

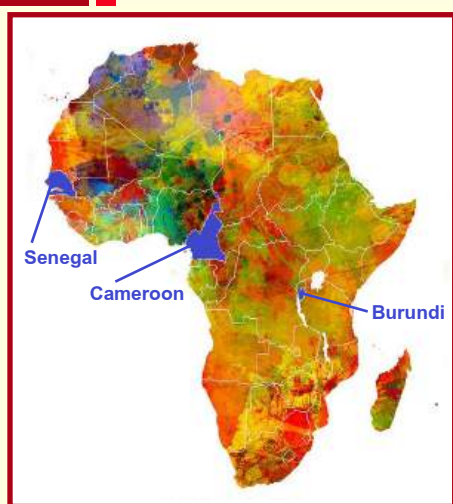
Reflection from the Superior General

I am told that Burundi, in Africa, is probably the poorest country in the world. It was in the capital city, Bujumbura, nestled on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, that, last Monday, I participated in a lively and beautiful official opening of a new Marist school already packed with obviously eager students. The parents I met expressed their gratitude to the Marists for opening the school. The teachers are grateful for their opportunities. The local church and civil leaders were well represented. As I was attending the Inauguration Mass I thought: "This is a special grace of the Holy Year for us Marists, as pilgrims of hope". This ceremony was on the final day of my intense visit to Cameroon and Burundi.

I am wondering: "what have I learned that I can take away from this trip?"

I learned from many stories, or perhaps myths, of Marists who have come here over the years. For example, I was amused to hear in Bambili, in Cameroon, of an Australian Marist, Bob Barber, who was on a long bus trip. The driver was overcome by sickness and the passengers searched for anyone among themselves who could continue the long drive. Bob volunteered and safely drove the bus to its destination.

His years of driving the school truck at Saint John's, Woodlawn, bore unexpected fruit and free transport for Bob with that bus company for the rest of his life. Then there were the stories of the last three Marist missionaries – from Belgium, France and Italy - who were forced to abandon the mission in Burundi at the height of the civil war in the 1990's, leaving only a large tract of land and a community house. Thirty years later the Marists have returned to open a school on that piece of land, still available, in spite of the efforts of many poor squatters to set up camp there. The local Archbishop had defended the land in the expectation that the Marists would return one day, as they had promised. There were many stories of our confreres who, while probably far from perfect themselves, sowed the seeds of the fragile but hopeful Marist District in Africa. We are all carried on the shoulders of the Marists who have gone ahead of us. May they rest in peace!



I learned that while the pendulum in our Marist "centre" is shifting, we need each other, now more than ever. If the movement of Marists was once mostly "from north to south", it is now much more multi-directional. There are still Marists in Africa coming from beyond the continent – from Europe, Canada and Oceania. Of the twenty-five Marist priests and four deacons originating from Africa, five are assigned in other units of the Society. The works of the District are greatly assisted by the wise stewardship and the generosity of the more established units. The formation is now very international, our African seminarians discerning their Marist vocation alongside their brothers from the other parts of the world. We are moving towards a truly international society in which each culture and each person's story, related in his mother language, is enriching the overall life and mission of the Society. This can cause anxiety sometimes, and the demons of excessive nationalism are always lurking, but with grace-filled hearts and minds, this direction offers new life and vibrancy for everyone.

I learned that while the District of Africa faces many challenges and hard decisions, like the rest of us, it finds its strength in our clear Marist identity – the Name and Spirit of Mary, the memory of the Founder displayed proudly, the wider Marist family, and especially the boldness and courage with which we respond to the needs of our time. This strong Marist identity challenges us to go out and preach the Good News to the poor by the same teacher who formed both Jesus Himself at Nazareth and the Apostles at Pentecost.

A blessed celebration of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord this Sunday. May we all, north or south, east or west, renew our Marist Religious commitment to "be the light to the nations".

John Larsen s.m.