

Let the Brothers of Mary Call No Man “Father”

by Bernard J. Lee, SM

1. Introduction

I presume a simple description of spirituality: **a perspective from which faith is lived**. It has a public character because a faith perspective is called “spirituality” only when it leaves its mark upon the communities and individuals who live it. Thus, it is others—not the one living it—that give the perspective public validity by naming it “spirituality” when they interpret that the mark it leaves upon historical lives is a gospel mark.

“Marianist spirituality” means that a spirituality’s faith perspective is profoundly shaped by the Marianist deep story and that the Marianist story makes that faith-interpretation possible. That is most likely to happen, to borrow the words of the Jewish writer Edmund Jabes, when historical circumstances force us to tease out of our heritage “what is most hazardous and most original.” It is named “Marianist spirituality” by those who note and celebrate its palpable presence in the world. Marianist spirituality belongs to the public as well as the private life of Marianist communities.

2. The Hermeneutics of Retrieval

It is interesting to me, because I had not planned it this way, that I am writing the first draft of these reflections in Europe after attending the Fourth Congress of European Basic Christian Communities, held at the Marianist Institute Ste-Marie in Paris (Antony). I have sensed for a long time that Marianist religious life was incubated in the energies and counter-energies of the French Revolution. Our deep story is cradled there. A hermeneutics of retrieval of our deep story requires reassessing that formative event in Western culture.

The French Revolution was an expression in France of social reconstruction of the body politic occurring pervasively in Western culture. Anything that deconstructs and reconstructs the body politic where Christians dwell cannot but affect as well the body politic of the Body of Christ. Today one still sees everywhere in old Paris chiseled inscriptions of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. In a recent publication (from Belgium), Jean Ancion uses *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* to note the character of European basic Christian communities. There is an essential modern élan in these three famous words of the French Revolution that call for the end of feudalism and for new ways of being together. What is both “hazardous” and original in Marianist spirituality has a lot to do with that.

I also acknowledge hermeneutically that my perspective, as a product of U.S. culture and history, shapes the retrieval I am undertaking. While I believe that the feminist critique of patriarchy is a valid ideology critique of culture, I also note that the literature of this critique is especially large in my own culture.

3. The Thesis

The thesis is that the Marianist story is radically open to the perspective of “discipleship of equals” as a way of living the Good News of Jesus Christ, an exploration of which the contemporary Church is in

great need, especially in the infrastructure of leadership and ministry. The “Brothers of Mary” know some things about “calling no man ‘Father,’” as an experience of the presbyterate that comes without rank, and as a community of men who recognize and value the equal role of the feminine in the structure of human experience (which is not yet to claim that the equality of women is everywhere defended and implemented in their own Marianist situations).

Marianists know something profound about true *égalité* expressed in daily life between those who are not ordained and those who are. There is an unquestioned mutuality between us. In our origins we found a way out of the loop of clericalism. In the United States this mutuality is named in the almost folkloric popular name, “Brothers of Mary.” No Marianist priest ever felt not included among the “brothers” of the Brothers of Mary. Analogously, there is a growing mutuality between professed religious Marianists and lay Marianists, grounded in SM history, but already transcending the earlier intimations of such mutuality.

This way of being together without ranking is what contemporary exegetes sometimes refer to as the “discipleship of equals” among the followers of Jesus Christ. And if there is even a hint of inequality in the New Testament, it is that leaders serve the community, as it were, from below. But that names function and not rank. The Church at large has an overwhelming need to relearn this mutuality.

It is also my experience that Marianist men have instinctively valued and welcomed “the feminine” in our lives. It appears especially in nurturing patterns in our apostolic behaviors. These nurturing and receptive attitudes are promoted and reinforced by the symbolic structure of Marianist devotion to Mary. We often deal with “the feminine” clumsily, and not always well. But in terms of spirituality, I see here some formed energies that link us with our sisters in the rejection of patriarchy as a social system. The rejection of patriarchy is a contemporary expression of Jesus’ discipleship of equals.

These two perspectives—nonclerical structures and male appreciation of the feminine—have been hanging around in the Marianist deep story from the beginning. But we have not articulated them thus from the front of Marianist consciousness. These two perspectives come together in one of the sayings of Jesus that comes into new focus in our age: “Call no human being ‘father.’ You have only one father and that one is in heaven. All of you are siblings.” This “saying of Jesus,” writes Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, “uses the ‘father’ name of God not as a legitimation for existing patriarchal power structures in society or church but as a critical subversion of all structures of domination.”

