

Catherine Amore: How Am I Called to Be Marianist?

[*Editor's note:* Catherine, from Brooklyn, New York, wrote her essay as part of the inaugural session of Marianists Write Now!, a NACMS-sponsored writing program held virtually from Friday, November 13 to Saturday, November 14, 2020. Each participant in this session of Marianists Write Now! wrote a personal reflection on the following question: “How am I called to be Marianist?”]

Puppets and Passion

When I was younger and just learning how to put words on a page in a comprehensive and succinct way, I frequently found it difficult to begin. A school essay's thesis often was so internally obvious that an entire paper simply *proving* why a point was correct seemed bafflingly boring, both to write and to read. My innocent, unmolded brain wished to spend my time exploring what words could potentially create on a page instead of what they had to establish. I often found myself writing an essay starting with the body as if to tell a story, detailing the exciting expository items first before flourishing the resolution that was known all along but made a dramatic entrance at the last possible moment. The opening paragraph, however, was never a favorite. Why give away the biggest, most obvious plot point at the start? Nobody likes a spoiler.

This is how it currently feels to begin detailing my journey with the Marianists. What is the “thesis” of being a Marianist? What is my “conclusion”? How can I effectively decide which moments in life prove my viewpoint? How do I explain my calling toward the Marianists?

Pause. Breathe. Begin.

Allow me, if you please, to tell you my story.

I was twelve years old and lived in Brooklyn, New York. It was the summer of 2002, and I was excited to begin my second year at an exclusive coed Catholic middle school in the fall. As a short summer reprieve—and because it was cheaper than my tuition—my parents decided to take the family on “vacation” to the Marianist Family Retreat Center's (MFRC) Summer Family Program in Cape May, New Jersey. I expected nothing other than some beach time, prayer time, and what turned out to be the longest car ride of my life. After feeling simultaneously queasy, sleepy, and hungry for five hours straight, I walked out of our minivan to a sunlight front porch and tons of people just waiting to hug me and take our bags to our rooms. It was a cacophony of movement; though I was immediately overwhelmed, my roommate for the week dragged me upstairs to our room and introduced herself.

“I'm Alison,” she said, her smile just as bright as her bouncing blonde ponytail. “If you have any questions at all, please ask me!” Little did I know this welcoming experience was my first example of the lasting power of the Marianist charism and of community.

Later that evening, we introduced ourselves as a family in front of the six other families and staff on retreat. I was somewhat nervous about standing up in front of a room of strangers. Though my theater “gene” had not quite developed fully, I had no stage fright to speak of, and the Cape May experience was much more intimate to me than dancing on stage or reading a report in front of the class. We showed the retreatants a picture of a family memory that we had been instructed to bring, and all of a sudden, what seemed like the entire chapel responded with a resounding, “ooh, aah, ohh, excellent!”—what I later learned was the typical MFRC response to a shared item within the group. As I sat back down with my family, I thought, “What was that? That was . . . weird! How did they all say it at the same time? It was like someone was pulling strings on all of them! Most importantly, why do I not feel scared? I feel . . . welcomed.” At that moment, I began to understand what the charism of community truly meant, even and especially if it went hand in hand with theatricality!

Fast-forward six years to my second time volunteering on staff during the Summer Program, which was the first time doing it without my family. At that point I knew how the family retreats worked, having been to one nearly every summer prior as a retreatant. Monday is about welcoming the families and introducing the theme of the week with a skit (puppets included!); Tuesday is learning family communication techniques and doing fun activities with the peer groups; Forgiveness Wednesday is complete with a foot-washing ceremony in the evening; Thursday is Affirmation Day (a personal favorite)

where our gifts are on display for all to see in the variety show; Friday's Commitment Ceremony makes all the parents cry; and Saturday's Commissioning helps to prepare us to go back to "reality" at home as a family. Eighteen-year-old me was comfortable performing in the skits, and now I knew that I was ready to volunteer for a "talk" during the morning session to introduce the theme of the day. When the time came for me to speak to the families about communication, standing in the exact spot as I had six years prior with my family, I froze. As I felt the gaze of the other children and parents upon me, I wondered, "What do I know about communication? How will my words help others to be better Catholics?" So, I lied. I made up a silly story on the spot about my brother and pretended that all was well within my family's communication. Afterward, I felt that I had "performed" quite well; I was simply a "puppet" for the Holy Spirit to speak through with a message about communication. I told myself that no one suspected the lie; no one suspected that my family's communication was slowly starting to unravel as we kids got older. We were *perfect* Catholics! "Ooh, ahh, ohh, NOT excellent," I thought. "Mary never lied, so why can't I follow that example, especially when it's so necessary?" That began an internal guilt-filled battle within me for the remainder of the week. How can I call myself a member of the Marianist community when I am not being my honest, God-given self?

