

## **Marianist Theme: Mary**

by Martin Solma, SM

*[Editor's Note: Father Martin Solma, SM, the Provincial for the Society of Mary's Province of the United States, delivered the following talk as part of the 2011 summer retreat series for the Province.]*

Shortly after the end of the Second Vatican Council, I remember overhearing a conversation between two brothers in the Province. Realizing that the Council had emphasized so strongly the centrality of Christ in our Christian lives, the one brother said, "I think we would do well to put Mary on the shelf for a while." In those tumultuous years following the Council, there were many themes that were emphasized in the Provinces, but Mary was not always one of them. Happily, through the great work of NACMS, the International Center for Marianist Formation, and lots of other initiatives, we have again found a certain balance between the centrality of Christ and our baptismal commitment, on the one hand, and the Mother of Jesus and our Marianist charism on the other. Perhaps, most importantly, we have grown in our understanding of the vow of stability, and it is this vow which I'd like to talk about today.

I went through a major shift in my thinking and practice in 1992. That year I was celebrating my twenty-fifth jubilee as a Marianist; as part of that, I wanted to make a 30-day retreat. Brother Richard Joyal, SM, from the Region of Canada also was interested in such a retreat, so we both enrolled for the October Ignatian retreat at Guelph, Ontario. I remember the day we arrived: we spent the better part of the afternoon exploring the grounds and the buildings, and we were especially interested in the chapel since, as we thought, we'd be spending a good amount of time there. It was nice enough. But what caught my eye was a painting of the Risen

Jesus near the tabernacle. With Jesus, there was a woman and, as I told Richard, “I hope that it’s Mary Magdalene and not Mary, the Mother of Jesus.” I was wrong: it was not Mary Magdalene. I thought: “how un-biblical,” “how pietistic.”

The retreat went well enough. For those of you who have made such a retreat, you know that there is a meditation toward the end in which the retreatant is asked to picture a meeting between the risen Jesus and his mother. Much to my great surprise, it turned out to be one of the very best prayer experiences of the entire retreat for me. I pictured this meeting and the image that came to my mind was that of a waterfall of grace and gratitude. It was all true! God had been true to His promises! All of the questions, even the doubts, all of the sufferings, especially on Calvary . . . it was all worth it. Jesus is risen, and Mary is at the very center of this great mystery of God’s love for us. I was so moved that I even bought a copy of the painting, so much did it touch me. Talk about tables being turned . . . and my arrogance being tamed.

Mary is at the very center of our lives as Marianists, and our vow of stability is the “sign and seal of our vocation” as our *Rule of Life* says. To grow in our understanding of this vow is to grow in our understanding of our vocation as Marianists and the place of Mary in our lives. I’d like to talk about this vow in four stages:

- Encountering Mary of the Annunciation: stability as my permanent commitment to the Lord in Baptism and to the Society of Mary as a vowed religious
- Standing with Mary at the foot of the cross with the Beloved Disciple: stability as a Marian alliance or covenant; becoming a Beloved Disciple with Mary as my mother
- Together with Mary and the Apostles in the Cenacle: stability as loving the Society of Mary and living within an apostolic community with Mary in the midst

- With Mary as a Servant at the Wedding Feast of Cana: stability as sharing Mary's apostolic mission.

I'd like to talk about the first three of these under this theme and the fourth (Cana) in the context of mission, our last major theme.

It is so familiar to us, this story of the Annunciation. It places Mary at the very center of the mystery of the Incarnation. But, as the Fathers of the Church have said, Mary first conceived Jesus in faith in her heart before she conceived him in her womb. The beautiful hymn from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians that we pray each Saturday evening mirrors the "fiat" of Mary:

Though He was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, He emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave. And, being as we are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on the Cross. Because of this, God highly exalted Him and gave to Him the name above every other name. So that, at the name of Jesus, every knee must bend, in the heavens and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord.