I am suggesting that Marianist spirituality in our time is called to radicalize the popular name in which the U.S. provinces once took such delight, “Brothers of Mary.” We might let go completely of the title “father” among us as a designation for an ordained member of the community. We might choose out of a Marianist spirituality to live resolutely beyond all the insistent forms of patriarchy, and to invite others to live with us into these meanings that belong to a new and equal People of God.

I will develop this thesis in the sections that follow.

4. The Socio-Historical Character of Spirituality

I have two working assumptions about all spirituality, and I would like to name them.

First, a spirituality is a social phenomenon. To be sure, it is equally personal. Individuals live it. But it arises out of a community's life. It is born out of a community's faith-experiment with the Christ event.

Spirituality is social for another reason. It is a way of living; but, as I indicated just above, it doesn't get credit for being a spirituality until it is perceived by others as significant, effective, and transforming.

Second, spirituality is time-bound. It is a way in which God's reign takes shape in particular historical circumstances. It is never timeless. What David Tracy says of a classic is also true of a spirituality: it cannot be timeless, but it can prove itself to be perennially timely through a lot of different historical circumstances.

There are at least two features of perennial timeliness. First, the intuitions at work in the story are large enough in stature to cast shadows upon the ranging rows of life ahead, even way ahead. Second, there are committed people with fecund religious imagination and ample daring to write a new story for a new age when it is the season. The community must allow the daring to succeed. And each time the new story "takes," the heritage is enlarged.

No spirituality is intrinsically forever. Time alone passes judgment on whether a spirituality has classic proportions.

5. Scripture and the Discipleship of Equals

I named above the directives of the Matthean Jesus: never give parental status to anyone in an adult community because all of us are siblings. "Siblings" is the metaphor that tells the truth about us as children of one parent, God. However, even a community of siblings cannot carry on without some structures and differentiations. And in that framework, Jesus does offer images for how power should function in a community.

There is reasonable consensus in New Testament exegetes and historians of early church history that Jesus gave no organizational structure to his followers, only some images which guide the evolution: shepherd, steward, and servant. Servant is the most developed image. The shepherd image underscores the preferential option for the sheep in trouble. The steward image reminds leaders that they do not own what they help care for, though they are under requirement to care well. The servant image tells leaders that they have no privilege that places them above the community. If anything, they are below, and are there for service. There aren't leaders on the one hand and subjects on the other.

Jesus named acceptable images for leadership functions. But he rejected "father" as an image because it de-equalizes. There is only one father for all people, and that one is in heaven. The effect of God's parenthood is that all of us are siblings. Except for the true parenting of children, our social order should not have parental leaders.

The dominant culture of the Mediterranean world in the first century CE is so assertive that, even though Paul can insist that Baptism into Christ forbids giving or withholding privilege on the basis of race, social class, or gender (Gal 3:25-28), he can yet be sufficiently culture-bound to say that a man is the head of a woman and that woman was created for the sake of man and not vice-versa (I Cor 11:2-15). Within the New Testament texts themselves we note some patriarchal development. In the deuterio-Pauline pastoral letters, which may be the most recent New Testament materials, especially the two letters to Timothy, the *paterfamilias* has become the model for church leadership.

The highly “hazardous” (to dominant presuppositions) and original notion of a discipleship of equals was derived, I gather, from Jesus’ religious experience of God as his Father and as everyone’s Father. He paced out the inexorable logic of God’s universal parenthood to radicalize the siblinghood of all human beings. All social realities, not just religious communities, are redeemed when our siblinghood is honored in how power functions.

6. The Discipleship of Equals Emerging from “Historical Hibernation”

If the discipleship of equals has not been palpable in church history (and it surely hasn’t), we must at least acknowledge that it is very, very difficult to affirm a social construction of church reality that butts against dominant culture on the darkest of issues, that of power and its functions. It was difficult enough for Christians in their earliest years. But once empire and church made adhesive alliances in the early fourth century (Constantine’s “conversion”), it has been an uphill battle ever since.

Apart from a flowering of democracy in Greece several centuries BCE (with a few faint analogues in Swiss history), the widespread shape of social order in Western culture involves the leader (Emperors, Queens/Kings, Princes, Dukes, Tyrants, Generals, Feudal Lords, etc.) and the leader’s subjects. The discipleship of equals slumbers in a long winter sleep.

It would be crass to say too simply that Vatican II caught up with the French Revolution, but there are elements of that. Vatican I, in a defensive mode about institutional structures, reaffirmed the position that the role of the hierarchy is to lead, teach, and govern. The implication is that the role of the laity is to be led, to be taught, and to be governed.

