

THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF EARLY MARIANISTS:

Reflections stimulated by Antonio Gascon; a review of the first volume of his history: *Historia general de la Compañía de María: La Compañía de María en el movimiento congregacional del siglo XIX – Fundación, misión y configuración institucional, 1817-1875* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones Marianistas, 2007).

Antonio Gascon Aranda's first volume of the general history of the Society of Mary is a notable achievement. It succeeds in bringing together the great amount of material and achieves a synthesis that is bound to serve for many years as authoritative and comprehensive. Far beyond usual congregational histories, it enriches our understanding with an immense amount of detail and provides a comprehensive pattern for interpreting our history. In my opinion this first volume amply justifies the effort made by the Society and by the Province of Madrid in freeing the author to undertake this massive work. It whets our appetites for subsequent volumes.

Toward a "Total History"

Reading this first volume, I was fascinated by the effort to situate Marianist history within vaster social, institutional, ecclesiastical, political and economic history. In order to appreciate and assess the achievements of the first Marianists, it is clearly of great importance to understand their social context. We need to understand not only the political and ecclesiastical milieux in which they worked, but also the material and social context of their daily lives. Gascon has taken great strides in this direction.

I believe future volumes of his history could be enriched by still greater use of the methods of the *Annales* school of historians (Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, et al.), aiming at "total history," with greater attention to socio-economic factors of everyday life. For example, Gascon makes many generalized references to diet, dress, domestic workers, styles of prayer, reading material, tobacco, length of hair, etc. We older Marianists may presume to know these things by experience, but we might be surprised by many details that have long been forgotten. And future generations who will use this history, most of them perhaps coming from non-European societies, will need more specifics.

I recall, for example, the surprise many of us felt in admiring the elegant dining-room cutlery with the initials of Stanislas College engraved on them, still kept at the General Administration. These are evident artefacts of a high *bourgeois* culture. Was this in any way typical of other Marianist communities? Similar questions about everyday life leap to mind: when did each Brother begin to have a private room? What could one take from one community to another? What was the actual content of the diet the nineteenth-century Marianists argued so much about? What can we learn from their characteristic style of architecture? From the chapels they decorated? From the prayer-books and even textbooks they edited? And, very importantly, how did their standard of living compare with that of the people they served?

Have Marianists always been “bourgeois”?

Gascon repeatedly asserts that the history of the Society during this period is a history of adaptation to what he calls *bourgeois* nineteenth-century society. In order to synthesize his vast amount of material, he makes abundant use of the term “*burgues*” (“*bourgeois*” – in what follows I will use the French term, more familiar in English) to characterize the social setting of early Marianists. This term, key to Gascon’s work, intrigued and stimulated me, while at the same time troubling me and awakening my critical consciousness.

What, exactly, is *bourgeois*? Is this conception truly adequate as a general category to describe the reality of the life and ministry of early Marianists? The critical remarks which follow mainly concern this issue, which is a key one in Gascon’s historiography. These thoughts are offered with the aim of questioning and nuancing the application of this category as an overarching concept for Marianist history. In no way do I intend these critical remarks to undercut my appreciation for Gascon’s work and my wholehearted admiration of it. At best, perhaps the following comments could prove of some value for future volumes of this massive, ongoing project.

Special difficulties for English-speaking translators and readers

The term and concept *bourgeois* presents some special difficulties in the English-speaking world. Although the term (normally italicized as a foreign import) is used and understood in English-language histories referring to the continent of Europe, it is hardly ever used by English-speaking culture in reference to itself. *Bourgeois* culture is seen as a typically continental phenomenon, a concept limited to cultures extraneous to the English-speaking heritage. Perhaps it is most closely approximated by the English term “Victorian,” which could hardly be used in reference to Marianist history.

Some possible English words and phrases that occurred to me as translations for *bourgeois* at various points in Gascon’s work included “conventional society,” “civil society,” “upstanding citizenry,” “moneyed middle-class,” “the establishment,” marked by “middle-class morality” and the pursuit of “upward mobility.” Adjectives that come to mind as equivalents for *bourgeois* at different points in Gascon’s text include “commercial,” “entrepreneurial,” “capitalist,” and “utilitarian.” Should we speak of “liberal capitalism” or “middle class values” or “conventional civic society”? The word *bourgeois* in English, even if italicized, can hardly carry such a plurality and density of meanings.

