

Marist Mission: A Participation in God's Creative Action in Thailand

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Participation

Our Marist ministry in Ranong, Thailand is a participation in God's mission. The Constitutions of the Society of Mary specify: "Their call is to be truly missionary. They attend especially to the most neglected, the poor, and those who suffer injustice. They are ready to carry out these tasks anywhere and at any time" (Const. 12). Yes, the Marist response to the call is our participation in God's creative action here in Ranong. What a privilege to participate in the mission God has entrusted to the Society of Mary!

I would like to tell you about the mission of the Marist District of Asia here in the Southern part of Thailand. The original mandate from the Marist General Administration in 2004 was to establish a Marist community in Myanmar (formerly Burma). But, after a few months of investigating the possibility of doing so, our confreres were told to leave the country. They could not renew their visas, and they had to withdraw immediately. They retreated to Bangkok, Thailand, where they found a warm welcome and temporary accommodations from the Redemptorists.

During their time in Bangkok, the team headed by Fr. John Larsen (now Superior general of the Society of Mary) with another Marist priest, a seminarian and a lay Marist missionary had to discern whether to look for another ministry in Thailand or go back to the Philippines. They decided to stay in Thailand. Surprisingly, they ended up serving the vulnerable people from Myanmar after all, Burmese refugees who work and live in Ranong. This place is a little province in the southern part of Thailand bordering on the southernmost point of Myanmar.

You might ask, "Why Ranong? Why this place?" I believe that this is the work of the Holy Spirit, the main agent of all mission. As the 1990 Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* ("On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate") by John



Paul II states, "the Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission." The Marist mission, led principally by the same Spirit, is our participation in God's creative action of love and compassion in Ranong.

What a place!

According to 2014 statistics, Ranong, Thailand has a population of 177,089 and about 57% of the population come from Myanmar. Burmese is the language most of them speak, while others speak the language of their tribes. In Ranong, most of the people from Myanmar are identified as Burmese migrant workers. Some of them have been in Thailand for many years; they have worked and settled down in Ranong. Economic and political realities are the obvious reasons why people leave Myanmar and decide to come and settle in Thailand, especially during the recent difficult political situation known as the "Military rule."

Myanmar migrant workers in Ranong, struggle to get legal documents to stay in Thailand. Some of them are undocumented even in their own country, lacking a proper passport, for instance,

and other identification papers. That is why it is so difficult to get a visa or other documentation that assures them a safe stay in the Kingdom of Thailand. Furthermore, Thai immigration policies can be quite rigid for some migrants trying to settle in the country. Having no proper documents exposes migrants to all sorts of grievous abuses, like human trafficking and unfair labor practices.

There are more than 100,000 Myanmar migrants in Ranong. Most of them work in fish factories. A few of them are fishermen, while others work in restaurants, hotels and shops throughout the city. Those who live in Ranong normally rent houses with only basic facilities like water and electricity. Many live in houses with other families and share the rent. Most of these houses are simply not suitable for human habitation.

The families of migrants also share in these intolerable conditions. Most of the children cannot go to Thai schools because they lack the proper documents. Thus, many children grow up without any formal education. There are, however, small migrant learning centers around Ranong that offer basic primary school



subjects like English, Burmese and Thai languages, also mathematics, science and history. These centers are usually run by Burmese families with little resources of their own and with the help of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Unfortunately, these private learning centers are not recognized by the Thai government.

So when children, both boys and girls, reach 13 years of age, they are normally encouraged by their parents to go out and look for work and earn something for the family. They look for jobs either in the fish factories or for other job opportunities in Ranong. Some choose to return to Myanmar, their country of origin and, sadly, others are “lost in the dark.” Ranong has a high rate of HIV/AIDS patients.

A Consolation

We firmly believe, however, that God has a special place in his heart for the poor and the vulnerable of this world. In the

Book of Exodus, God says to Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am aware of their sufferings” (Ex 3:7). What consoling words from the Scriptures. But would these words console the vulnerable people here in Ranong today? Here are the statistics: the total population of the Kingdom of Thailand is 69,148,481 according to the 2018 census. Buddhists count for 95% of the population, Muslims for 5%, and Christians are merely 0.7%. Most of the migrants in Ranong are Buddhists, with very few Christian Catholics. How could these words of Scripture be a consolation for the migrants?