The Catholic Action Movement that I knew as a young Catholic, for all that was splendid about its empowering activities, nonetheless reflected a ranked ecclesiology. Only the hierarchy had mission by right. The Catholic Action Movement gave lay Catholics the opportunity to participate in the apostolate of the hierarchy. Laity had no mission of their own. This is still a leader/subject ecclesiology.

The People of God ecclesiology of Vatican II underscores what all Christians have in common through their Baptism, and that includes the right and duty for stewardship of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Lay Christians need not borrow mission from the hierarchy, because one cannot borrow what one already owns.

I want to say clearly that I am not proposing that the Church become exactly like any modern form of democracy. The “American Heresy” is a very naive form of that claim. I do not know what form church

order should take, and neither does anyone else. But present order, unlike original church order, is not a living sacrament of the discipleship of equals. Social order is never “merely” a structure. It is a way of being in the world among people. In terms of this paper, spirituality can easily embrace social order as it proposes a perspective from which to fashion a social order. The discipleship of equals, as Jesus’ metaphors for community order indicate, is a consequence of who God is to Jesus and to us in Jesus, a parent whose parenthood radically and pervasively “siblingizes” all our relationships, without remainder. Social order needs disclose the structure of siblinghood.

The equality of the discipleship of equals does not suppress real differences in functions, gifts, and roles. The real differences must, however, serve rather than disturb our siblinghood. The quality of women in the discipleship of equals is the thorniest of issues confronting institutional culture today in the Catholic Church.

Sadly, at decisive times when the institutional Church might have been interacting receptively (and critically) with new movements in culture, it responded reactively and defensively. In the throes of the Counter-Reformation, the Church’s official response to the scientific revolution was dismal. Under vicious attack both ideologically and physically during the French Revolution, the Church did not attend to the finer instincts of the new spirit of the 18th century. Violence does not, of course, encourage openness; and the violence of the Revolution was not only fierce but also was often directed against the Church. It is interesting to recall that after the Revolution King Louis XVIII wanted to make the famous Madeleine in Paris a National Shrine of Atonement for the ravages of the Revolution against the Church.

Still again in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Western mind was learning about historical consciousness and fending for the first time with developmental models of reality, the Church was reacting to its loss of land and the reduction of its political influence. It fended off the historicization of its own reality. The Syllabus of Errors and Pius X’s writings against Modernism were stinging and unbalanced rebukes of the new learning that was creating the modern mind. The Oath against Modernism was only removed by Paul VI after Vatican II.

But let us back up to Marianist origins and the French Revolution, when in secular culture a new consciousness was being incubated, and subjects demanded to be citizens. The hibernation of the discipleship of equals heard the first crackle of spring.

7. Marianist Origins

I do not doubt that William Joseph Chaminade deeply resented and resisted the vitriolic attacks of the Revolution on the Church. He suffered greatly from the Revolution in his own life. If the French Revolution fought for a new vision, it nonetheless did so with old violence and jaded intentions. The Napoleonic years that followed were not much kinder. When Napoleon was visited by the wrath of clergy, he gave greater power over them to Rome in the Concordat of 1801. In effect, the Concordat made local churches into administrative units of the Vatican, rather than apostolic churches whose leaders possessed apostolic authority, not delegated-from-Rome authority. Clericalism intensified, the very feature of the Church that was such an irritant to the Revolution.

Chaminade was a very practical man, as the collected letters make clear. There are many pages dealing with practical matters of finances and property for every one page that addresses explicit religious concerns. He resourced himself in the theology and spirituality of his day. His was of practical rather than theoretical intelligence. He led from sound instinct. He learned from the spirit of the French Revolution more than he has been given credit for.

In his study of the French Revolution, Simon Schama summarizes the underlying motif: subjects become citizens. *Liberté, fraternité, and égalité* are the marks of those who participate in the processes that shape human life. This is the end of feudalism, of lords and subjects. Government should be there for the people, not people for those who govern. This is not just a French phenomenon. It is a transformation of instincts in Western culture and the creation of a new sense of social order in which government is meant to serve, not to be served. It is a same spirit that energizes the American Revolution and drives the intellectual life of many of the social philosophers of the age. The French Revolution expresses a change in cultural consciousness. Western culture's embodiments of this consciousness have all been flawed (and always will be!); but that *élan* has remained a driving dynamic in the public will, as recently as the demise of the Soviet Union and the continuing struggles against capitalist feudalism in Latin America.