Much of the problem with this concept for English-speaking Catholics arises from the fact that before World War I their predecessors were massively of the poor or working classes, certainly not any kind of *bourgeoisie*. The mass of English-speaking Catholics were either peasant farmers (e.g. in Ireland or on the American frontier) or members of the working class. In the Industrial Revolution there certainly arose in England and America a moneyed middle-class, but it was not Catholic. It dominated society, but rejected any Catholic values. Nineteenth-century Catholic life in the English-speaking world largely developed as a defense against it. Though there were

individually prosperous Catholics and some few Catholic descendants of the land-owning English nobility, the cultural tone of English-speaking Catholicism was set by the peasant and working classes. A tiny minority, slightly bolstered in England by the Oxford Movement, formed an intellectual elite with a mindset that could possibly be compared to that of the continental ultramontane Catholic *bourgeoisie*, but its influence on ordinary ecclesial life was minimal. In America, some spoke sneeringly of “lace-curtain Irish,” to characterize working class immigrants with pretensions to the culture of a higher social class. They never set the tone of Catholic cultural life, and certainly Marianists had little contact with them.

“Bourgeois” Society: a Polyvalent and Controversial Concept

Even for those of continental European cultures, in Gascon’s usage the term *bourgeois* appears to me overworked and polyvalent. Elements of *bourgeois* society, as he characterizes it, include such heterogeneous matters as sentimentality, a preoccupation with order, respect and industriousness, a moderate option for progressivism, modernity, liberalism, democracy, industrialization, *laissez-faire* capitalism and staunch ultramontane devotional Catholicism. Gascon notes that the nineteenth-century *bourgeoisie* was interested in progress, modernity, wealth, social and economic development; it opted for order, development, economic expansion and public utility. He describes certain noteworthy characteristics of early industrialization (centralization, uniformity, discipline, regularity, productivity) as “*bourgeois* principles of order” (cf. pp. 401-11) and “conditions for prosperity” (p. 725). Despite the openness of *bourgeois* ideology to industrial progress and economic development, he shows how the *bourgeois* ideology was anti-socialist, anti-radical, preoccupied instead with order, stability, usefulness and professionalism.

In many forceful passages Gascon propounds, formulates and reformulates his thesis about Marianist life as a reflection of *bourgeois* society. He speaks, in terms that evoke Max Weber’s descriptions of the Protestant ethic, of a Catholic “*bourgeois* mentality that imposes the values of work, accumulation of wealth and upward social mobility” (p. 284).and of “the *bourgeois ethos*: a representation of life in which the virtues have no other aim than the increase of wealth by means of practical skills, work, order, calculation and foresight in economic matters” (p. 448). The *bourgeoisie*, he notes, defended private property as an inalienable value, fostering financial profit and offering security as the sole principles to be defended by Civil Law. With reference to the first years of the Third Republic, he speaks of a *bourgeois* republican “moral order,” dedicated to *laissez-faire* economics, social stability, prosperity, and opportunism (p. 745), and of a “conservative regime in the hands of the *grande [sic – is this the same as haute?] bourgeoisie*, which pursued a political program corresponding to their class interests, without paying attention to the needs of farmers, the *petite bourgeoisie* and the working class” (p. 746).

Applying this mentality to religious life, Gascon claims that “the same principles of order and good administration, work, frugality and efficiency in mission came to characterize nineteenth-century religious life, as a perfect inculturation of the *bourgeois* outlook on life” (p. 448). As for the Society of Mary, he characterizes the period after 1871 as one of “full adaptation of Marianist life and mission to the culture of the *bourgeoisie*” (p. 744).

Many of these points were undoubtedly true for some places and among much of the top Marianist leadership. However, we must not forget that very few Marianist religious who entered the Society before 1950 actually grew up in *bourgeois* families. I do not believe this conception of adaptation to *bourgeois* culture can be extended universally to Marianist history. To me the concept of *bourgeois* culture, as used by Gascon, seems over-generalized, amorphous and encyclopaedic. In the last analysis, is he saying anything more than that the early generations of Marianists participated in the typical, conventional culture of their time?

