

The Marianist Person at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

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Study Guide

Chapter 1—The Person in Marianist Tradition

1. As a twenty-first century reader of the 1839 Constitution we can easily see how it is time-bound—a product of its culture. Likewise, Simler's Rule of 1891 reflects his time and his priority on "filial piety." It's often difficult, however, to recognize the bias of one's one time (pp. 25-33).

What do you think is universal (for all times and all places) about the current Rule of 1983? What might be cultural biases?

2. The Rule of 1839 described two principal objects of the SM as:
 - A. to raise members to evangelical perfection
 - B. to labor in the world at the salvation of souls

Recognizing that human nature is weak, however, this Rule also sought to guard against human laxity by adding the Third Object – *the rules of precaution and reserve*. The Rule of 1983, however, starts from a different basic assumption. Rather than strictly structure the SM's time and surroundings, it notes the value of understanding the ways of the world, but then urges Marianists to be vigilant so that "the norms, customs, and habits of the world will not weaken or tarnish the power of His word" (p. 35).

Ideally, we will always be true to our commitments, and interior motivation will be sufficient, but indeed human nature is still weak at times and needs supports. What temporal decisions or routines have you found helpful to keep you motivated and true to your commitments?

3. Marianists of the twenty-first century strive to embrace the goodness of the world while still being an eschatological witness to what waits for us beyond this world. Friendships, a supportive environment, engagement with the world, decisions made through dialogue, receptivity, adaptability, working against societal injustices, and creativity are some of the ways contemporary Marianists find the strength and wisdom to effectively carry out the Marianist mission today (pp. 36-39).

Which of these elements are you good at?

Which are a struggle for you? Are there others?

4. The essential is the interior. But “in current Marianist anthropology the interior and exterior require each other. The interior gives meaning, depth and spirit to the exterior...but the exterior gives shape and symbolic expression to the interior” (p. 38).

Think of a time that you saw your interior spiritual life and exterior apostolate support each other in your ministry.

Chapter 2–The Person in the Vision of Vatican II

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (and women) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

1. The changes of Vatican II paralleled the paradigm shift of Marianist culture described in Chapter 1 especially the shift from church as institution to church as *people of God*. How old were you during Vatican II (1964-1965)?

Do you remember the changes as current events or history?

In your opinion what was the most significant change in the Church as a result of Vatican II? (For background see *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, SJ)

If Vatican II had not happened what do you think would have happened to the Church?

Do you think it's time for Vatican III?

2. In the late 1960s Western society became more secularized. This included respecting the dignity, freedom and creativity of the secular, refusing to use God or the sacred as an excuse to escape human responsibility or to cover our ignorance and limitation. Freedom and authentic human community became priorities (p. 33). These values probably seem intuitive to the Western twenty-first century mind, but they come at a price.

For residents of "First World" countries:

A. Burden: When have you felt it a burden to know that the answer to a vexing problem might not only require prayer but also rigorous intellectual effort, learning new technology, or responding to the complexity of international politics and economics?

B. Complexity: Because we understand many more sides of a debate it makes the clarity of who is right and who is wrong much more complex. Consider current issues like:

- How can we stop sweatshop labor without hurting the meager livelihoods of individual families?
- Should we support advancements in medical research that will save lives but may require the destruction of human embryos? When does life begin?
- Is military intervention acceptable in another country's affairs in order to redress an injustice?

For residents of developing countries:

A. Can you identify any significant losses to your culture and faith as a result of the influence of technological advances and Western influences?

B. What are some improvements and gains that Western knowledge has brought to your country that can be used to further the mission of Christ?

3. Have you ever traveled or lived in a foreign country, especially a "third world" country? How did that experience impact your faith? If you haven't traveled, talk with someone from a developing country about their culture and faith.

Do you agree with Bihl that the needs of the Church in developing or Asian countries are significantly different than Western countries?

Consider something Westerners could learn from another culture that would deepen their faith.

Consider something you would like to share with a Catholic from another culture that they might not otherwise know.

Chapter 3 – Persons in Relation

Most likely you thought you understood the concept of person before you read this chapter. (I did.) Now it gets a little more complicated. Remember that these are theological approaches to the complex relationship between God and humankind. In some ways it's very simple but theologians always want to extract as much meaning as possible about our relationship with God. Don't give up.