Fast-forward once again to 2015, during my year as volunteer intern with the Retreat Center. In my mid-20s, my career was nonexistent, and I was struggling to find my true passion in life. My faith had diminished during my years at college, and a tough breakup solidified my post-college years as world-ending. Although I'd decided to volunteer with a Catholic organization for a year, the Marianist pillars of faith and devotion to Mary still seemed quite foreign to me. It was May, and the Center directors and I were knee-deep in planning for the summer family retreat. I couldn't even count the number of retreats that I had volunteered for during that year, let alone my previous decade of service at the Center. However, this was the first summer retreat in recent memory that did not include a puppet in the daily skits. No puppet? It's not a Cape May retreat without a puppet reciting scripture and words of wisdom in the skits! Even so, while my faith in God may not have been foolproof, my faith that the family retreatants would receive the Marianist charism through the program was rock solid, with or without a puppet.

One night, with the first summer retreat week looming closer and the stress high, I found myself alone in the main chapel. As I lay in the glow under the plastic stars that adorned the ceiling, breathing in and out to calm my anxiety, something caught my eye: a puppet, left from a previous weekend's retreat. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I realized that it was the Father Chaminade puppet, graciously made by Carol Weiss, a longtime contributor to the Marianist Family Retreat Center and fellow New Yorker. I found myself suddenly thinking of that retreat years ago when I had compared myself to a puppet, spewing dishonest words of "wisdom." I wondered if Chaminade himself had ever struggled to find the truth in his words. I wondered if he, too, doubted his faith within the tumultuous times in France all those years ago. Did he simply feel like a puppet—lifeless, boneless, hopelessly spewing words that held no gravitas against an oppressive government? I picked up "Puppet Chamie" and realized that his collar was falling off a little; he was a little worse for wear. It hit me suddenly that I was like the puppet, struggling to put myself together, feeling lifeless in a life that had extraordinarily created pieces but little meaning when put together. Yet, I was like Father Chaminade, too. I struggled to live in a world that didn't put faith first, a world where there were so many injustices to address, a world where I was an outcast of a society doomed to live a life constantly battling against inward lies and outward cowardice in myself and others. Am I called to be a puppet for the rest of my life, an empty vessel, reciting words I do not believe in order to perform to the expectations of my religion?

I've thought about that night often. Since then, I have found so many amazing qualities in myself to believe in: compassion, leadership, empathy, creativity, intelligence, a passion for molding young minds as an early childhood educator in New York City. Without the years and years of affirmations from the Marianist community while on retreat, I may not have believed enough in each of those qualities. Without the mindset that I was included in the discipleship of equals during my year of service at the MFRC, I may not have believed that society indeed can be a positive change for good. Without smiles and constant heart-to-hearts from my numerous close friendships developed within the Marianist community, I may not have had the courage to pursue my passions. Without access to Marian symbols, art, and architecture for more than half of my life, I may not have loved my being a woman and empathized with mothers as much as I have. Without trips to multiple Marianist locations throughout the

United States and communicating with Marianists around the world, I may not have believed that the pillars are universal. Without my connection to the Marianist charism, who would I be?

Some days I feel like a puppet without a master, endlessly dragging on through hours that seem to hold no purpose. Other days I feel like I am the sole puppet master, guiding others through their lives and having little energy to manipulate my own performance through life. Most days, however, I feel guided by an unseen force, performing kind actions and always striving to live a morally good life for myself and others in every moment. Am I called to be a Marianist puppet? A puppeteer? Can one be both? When does one become unfabricated and *real*?

There will always be a special connection to the Marianists. There will always be mementos of memory that live in our hearts, good or bad. There will always be a longing to believe fully and wholly that God has created this world for good. There will always be a call to service, a call to the oppressed, a call to educate using Catholic values as a baseline. There will always be that line in the back of my head—"Do whatever he tells you"—which I've often translated as "JUST DO IT!" Why do we, as Marianists, continuously answer "yes" to multiple callings, multiple ways of being that sometimes even the rest of the Catholic world doesn't seem to actualize?

The Marianists welcome those with all God-given gifts, from all ways of life, around the world and around each other's world. The gravity of the Marianist charism continuously pulls us in, just as a mother's love pulls in her children, no matter where in the cosmos they find themselves. With the Marianist charism as her puppeteer, this "Catherine puppet" meets the unknown future head-on and allows her life to be transformed into something real and good.

What is the Marianist call, then? I believe that we are all baby puppets—put together with love and grace and a little bit of charism glue—just waiting to be filled in life with gifts and affirmations and goodness and passions. Once we realize that we are all called to be real boys and girls, transformed into real children of God, we Marianists can do anything he tells us. After all, I haven't met a Marianist who wasn't a child at heart . . . have you?