Were Nineteenth-century Marianists uniformly “bourgeois”?

In any case, even accepting its polyvalence and lack of clarity, I wonder if the category of “*bourgeois* society” is really accurate as a general concept describing the earliest generations of Marianist life.

In France, as Gascon himself shows, the vast majority of early Marianists up to the 1870’s worked in primary education in rural villages with the children of farmers, either petty landowning cultivators or agricultural hired laborers. Some other Marianists in this early period worked with urban working-class children, with orphans or in schools for “arts and trades.” In many towns, it appears that the school was seen as a solution to “civilize” and train working-class children to become useful citizens. Perhaps you could argue that the mentality and leading ideas in education were those of the *bourgeois* establishment, but I believe that most French Marianists of the first two generations worked with farmers and working-class people, not with the *bourgeoisie*. Marianists aimed consciously to Christianize them, while school patrons wanted to “civilize” them.

Gascon is interested in showing how the *bourgeois* way of life required universal education and how Marianist schools thus served to promote what he calls the *bourgeois* development of Catholic society. He makes it clear that, like many new nineteenth-century religious congregations, Marianists were part of the story of modernizing Catholicism, taking up concrete evangelizing tasks in works of social usefulness, preparing students for such typically modern careers as merchants, businessmen, entrepreneurs, railroad employees, etc. (p. 498). All this is true enough. Each of the heterogeneous currents and mentalities Gascon characterizes as *bourgeois* is clear in nineteenth-century European society and each exerted its influence on Marianists in certain eras. But in the early generations most Marianists were not working with *bourgeois* Catholics.

The Bourgeoisie as beneficiaries of a Marianist reorientation

A conscious option for *bourgeois* society and *bourgeois* values seems certainly applicable to all that we know of that brilliant but quirky first Marianist educator, Jean-Baptiste Lalanne. Gascon tells us that his projects “aimed to prepare young people for work in the modern industrial and commercial economy,” inculcating “a *bourgeois* practical sense of ‘the beautiful, the useful, and the possible’” (p.565). Following Lalanne’s lead, some thought that *bourgeois* education was the whole *raison d’être* of

the Society of Mary. Gascon tells us that “in 1876 Bro. Bel argued that the Society of Mary had been founded to direct its educational works toward the *bourgeoisie*; since the poor classes were served by the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the nobility by the Jesuits” (p. 453).

Gascon shows us that Bel’s argument was strongly countered by many other contemporary Marianists, including those in high authority, but still he appears to agree with Bel inasmuch as “...the *bourgeoisie* needed secondary and higher education in order to prepare its sons for the direction and management of family businesses, to take up posts in public administration and in the branches of civil government, and to practice the liberal professions in society” (p. 454). .

Gascon’s thesis seems to take Stanislas College under Lalanne and his successors in the period 1854-1903 as the paradigm of the Marianist mission, replicated or imitated in such diverse settings as Madrid, Cadiz, San Sebastian, Rome, Pallanza, Cannes, and foreshadowed already at Bordeaux, Layrac and Saint-Remy. Were such undoubtedly *bourgeois* works the focus of the Marianist mission everywhere and from the beginning? Or were they rather, for many Marianists, an unusual and prestigious exception?

After the 1870’s, because of the annexation of Alsace to the Prussian Empire and because of changes in French legislation initiated by anti-clerical politicians, schools in the countryside for peasants and working classes in France were practically closed to the ministry of religious. As a consequence, French Marianists of the third generation moved up the social ladder, into larger communities serving fee-paying urban institutions that catered to a more moneyed middle class. A few of these establishments had already been founded by Lalanne and others, and soon this type of work for the service of the French Catholic *bourgeoisie* multiplied.

In some places and periods, Gascon makes it clear that Marianist religious life was massively and consciously committed to developing a classic type of *bourgeois* society and ensuring its linkage to Catholic faith. The earliest Marianist foundations in Spain and Italy, made in the 1880’s, clearly reflect this mentality. These foundations were aimed at the Catholic *bourgeoisie*, with few exceptions, from the beginning.