As the Western culture brought feudalism to a close, the Church reaffirmed its feudal order and defended its monarchical social order with the sacred canopy of scriptural texts. Bishops, Cardinals, and the Pope continued to wear royal clothes; they maintained the rhetoric of aristocracy: "Your Excellence," "Your Eminence," and "Your Holiness."

What I find enduringly remarkable in this time of ecclesial defensiveness is a new religious congregation in which the ordained have role, but no rank and privilege other than what church law imposed from outside on the inner life of the Society of Mary. Chaminade founded a new religious congregation that was internally without the feudal, clerical patterns that continued to trademark ecclesial order. I do not think this was a theoretical decision for Chaminade, but a result of practical, political sensibilities—in short, a flowering of prophetic imagination.

Chaminade's original instinct was that there should be no distinctive religious garb; when pushed on it, the standardization was along the lines of daily wear. One recalls the letter of Pope Celestine I to Bishops in Narbonne and Vienne in 428, scolding them because priests in their diocese were following the pagan custom of dressing in a way that sets them apart from the rest of the people. The "Brother" (*mon frère*) word was meant to be our internal way of addressing one another, and in European countries Marianists often retained the public counterpart (*monsieur, don*) of our English word of address "Mister." These are not minor symbolic gestures; they are expressive of a community whose social order appreciates the finer instincts of *liberté, fraternité, égalité* and recognizes the openness of the Body of Christ to a new body politic.

In church law if a religious order has ordained members it is a clerical order whose major officers (generals, provincials, novice masters) must be ordained. The Society of Mary did not escape those directives, even though internally priests had no privilege stemming from clerical status. For its time, it is extraordinary that a community leader could be a non-ordained Marianist, to whom an ordained Marianist owed religious obedience. In fact, that still arches eyebrows in our time. In more recent times we have

regularly availed ourselves of indults to have the offices of provincial and novice master occupied by **any** Marianists, ordained or not, according to a Marianist's gifts and the community's perceived needs.

What has also unfolded in time, and blossoms anew in the crisis of the present time, is a Marianist openness to mutuality with nonprofessed women and men who have also said Yes to the Marianist deep story and exercise stewardship for its historical maintenance and dissemination. As numbers of professed Marianists decrease everywhere in the world, we realize that the "lay" Marianist vocation is no less a true Marianist vocation. Realistically, this newfound mutuality would probably never have happened without the decrease in numbers, as right as that mutuality truly is. Professed Marianists should never be clerical counterparts to "the laity" that share in our (professed) missions.

I want to indicate as well that there are resources within the Marianist deep story which resonate with the feminist critique of patriarchy. I find these especially in the language of nurture and gestation that abound in popular Marianist prayers: As Mary formed Christ in her womb, so is it the Marianist vocation to form Christians in the womb of our community.

8. Spirituality and Strategies

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that all people are called to a life of perfect holiness. It is not proper, therefore, to see the religious call to perfect holiness as a "gradation" different from everyone else's call to perfection. The Council, and many of the post-Conciliar documents (e.g., *Evangelii Nuntiandi*), affirm that mission and ministry flow from Baptism (priesthood is one particular and essential ministry, and it too is rooted first of all in Baptism, and then in Orders as a specification). The U.S. hierarchy is currently dealing with the very thorny problem of equality for women in culture and in the Church. The prophetic embodiments of possible solutions will be found in multiple places, of course; and religious communities that claim a prophetic vocation ought to be foremost among those places!

I hope the prophetic possibilities of the Marianist deep story do indeed come to the fore with bold energies. Sociologically, I do not expect this to happen first in our societal structures. We initiate new behaviors and new ways of naming ourselves in communities across a province, a nation, or a world. *Societas*, the structured conduct of the larger unit, is committed especially to maintaining the structures that are essential to unity and coherence. The anti-structural elements that facilitate social transformation normally issue from *communitas*, the small social units that are closer in their interaction to the daily lives of human beings and feel more intimately the longings of people our age through which the Spirit of God speaks anew (*Gaudium et Spes*). Therefore, in the strategies that follow soon, I express hope that communities will assume responsibility for behaving in some of these ways, so that *societas* may be touched by the new experience of *communitas*. The dialectic between *societas* and *communitas* is a necessary conversation for institutional health.