He emptied himself: "kenosis." This great kenotic act finds concrete expression in Jesus' ministry to the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, and sinners. He was born in poverty, he had nowhere to lay his head, he touched the lepers and allowed the sinful woman to kiss and caress his feet. He was poor and empty, and the love of his Father became the meat that he lived on. But, Mary was poor and empty, too. She called herself "God's servant, God's slave" and opened herself in freedom to what was asked of her. I very much like the sculpture of "Mary, the Seat of Wisdom" that graces the Marianist cemetery at the University of Dayton. No cowardly, mousy woman is she. She's strong, forthright, with arms outstretched. She was available, dispositive, willing to take a huge risk. She said "yes," but she also asked questions. In the end, in the face of mystery, she opened herself and received the greatest gift that anyone could imagine: the

Incarnate Word in her womb. A person must be empty and poor, and incredibly free, to give the self away so completely. What better to do with your life? Dorothy Day once said, “The best thing to do with the best things in life is to give them away.”

Outside the Chapel of the Beloved Disciple at the Regional House in Nairobi, there is a quotation by St. Gregory Nazianzen painted on the wall:

Then give all to Christ,  
and there is nothing we can give so good as ourselves  
if we really understand the Mystery.

Like Mary, we also have said “yes,” first of all in our Baptism, then in our religious profession, capped by the vow of stability. I was struck recently by a letter I received from a member of the Province. He had been asked to do an important and challenging job within the Province. In accepting, he said, “this is how I understand my religious profession and the vow of stability.” This availability, this yes-saying, this freedom to give oneself away . . . much good food for thought and prayer during this retreat. I will leave a copy of a very fine article, dated now but excellent nonetheless, by Charles Davis. It is entitled “Empty and Poor for Christ.” Maybe you’ll find it helpful for your prayer today.

Perhaps no biblical image expresses most deeply the charism and gift of the Marianist life as the Calvary scene in the Gospel of John. The original sculpture at the General Administration in Rome has been reproduced in so many ways and has found its way into the iconography of most Marianist units. It represents what Father Johann Roten, SM, calls “our deep Marianist memory.” As you know, the mother of Jesus makes just two appearances in this Gospel: at Cana

in chapter 2 and at the foot of the cross in chapter 19. The hour that was anticipated with the superabundance of wine at the wedding finds full and final expression as Jesus completes his mission from the throne of the cross.

The story is related in almost simple terms: John 19:25-27.

There is something profound happening here, something that caught the imagination of Father Chaminade during his Saragossa exile. The Beloved Disciple, the one specially loved by Jesus—never named in the Gospel and likely to represent all those who are loved by Jesus and faithful to him—is given to the woman as a son; and the woman is given as mother in return. Some translations indicate that the Beloved Disciple took her “into his home,” but the original language is much more graphic. He took her “into his own things,” into his world, into his life. She becomes part and parcel of his future, and he of hers. There is a new family beginning here. And, those who share the same mother become brothers and sisters of Jesus. In a subsequent scene, we are told the side of Jesus is pierced and out flows blood and water. On one level, this is simply the sign of death as the lifeblood flows out. But, in the symbolic world of John’s Gospel, these are birth fluids. In chapter 7, during the great Feast of Tabernacles, when bowls of water were poured over the altar in Jerusalem, Jesus stands up and cries out: “if anyone thirsts, let him come to me for, as Scripture says, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now, the Gospel says, ‘He said this of the Spirit, but the Spirit has not yet been given since He had not yet been glorified.’” At the moment of “glorification” in John’s Gospel, when Jesus gives his all, when his new family is begun, when his work or mission of “unveiling” of the loving heart of God is “finished,” his heart is pierced and out flows the gift of the Spirit upon the little community gathered at the foot of the cross. This is death and birth, dying and rising, and the gift of the Spirit all rolled into one! No wonder this held such power for our Founder. The most

striking depiction of this scene that I have ever seen was at the Poor Clare Monastery in Lilongwe, Malawi. The artist placed a gaping wound in the side of Jesus, and there is a fountain of water flowing out, quite a trick to do in wood!

I learned a good lesson one year from an African Marianist in the scholasticate. We would have a Marianist studies class every Friday evening. One night, we were talking about this Calvary scene. He made the observation that, for him, this experience of Mary at the foot of the cross was a far greater act of faith than was the Annunciation. At that point, for Mary, it must have all looked so futile and so definitive. Was she wrong? Had she been duped? Was this what God's promises lead to? It was shortly after that night when I had my experience at the Guelph retreat house, experiencing Mary's "waterfall of grace and gratitude."