A similar stance characterized some Marianist works beyond Europe. For example, our foundations in North Africa, which were numerous during a short period, from the 1880’s until World War I, seemed to cater primarily to the European landowners, without excluding Arabs and others. This stance may have influenced our beginnings in Japan, where we tried to assist a modernizing and westernizing elite.

Over-generalization of the Bourgeois Category

True as this somewhat ambiguous *bourgeois* conception of Marianist life and mission may be for such important foreign foundations and for much of France in the era of the Third Republic and of Fr. Simler, I don’t think it applies to many other historic Marianist situations. In this sense, the first volume of Gascon’s history might be criticized as being a bit one-sided, discounting an important dimension of social concern for poorer and more marginalized people in our history.

I believe that Gascon over-generalizes when he extrapolates the *bourgeois* category, so characteristic of late nineteenth-century France, in at least two directions: 1) beforehand, to the first generations of the Society in France (see above), and 2) to all other cultural areas outside of France, including the development of the Society in America, Switzerland, Austria, and Belgium - countries where the dominant cultural influence of France was more controversial.

To understand the social context of our charism we must look closely at the facts more than the rhetoric. Quite naturally, rhetoric is always controlled by the higher and more educated strata of society, which in the nineteenth century may perhaps be said to have used a *bourgeois* vocabulary and produced a *bourgeois* advertising campaign to attain its purposes.

In reality, our first foundations outside France, in Switzerland and the United States, and to some extent in German-speaking lands, came close to the earlier French model, focused on peasants and the working class rather than on anything parallel to the French *bourgeoisie*.

In particular I would argue, in accord with Kauffmann's key study of Marianists in the United States, that the Society of Mary in that country was not much concerned with the "middle class" till World War I. Citing Kauffmann, who avoids the word *bourgeois*, Gascon tries to argue that late-nineteenth-century Marianists on the frontier in Texas aimed to "educate in the *bourgeois* values of discipline, civic morality, respect for authority and property" (pp. 519-20, note 385). The values were present, true enough; but I do not believe anyone in America thought of these values as *bourgeois*. Most would have rejected the label. The students described in Kauffmann's passage were largely Mexican-Americans, coming from rural backgrounds, and definitely poor. What is to be gained by considering them as somehow *bourgeois*?

In short, the focus on the traditionalist moneyed *bourgeoisie* did not happen according to the French pattern in some large parts of the Marianist world. What happened instead was that farmers and working class people educated by Marianists gradually moved up the social ladder, and their children became "middle class" but without many of the characteristics of the traditionalist, archconservative moneyed European *bourgeoisie*. In the United States, Canada, Belgium and the German-speaking world, Marianists continued focusing primarily on farmers and the working class up to the Second World War. In these countries, I believe Gascon's *bourgeois* concept might come closer to being applicable to Marianists at a much later time, in the twentieth century (perhaps sometime between the two Wars), but not during the nineteenth century.

Implications for the understanding of our charism

I believe this is not only a question of historiography. It shows something about our charism. The first generation of Marianists focused on farmers and working class people, in a context of a modernizing but staunch Catholicism. Father Chaminade memorably referred to them as "the popular classes who are the most numerous and the most neglected" (letter to Pope Gregory XVI, September 16, 1838). Some like Lalanne

and Brougnon-Perriere wanted to deal with the more moneyed middle class, but this focus did not prevail generally until much later and then only in certain places.

In many early manifestations of the Marianist charism and in Chaminade himself, there is a thrust in favour of poorer people, the working class, and even sometimes the societally marginal. One needs only look at the foundations the Founder made and the good works he organized in order to verify this. Blessed Father Chaminade himself had many connections with the moneyed middle class, and he did not exclude the service of the *bourgeoisie*; but he certainly did not privilege them. Marianist history should not portray the Founder and his first disciples under the rubric of a doubtful and loosely defined category that might be more appropriate for later eras.

Antonio Gascon's history is ground breaking and comprehensive. It provides us with an indispensable synthetic tool for all future Marianist studies. I hope that future volumes will be able to locate the work of successive generations of Marianists within a more precise and nuanced social context.

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