I am claiming, first of all, that "discipleship of equals" is a contemporary insight into a feature of Marianist spirituality that has been there from the beginning, though not with the more contemporary language. I am also suggesting that the events of today's Church have need of the kind of ecclesiology that is embedded in Marianist nonclerical structures and behaviors. Marianists have a longer experience of a nonclericalized priesthood than perhaps any other community in the entire Church.

Secondly, the Society of Mary, which itself grew out of lay communities, has a propensity to true mutuality with nonprofessed Marianists, even to the point of equally shared stewardship for the Marianist deep story. I find lay Marianists whose commitment to the Marianist story is as informed and well lived as religious Marianists. We have not always claimed that mode of mutuality. More often in Marianist history, the religious community has felt that it calls lay Christians to conversion to Marianist spirituality. I acknowledge the profound ways in which lay Marianists (and lay Christians generally) have called me, and have called Marianist communities, to conversion. It takes a particularly secure spirituality for male religious Marianists to open their lives to prophetic critique and to the call to conversion that comes from outside the religious community.

And thirdly, I have noted that Marianist spirituality today opens up out of its story to a critique of patriarchy. This could not have been a part of Marianist critical awareness in its origins, for the critique of patriarchy was not part of that world. However, the *anima* that is so strong in the Marianist soul occasions sympathy for women who have been systematically excluded from many forms of influence and leadership in the Church, and whose recompense for work done has long been shortchanged.

I believe that I am describing perspectives from which some Marianists in the U.S. Church are living their faith—not a majority, maybe, but possibly a large enough minority to form a critical mass. On these items I believe that, with some conscious choice, some daring, some dogged implementation, and some willed visibility, the Marianist story has a new opportunity to demonstrate the perennial timeliness of its spirituality. We may be a classic, but someone other than us would have to do that naming. The naming would have to be a response to what they have seen and heard and touched through our lives today.

Here, then, are some ways of being Marianists, strategies that spill forth from what we hope might be our spirituality:

- a. We might reclaim “Brothers of Mary” as our preferred identification, and forsake “Father” as a title for our ordained Brothers. The “Father” title is historically relative and nonessential to begin with. It also violates the dictum of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel never to use that as a title for a community member.
- b. We might then call our general leader our “Good Brother” instead of the “Good Father.” Or, since Jesus also reminded his followers to call no one truly good except God alone, we might speak of our “Servant Brother.”
- c. We might resocialize our sense of sharing a Marianist vocation with lay Marianists so that we are equals in our stewardship of Marianist life in the world. We are not the white hot center, with cooler peripheries! Shared stewardship requires giving up privileged control and becoming truly dialogic in our comportment.
- d. As the Church explores new roles of leadership and ministry for the non-ordained in the public and private life of the Church, we might do the same within non-ordained Marianists in our own

religious communities, e.g., presiding at Liturgy of the Word and at communion services, spiritual direction, preaching, as principal pastoral agents in parishes without a resident priest, etc.

e. We should utterly abandon noninclusive language in all horizontal contexts and be part of the search for a more adequate language for God in vertical contexts.

f. We might choose to adapt our lifestyle to the experience and experiment of basic Christian communities. Our dialogue with that important new way of being church could well be a constitutive dynamic for us, especially since the discipleship of equals in such communities is often an explicit commitment.

These are but a few hints at Marianist spirituality to close the Second Millennium and open the Third. They are responses to the inner structure of Marianist origins, not derived from some inexorable logic in our story, but from an honest development of that story in a new time.

9. Postscript

No one can wrap up a spirituality whole and entire in words. All of this conference's presentations taken together are a metaphor for what the Spirit is up to in our midst. Thus, I want to indicate three of the most serious limitations of my reflections. First, they are too preoccupied with internal, institutional concerns. These concerns are justified and necessary but incomplete for a world Church in conversation with the other world religions. Secondly, I have not dwelt upon the utterly central issue of social justice. I would simply point out that any Marianist community that prays daily Mary's Magnificat as its own prayer will have an enviable passion for the transformation of unjust social situations. Thirdly, I have not spoken repeatedly of Mary, but have rather focused upon the prophetic imagination embodied in the **social structures** of the Society of Mary, especially as these distill from the havoc of the French Revolution authentic expressions of the modern soul. But this, too, is moored in the Chaminadean imagination that liked to dwell upon the first record of gathered disciples, and there with them were Mary and Jesus' brothers (Acts 1:14). Their prayer created a common life and a mission, and their common life and mission kept them faithful to the Breaking of the Bread.

North American Center for Marianist Studies © 1995, 2011. Material taken from *The Promised Woman*,
Monograph Series, No. 37 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 1995), pp. 421-35.