1. Panikkar makes the distinction between the words *individual* and *person*. An individual is more of a Western concept of “autonomous center of consciousness.” In other words, the individual is self-contained and operates independently of others. On the other hand, a person has an identity that includes relationships to other people. (Family systems theory makes a similar point in saying that no one acts in isolation. If one person in a family – or community – changes, this will effect the dynamics of everyone else in the group. (See Bowen, Murray, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice for a fuller development of family systems theory.) What does this mean for a Marianist? Simply that the relationships we have (with our family, our community, our enemies, the earth) are part of our identity. Others have a claim on us and we them. We act in isolation or complete independence only at peril to the common good (pp. 53-55).

Who are the people who have formed you or influenced you in your faith? Do not consider only those who have had a positive influence, but also those who may have impacted you negatively. Consider also experiences of loss. Even bad relationships shape our identity.

If you're still confused, try thinking of *person* as the body of Christ in the scriptural sense in that it is made up of many members (1Cor 12:12-30). Another approach would be to meditate on the concept of the communion of saints and how we are connected with those who have gone before and will come after us.

2. Catherine LaCugna's emphasizes the Trinitarian insight to the human person. We start with the Christian belief that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Since God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at its core God is in loving and fruitful relationship. Thus, we who take our identity from God are called to:
 - be a creative force in the world
 - sacrifice ourselves for our brothers and sisters
 - sustain the Spirit of God through generations

We cannot, however, do this alone, but only in relationship with our elders, our peers, and those we mentor – and sometimes the child will mentor the elder as Mary formed Christ and in turn was formed by him. Remember that Jesus entered into relationship with the apostles, his disciples, and most closely we assume, with his mother (pp. 56-62).

When have you been in a creative relationship?

When have you been in a sacrificial relationship?

When have you been in a relationship that sustained you and motivated you to keep on with the mission even when you were tired or discouraged?

3. Christianity is not just a “me and God” experience. Zizioulas talks about this openness to reach beyond oneself and move toward communion as ecstasis. Transcending the limits of self means putting oneself in “right relationships—to God, to the cosmos, to other human beings, to ourselves.” This takes self discipline since we must at times die to self to enter into communion with another (pp 63-64).

In the pursuit of holiness and spiritual depth it is sometimes tempting to become fixated on personal feelings of religious ecstasy or awe and individual devotional practices trying always to move up the spiritual ladder of perfection. Refocusing on the needs of the other can balance what might become self-absorption.

Have you ever had an emotional experience of God’s presence? If so, fine. Remember it but don’t rest in it.

If not, don’t berate yourself. God often speaks subtly and obliquely or through your circumstances or other people. God has not been absent, merely disguised.

4. As Sandra Schneiders reminds us, feminist theology is not just about women. It is about the powerful and the powerless, the superior and the inferior. For much of history men have been in the position of power and women have been the dependent ones. That is why women have identified with this theology. Mary shows us the value of siding with the powerless in her Magnificat as she describes God as the one who pulls the princes from their thrones and raises the lowly, fills the starving with good things and sends the rich away empty (pp. 64-66).

When have you felt powerless?

When have you aligned yourself with the powerless?

When have you been aligned (willing or not) with the powerful? (Consider your gender, country, and social status for starters.)

5. Based on your life experience, how would you state the main point of this chapter in one sentence?

Chapter 4–The Person and Freedom

1. According to Gregory of Nyssa, God is entirely free and spontaneous, not moved by compulsions and constraints. Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, therefore, we share in this divine freedom through the choices we make. Through these choices we create ourselves. But humans also “share in the labors and strains of the whole cosmos through their bodily nature.” This puts us in the middle. We have a responsibility to create and build the Kingdom of God on earth. It seems like an insurmountable task but is made possible because the Holy Spirit is with us (pp. 67-73).

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of changing the world for the better?

What has helped you move beyond discouragement or obstacles?

In hindsight, how do you think the Holy Spirit might have been working in you?

2. Rahner takes the concept of personal freedom to its ultimate stage – freely giving oneself totally to God. He calls this *self-bestowal* or *self-donation*. For Marianists it is akin to the work of purification. Making choices is the way that we humans actualize this freedom, but because we are free the ultimate choice that is either for the good (God) or not, cannot be revoked. Free will is a daunting gift.

Think of some choices you’ve made that led you toward God or away from God.

Do you think the ultimate donation of self comes at the time of death or can it be made before then?