Let’s take a look. In all four Gospels, we always encounter Jesus moved with compassion for the poor and the

powerless. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is moved with compassion when he sees the widow of Nain grieving the death of her only son. Jesus restores the son to life. In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks to a woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned to death: “Has no one condemned you?” he asks. “No sir,” she replied. “Then neither do I condemn you.”

In our day, Jesus continues to console the underprivileged, the poor and the powerless regardless of whatever differences in cultures, religious affiliations, or traditions. In fact, we have just celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus at Easter, and we continue to rejoice in the blessings of the Easter Season. The power of his passion, death and resurrection has become the consolation for the poor and the powerless in all the world. In so many ways, we are all poor. And yet Jesus himself

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has become one with us in our poverty as well as in our wounds, our vulnerability and our powerlessness.

The Risen Lord is our compassion and consolation, and he gives this gift to all regardless of differences. But how can this gift be given to the poor and the powerless migrants in Ranong? Perhaps this is the mission of the Society of Mary, to share in the creative action of compassion and consolation of the Risen Christ. As Marists, we are convinced that it is Mary's initiative for us to be here in Ranong. Mary, our blessed mother and our first and perpetual superior, desires and wants us here.

Marists have been in Ranong for 13 challenging years. Perhaps, the most challenging aspect of the mission is to be a source of life, compassion, and consolation in the midst of the migrants' distressing situation. It would be easy to become like one of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in dangerous and difficult places. But we have to remind ourselves constantly that we are not an NGO, but rather a Marist community participating in the mission of God who constantly reveals his love and compassion to the poor. This is not an easy call to embrace. We realize, however, that the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ, who has been journeying with us and inspiring us enables the creative action of God's compassion to flow through us.

A Concrete Action

Explicitly, the action of the Spirit can be seen in the way we respond to the needs of migrants. Their needs are so great that no mere human endeavor could adequately meet those needs. But as principal agent of God's mission, the Holy Spirit is able to direct the generosity of the many people from all parts of the globe to faithfully participate in the mission.

The Marist Asia Foundation (MAF) responds to the needs of migrants through Education, Health, and Migrant programs. A permanent but simple building was constructed in 2014 to provide space where all these programs could be accommodated comfortably. In the Education program, Burmese students from different tribes of Myanmar have the opportunity to take classes. The MAF offers a preschool program for two years. It also offers subjects at the

secondary level where students learn three languages as mentioned above. They also learn mathematics, science, history and computer. When students finish secondary school (after at least four years), some of them apply for the online program provided by Australia Catholic University. These students earn a diploma after one and a half years of studies.

Those who have done the online course can work as teachers. Some work as staff for both non-governmental as well as government organizations, while others find work in various hotels and restaurants. A few have been given an opportunity for further studies at universities in Thailand. It is wonderful to see these students gaining confidence and advancing in their careers. Education is, indeed, an essential road to freedom.

As mentioned earlier, most migrants work in fish factories. The MAF has been trying to provide them choices beyond fish factories. In this part of Asia it is a big advantage for those looking for better job opportunities to be able to speak Thai, Burmese and English. Thus the Marist project gives the migrants choices to learn Thai as well as basic, intermediate, and academic English. We have also set up a computer training program.

Moreover, the Health Program benefits from many generous resources to provide compassion and care for the most abandoned. The Marist project has set up an HIV/AIDS program to provide support, counselling, and advocacy.

These are some of the responses that the Marists, together with our collaborators, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians, currently offer in Ranong. This is our way of participating in the mission of the Trinity entrusted to the Society of Mary here in Thailand. At present, there are three Marist priests permanently assigned here, Fr. Frank Bird from New Zealand, Fr. Gil Casio and Fr. Hermes Sabud, both from the Philippines. We look forward to welcoming Bro. Denis O'Brien from New Zealand. We are blessed with the contribution of the two RNDM Sisters (Religieuses De Notre Dame des Missions - Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions) who have been collaborating with us for many years. We are also gifted with many volunteers from different parts of the world who have come to participate in the mission. At the moment we have two young teachers from New Zealand who have been helping in our education program.

A Grace and A Blessing

Being called to share in the communion of God's creative action of love and compassion to the vulnerable migrants in Ranong is a grace and a blessing for us Marists. Success or failure in our mission is not really the essential part of our ministry. What is essential is that we have the privilege to participate in God's mission here in Ranong. Let us continue to journey together, wherever the Holy Spirit leads us.



We ask for your prayers for this mission. And if you are able to help financially, please use the envelope in this magazine to send your gift. Please mark the inner flap of the envelope "Marist Foreign Missions."