

Maryknoll at 100

By Michael Duggan, MM

Maryknoll is celebrating its 100th anniversary during the year 2011. It was only three years before that the United States was taken off the list of mission territories and the U.S. Church was far from realizing its potential for foreign mission work. The Church was growing and coping with all that entails in attending to the needs of an immigrant population. There were only fourteen priests missioned overseas at the time.



Two men, Fr. James Walsh from the Boston Archdiocese and Fr. Frederick Price of the Raleigh Diocese in North Carolina, were two priests, independent of each other, publishing magazines promoting mission. Fr. Walsh as the director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Boston published *The Field Afar*, promoting and supporting foreign missions and Fr. Price published the periodical *Truth*, promoting home mission in North Carolina. Fr. Price also founded an orphanage and a seminary for home missionaries in North Carolina. Fr. Price was himself the first priest ordained in North Carolina.

A third person, Mary Josephine Rogers, who would become the foundress of the Maryknoll Sisters and take the name Mother Mary Joseph, was truly a mother to the Society that was being born in the minds of Frs. Walsh and Price. She met Fr. Walsh in 1906 and volunteered to help publish his magazine. She gathered a few women to help and they and other women eventually became the Maryknoll Sisters of

St. Dominic with Molly Rogers as their superior and foundress.

Frs. Walsh and Price corresponded for many years fanning each other's enthusiasm for mission. They finally met in Montreal in 1910 at the Eucharistic Congress and decided to petition the U.S. Bishops Conference to begin a seminary for young American men. Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore encouraged the bishops to assent to the idea and with that assent the two priests went to Rome and

on June 29, 1911, Pope Pius X gave his formal permission to begin the Society known as the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America or Maryknoll.

On the trip back to America the two priests stopped at the headquarters of the Paris Foreign Mission Society in Paris and the Mill Hill Fathers in England. At both places they discussed their new project for the U.S. Church, asked advice and took back to the States the Constitution of both Societies for further study.

The early days of the Society were difficult for the struggling group of men who included seminarians James E. Walsh, who would spend twelve years in prison or house arrest in China and Fr. Francis X. Ford who would be killed by Chinese Communists charged as an agent of the U.S. government.

From the very beginning the founders relied on the help and experience of others realizing that they could not accomplish anything productive and long standing as a missionary society if they did not. Fr. Walsh, the manager and director of the venture, was particularly aware of the need to rely on others' expertise and experience in the mission field. Perhaps it was this realization that inspired Fr. Walsh to look beyond the needs of the Society and help those who did not have the access he had to sustain themselves.

"Be bigger than your Society" was one instruction he gave to his young seminarians. He insisted despite the observation that there was not always enough money to meet demands of daily living that there always be some money for the people who came to the door asking for help. The Great Depression created a population of homeless who were traveling on the roads looking for work or a hand-out to get them to the next town.

While the Society founders were developing their new organization they depended more and more on Mother Mary Joseph and the Sisters who were taking over more responsibility for the magazine. Fr. Walsh was traveling to China and other Asian countries considering a mission assignment for his newly ordained priests. Fr. Price was traveling in the U.S. on fund raising trips, speaking in parishes and renewing friendships he had with bishops who had studied with him at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

The Sisters not only published the magazine but acted as secretaries in the administration of the Society, worked in the kitchen and at one point when the cook left abruptly, Mother Mary Joseph filled in as chief cook until a new cook was found. Maryknoll would not have survived without the presence and influence of Mother Mary Rogers so she is considered a co-founder of the Society.

The Society grew rapidly and by 1918 the first group of missionaries were ready for assignment to China. Fr. Price led Fr. James E. Walsh, Fr. Francis X. Ford and Fr. Bernard Meyers to Hong Kong where they would study Chinese before going on to the main land. Within a year Fr. Price died of acute appendicitis in a hospital in Hong Kong. The three young missionaries were on their own.

The number of Maryknoll sites around the U.S. continued to grow with procures in San Francisco and other major cities. In 1913 the first Maryknoll high school seminary opened in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and in 1920 ground was broken for the major seminary in Ossining, New York, 30 miles north of New York City. This growth was matched by the addition of new missions: Hong Kong, Korea, Philippines, Hawaii and Japan.

Numbers were growing also as men joined Maryknoll first as oblates and then as Brothers. In 1912 three young men arrived at Maryknoll to become auxiliary Brothers of St. Michael. These numbers

increased, so that in one period of twenty years 380 Brothers were professed. These were the years after World War II and the Korean Conflict when the U.S. Church was seeing a great growth in vocations to the priesthood and religious life. This was true for Maryknoll and it was also the time when many Maryknollers around the world were becoming more involved in social justice moments. Maryknollers had always been involved in charitable works such as building orphanages, hospitals, old-folks homes, youth centers and trade schools independently or in conjunction with parish work which in many countries was the staple of mission life. The impetus for direct social work undoubtedly came from papal encyclicals studied in the seminary but also came from the migration of people from farm areas to urban centers. Many third world countries were urbanizing in the industrialization that was occurring in most parts of the world. There was an exploitation of peoples who were not prepared for urban living and factory working and the missionary found himself following and associating with these people as they struggled to make a living often in the face of military, governmental and corporate control.

Issues of justice for the oppressed became issues for the missionary. As he aligned himself with the oppressed urban dweller, the missionary often faced the possibility of being expelled. It was not an easy time for many but satisfying as the missionary lived the 'option for the poor' in a way differently than he expected when he first went overseas.

One example was South Korea beginning in 1965 when the government decided to industrialize and the migration to the cities began.