3. Panikkar believes that true freedom is detached from “tradition, customs, laws, and theology.” It is a mystical freedom which means that although the mystic may not need the laws and customs, he or she chooses to keep them anyway out of respect for the community (p. 79). This detachment leads to transhistorical consciousness in which the mystic, although living in the present, is not bound to it. Panikkar understands freedom as “taking great risks and living without security.” By living in the present we are freed of past laws, teachings, customs, and future fears. This doesn’t mean ignoring the past but rather not being bound by it.

Have you ever decided to keep a spiritual devotion for the sake of others?

4. What gives you security in your current life? What risks can you imagine taking that would stretch you but threaten your security? Can you think of risks that are not worth taking or that would be foolish to take?

Chapter 5–Liberation and Freedom

1. In order to free the person liberation theology insists that we must free the world from oppression and this starts with social analyses. “It seeks to uncover the sources of oppression in a given social institution” (p. 86). Liberation theology does not pretend to be neutral or unbiased as it is always done from the side of the poor (or other oppressed group).

When have you experienced oppression as an individual or part of a group? Consider times when someone else had power over you and you felt treated unfairly (perhaps in employment, schooling, your family, or a project on which you were working).

How did your experience weaken or strengthen your faith?

Do you still hold bitterness toward your oppressor? If so, does this chapter give you any ideas of how to move beyond anger or bitterness?

2. What do you think of the premise of liberation theology that the Church cannot remain neutral in politics but is called to take an active role in redeeming social structures (pp. 85-86)?

What if Christians of good will agree that they should work to overcome the injustice of poverty in your country, yet they differ on the means? Some may believe that working within the system (or supporting a particular candidate) will best bring about the desired change, while others believe that only by bringing down a corrupt system (or voting for the opposing candidate) will achieve the desired goal. Even with good social analysis there might not be agreement.

What would be a “Marianist” response to such a situation?

Should the Church maintain neutrality?

What would you do if Marianists in your community disagree with your analysis?

3. Bihl presents two different understandings of original sin:
 - A. The Pelagians honor the free will of the individual saying that salvation comes to us only because we choose it.
 - B. Augustine sought to preserve the absolute freedom of God to save and thus was wholly a matter of God’s electing grace.

Gregory of Nyssa offers a third view of original sin which avoids the Pelagian trap of utter self-sufficiency of the human individual but maintains the freedom of the individual. How would you explain Gregory’s view of original sin to a high school student? Do you agree with Gregory of Nyssa’s view or do you have another viewpoint?

4. Such theological debates may at times sound reminiscent of the verbal jousting in which the Scribes and Pharisees often tried to trap Jesus. Reflecting on the Gospels, how do you think Jesus would have responded to this discussion of original sin?

Chapter 6–Concluding Thoughts

1. How would you respond to Bihl’s critique of liberation theology that the preferential option for the poor redresses an imbalance in our world but that it is unfair to absolutize the political as the only thing that counts? Do you see any other ways of being “for the poor” without crowding out the contemplative or mystical insights of the French School of Spirituality?

On a scale of 1–10 with 1 being fully on the side of liberation theology and 10 being the French School of Spirituality where would you put yourself? Where would you put Marianists as a whole?

Perhaps these aren’t the only two poles. Would you like to add a third or fourth spiritual framework?

2. Bihl responds to Jose Maria Arnaiz who wanted a fuller grounding in philosophical anthropology and in particular a Marianist anthropology by saying that he doesn’t believe there is a Marianist anthropology but rather the gift of the Marianist charism is lived out through *mythos* not *logos*. It is real and significant but not anthropology.

Does this answer disturb you, confirm your thinking, stimulate your thinking, or befuddle you? Why?

3. All of this can feel rather confusing and perhaps even irrelevant as you try daily to be the best Marianist you can be – teaching, studying, working among the poor either at home or in a foreign country, trying to mend broken relationships, and build community. Some may find the academic study of theology stimulating, others just find it tiresome. Thankfully our worth and vocation is not measured by how much we know but how much we care for each other. For those who travel a different path to understanding perhaps this excerpt from *The Journey* by Mary Oliver will speak to you.

*One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice--
But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do,
...and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,
determined to do the only thing you could do--
determined to save the only life you could save.*

Look into yourself for the theology of the person that resonates with you. Test it out on others but don’t impose it on them. Perhaps you will be the one to articulate a Marianist anthropology in ways that others will say, Yes, now I understand.

The Journey

One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice--
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.

"Mend my life!" each voice cried.

But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations,
though their melancholy was terrible.

It was already late enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.

But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,
determined to do the only thing you could do--
determined to save the only life you could save.

By Mary Oliver