spite of their illiteracy they hold monthly meetings, discuss given subjects and plan their activities. From time to time they receive the help of the catechists of their village who guide them and educate them in the different aspects of their life. Once every two months the sisters take part in these meetings. We notice to what a degree the Association brings them together in helping people who are in the greatest need. Sometimes they bring the sick to the dispensary carrying them on stretchers. They help the destitute giving them a little money for food and clothing. They contribute towards the needs of their village chapel, etc. It is interesting to see how, in their own poverty they collect money for their projects. They grasp at any opportunity to work in the fields and the money they earn is put into the common fund. In the same way they clear and cultivate the forest and all their pay is put into a common fund. These activities give them a sense of unity and from acting together in one project they develop christian values.

They gather at Bodopoda for seminars and celebrations and special activities on the occasion of the Feasts of Mary. They love to take part in them and they benefit greatly from them... We have been able to notice great changes in their lives as members of the Association devoted to Mary and to her Son in a special way.

"Love is resourceful, even to infinity" said Saint Vincent, indeed nothing stops the M.Y. An example is the Foreign Mission of the J.M.V. of Spain."

The Movement looking for other activities has thrown itself into the Foreign Missions (Missions Ad Gentes) since 85. Thus it has had eight years missionary experience in the Honduras, seven in San Domingo, one in Mexico and one in the Argentine. During the time of the mission, two months of July and August they worked in the town parishes, in the suburbs and the villages, always in very poor areas with the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity. The clear object was to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the poor in the joy and the manner of young people. It was their aim to share their ideas and apostolic experiences with young people of their own age and to work with them in the areas of evangelization... The work of human and social development went together in

this... They worked on a literacy programme, a health programme to teach hygiene and childcare. They taught mothers some simple ideas for feeding underprivileged children. They built small timber houses for families living in the slums. Through their efforts were born small Christian communities and groups of young M. V. Y.'s who carry on the work they have begun....

In the spirit of the Magnificat

It seems clear that in every country the apostolic involvement of the M.Y. lives out the same spirit of the Magnificat. The Movement recognises in Mary "*who lives among the poor and the lowly of the Lord*", a woman full of energy, acquainted with poverty and suffering, flight and exile. They try to say that God is on their side and that he looks upon them with a preferential love. They stand up courageously to have their dignity and their rights respected. They proclaim their faith in a God that is a lowly servant and who is not afraid to take the last place to raise up those who count for nothing. Like Mary in the Magnificat, the M.Y.'s learn the path of wonderment, action and conversion.

In Conclusion

With Mary the Marian Youth share in building up a world for everyone, where no person will be put aside. Their first care is for those who are in a difficult situation so that they become active participants with others in society and the Church. An example from France will illustrate this:

"I am a widow. I have six children. The youngest will soon be three. My husband decided to leave one morning. He was unemployed. He just couldn't take any more. Before his death it was already difficult but now it's worse. We can't pay the rent any longer...

At the time of his death, my husband who was a believer, but not me, I said; 'to God with him'. I thought that if there was a God in heaven he would not have done that to us! The Good God; I don't believe in it. In my life I have got more blows than hugs from a father and a mother who drank. I never had enough to eat as a child.

Don't speak to me of your Good God. He is responsible for my kids in the M. Y. There is no question of them going with you".

One evening, I was at the end of my tether. Disgusted, I found my kids praying in their room before Our Lady. I stayed there without moving, listening to them, without their seeing me. That changed me. They were saying to Mary: "Daddy is with you. He helped everyone. He couldn't say no to a neighbour looking for anything. Tell him that we want to stay with the M. Y. He wanted us to go but Mum wants us to stop. In our heart we promised to be M. Y.'s but we can't. We want to keep our promise. Let him settle with you so that Mum says yes!"

Well, believe me, I was just stuck to the ground; I don't know what praying is but there I was, stunned, in front of my kids, listening to their words.

The following day, pretending I had seen nothing, I said to my children: 'I have been thinking. I'm going to phone to say you can keep going to the M. Y.' Well, they hugged me and went off into their room. I found them in front of the little statue of Our Lady, saying: 'Tell Daddy, its great. We can keep on going'. That's all I heard at the time. Now I don't know where I am with God. I don't know how to pray. I don't know if he exists, but anyway his mother had done a good day's work. I believe in her alright...

There's one thing that has made me sit up: I saw myself from the outside. Asking myself to write this story for the M. Y. I said to myself: 'everything that happens is important. Even after emptying all your bag you don't find that it is bad. You're not put down'. Someone, my kids' leader has just said to you: 'That's just terrific! It must be made known!' Well believe me, its the first time somebody told me I did something good.

Now I think: 'There must be a good God in the heart of those who know how to listen without judging poor people and who loves them so much that he doesn't turn on them for what they say when they are fed up to the teeth with life. We the little ones, people with no standing rely on the eyes of people capable of making our kids like other kids, making them also able to keep a promise.'

If that is what the M. Y. are, I say keep on, and then I am going to ask you to speak for us. Tell everyone that we, poor people, uneducated people, we, that poverty cuts off from others, that poverty crushes, don't ask to be seen like those who have everything, but we need to find love and we need to be thought of too. Poor people have riches in their heart even if they have nothing else.

Now, I say to my kids: 'you should bring others, at school and everywhere. That will help other young people to come out of themselves and not despair.' Anyway, I say it everywhere.

(Denis O'Donovan C.M., Translator)