Young men and women especially moved to the cities to feed the enormous needs of the new industries and factories that sprung up to satisfy the demands of an expanding world economy. They were forced to live in company dormitories with little pay and little health care. They worked long hours and had few vacation days or time off. Maryknollers along with other Catholic and Protestant missionaries began advocating for the oppressed workers and began another phase of mission life. Concerned Maryknollers joined prayer meetings and peace Masses and walked with demonstrators to bring world attention to the situation.

In the instance of the missionaries in Korea those involved were threatened with expulsion but were saved by the intervention of journalists and a world-wide diplomatic effort. The issue of human rights was now the issue of the missionary not only in Korea, the Philippines and other parts of Asia but also in Central America and South America and to a lesser degree in Africa.

In Central America, particularly in Guatemala, the military and the rebels used the *campesinos* as pawns in internecine warfare. Missionaries were threatened and some assassinated for their solidarity with the poor. In the Philippines the missionary stood with the farmer as corporations supported by the government stripped the rain forests and confiscated farm land.

In Africa, in Tanzania and Kenya where Maryknollers were missioned, the missionary educated men and women who began the struggle for a democratic or a Christian socialist country.

Sacramental work was still paramount but it was no longer separate from the social justice issues which would bring a better and more involved laity to self governing and social awareness.

These were the halcyon years for Maryknoll. In 1959 there were 1,400 priests, Brothers and seminarians. Associate priests who joined Maryknoll for a five year term were gaining in numbers. Some of the Associates extended their service to a second term and a few asked for full membership.

Lay people were asking to work overseas with Maryknoll and as their numbers grew, Maryknoll over a period of 12 years formally recognized them as Associate members. The Lay Mission Association eventually began the process in Rome of obtaining recognition as a separate entity.

The number of countries where Maryknollers worked rose to 44.

Recently the Superior General of Maryknoll spoke to the bishops at their semi-annual meeting. In his talk he referred to the Centennial year as a jubilee year when one aspect of the observance was to ask forgiveness for any wrongs that needed to be made right. He asked forgiveness from people who have been hurt, disillusioned or harmed in any way because of mistakes Maryknoll made in the past. Mistakes made because of undue pride in our work or in the success we experienced in our mission overseas.

When he said this, he undoubtedly had the words of Bishop Walsh in mind. The Founder, Bishop James E. Walsh said the following in a final letter he wrote to his Maryknollers in 1936 as he was dying. "You dear sons in Christ have the future of Maryknoll in your keeping. That future will be secure if you remain humble, with childlike faith serving God and others for God from the simple motive of love. Seek first the kingdom of God. I have no fear for the future if Maryknollers in all their actions and discussions will forget self and keep in mind the will and the glory of God."

All was going well and then the changes that occurred in the U.S. Church affected Maryknoll with the exodus of nuns from the classroom and the decrease of priests and religious in educational institutions. Maryknoll also experienced these losses. Vocation dwindled almost to one or two men a year and with the drop in Mass attendance, outreach to the Catholic community became more difficult. Membership grew older and more men were retiring at home in the U.S. and overseas. There was a time when Maryknoll and mission were synonymous, now it no longer was a household word in Catholic circles.

It was apparent that we could no longer go it alone. As we had grown in numbers, resources and experience there was a subconscious feeling that we could continue to expand and the flow of vocations and financial security would continue. Slowly, however, it became apparent that Maryknoll would have to reflect on a future that would be different from what we knew. It was also apparent that the organization would be more effective if Maryknoll would partner whenever possible with other mission organizations for the most productive results without duplication of personnel and finances.

In this spirit of service and cooperation the delegates to the Twelfth General Chapter in 2008 stated that while Maryknoll had always sought the cooperation of other mission groups the delegates stressed that cooperation and partnership would be a high priority of the Society in the future.

The partnership would be with all the Maryknoll entities and with other Societies involved in mission.

A statement from the Eleventh General Chapter Mission Vision Statement reads:

"Aware that we do not stand alone in our efforts to bring the News to the nations, we work toward the achievement of common goals together with local churches, other missionary institutes and all people of good will. We recognize that we have a special Word of history and traditions with other missionary communities with whom we share the name of Maryknoll.

“The delegates recognize that the Society on many levels is already engaged in multiple partnering relationships on both a formal and informal basis. We encourage leadership to intervene to strengthen and, where appropriate, expand these relationships.”

The delegates developed a list of possibilities in which this partnership might also be realized. Some of these follow:

- Partnership with others is a constant criterion in our initiatives in mission. We invite others into our efforts and offer to join the efforts of others.
- Search for opportunities for partnership with other mission societies.
- Our charism commits us to partner with those who share mission values within the church of the U.S. in the promotion of mission.
- Form an advisory committee whose members would be laity drawn from a wide range of people and groups within the church of the U.S. Affiliates, universities, solidarity groups, employees, sponsors, donors representative of the ethnic diversity of the church in the U.S.

The list continues but the message is clear. Mission is not done alone but calls on the skills, talents, experience and enthusiasm of many others. It has always been so but more necessary than ever as all mission societies and organizations face a future with fewer members and less resources. The times bring problems to the spread of the Gospel but partnership makes them challenges that call for mutual support and shared enthusiasm of all of us.

It is in a spirit of cooperation and partnership that we celebrate a hundred years of mission, and facing new challenges at home and abroad, we do so with a renewed humility and future secured by the knowledge that we are all working together for the same goal: *Primum Regnum Dei*. To repeat the words of Bishop Walsh, perhaps looking down the years to this moment, *and* to the future, he said, “that future will be secure if you remain humble with childlike faith serving God and others for God, from the simple motive of love.”

Encouraged by the vision of our founders we begin a new phase of mission. As Maryknollers as we celebrate one hundred years of mission we hope that rather than being a hundred years old we will think of ourselves as being one hundred years young. With the help of the Spirit and the help of our fellow missionaries, it’s time to begin again.

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