The power of this scene can touch us deeply as we reflect upon our relationship with Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother. This is an important dimension of our vow of stability, but it also says something to us about our vow of chastity. Our religious lives must be passionate, far more passionate than we often allow them to be. That can only happen if we are engaged in a love that is so great, so overwhelming, so captivating that the powers of our mind and heart and body and psyche get focused on the one thing necessary. Over the portal at the Abbey of Gethsemane are two words carved in stone: "God Alone." Christ must be the center, and Mary helps us to keep him there.

In 1998, just before their first profession, eight African novices visited with Cardinal Maurice Otunga, the first Kenyan bishop whose cause for beatification has just been opened. At the end of their visit, he told the novices: "If Christ is not in your heart, something else or someone else will be." This old man knew well both the deep need of the human heart to give

and receive love . . . and the power of the person of Jesus to captivate and enflame the heart. A similar thought was expressed so simply in the film I mentioned the other day, “Of Gods and Men.” A young Muslim girl, obviously in love herself, is speaking with the old monk. She asks him if he had ever been in love. “Yes” said he, several times . . . but then a greater love captivated me.”

Our vow of stability expresses our alliance, our covenant, our love for Mary. With her as mother, we become brothers of Jesus whose Spirit fills us and invites us to live a life of superabundance. We might spend some time today, speaking with Mary, asking her to form us more into the likeness of Jesus. We might beg the Lord to become such a deep and loving part of our lives that the abundant life Jesus promised might be real and tangible—the grounding for us.

For Father Chaminade, the image of the Holy Family held special pride of place as a model for the Marianist Community. The unity and intimacy, the centrality of Jesus, the complementarity of roles all reflected something of his hope for our life together. Today, however, perhaps a more compelling image is that of the Apostles with Mary, awaiting the gift of the Spirit in the Cenacle. It captures something of the apostolic dynamism that should characterize our communities. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus withdraws from the disciples and is taken up to heaven, he promises to return and tells them to stay in Jerusalem until the gift of the Spirit is given. What kind of community is this: savoring the presence of the risen Jesus for 40 days, assured of Jesus’ return, hopeful that what is coming is more than they can hope for, and Mary there in their midst? Talk about a vibrant community! Perhaps they spent those days also reflecting upon their giftedness and looking with respect and appreciation on the giftedness of each of the other members of that tiny apostolic group. And then, of course, the explosion of Pentecost in wind and fire sends them out with zeal and with apostolic boldness.

Our vow of stability emphasizes the essentially communitarian dimension of the Marianist charism.

Marianist life, our ministries, and our Province mission are essentially communitarian. Too often, when we think about the vows, especially the vow of obedience, we become too individualistic. I am amazed how often we receive letters that begin something like this, “After much prayer and discernment, I have decided. . . .” How can you possibly respond to that? For us, our ministries, our mission, is discerned together within the community: first the community of the Province, then my local community. In other words, our mission is OUR mission—not MY mission—and my ministry helps the Province realize its mission. And we do this together, trying to discern the call of the Spirit of Jesus—today, here and now—within a Spirit-filled family with Mary at the very center. The time and effort required for this type of life is much greater, but the results are far more effective and fruitful. The work that went into Vision 2020, with all of the meetings and consultations and deliberations and fights helped produce a blueprint for Marianist life that will carry us well into the future. Our vow of stability strengthens our love and loyalty to our religious family and to the entire Marianist Family.

I will leave you with a final note about Mary in the Cenacle. She prays for the apostolic community. She who first received the Spirit at the Annunciation knows how to prepare the disciples of Jesus to do the same and to bring Jesus into the world. Mary’s intercession became particularly real for me in 2005. At the time, my mother and father were living in their own home and both in serious decline. It was clear to us that the situation could not continue, but they were adamant about staying in their home. I prayed to Mary for help and guidance as the situation looked hopeless to me and to my siblings. I asked Mary to grant a special grace to them for the Feast of the Assumption that year. I begged. They signed the final papers for admission to the



Jennings Center for Older Adults on August 15 and moved into this wonderful facility on August 22, Feast of the Queenship of Mary. For me, that was no coincidence. Perhaps we can beg Mary's intercession today for our ministries and for the mission of our Province.

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