

Catherine Amore: What Does It Mean for Me to Live a Committed Marianist Life?

[*Editor's note:* Catherine, from Brooklyn, New York, wrote her essay as part of Marianists Write Now!, a NACMS-sponsored writing program held virtually from Friday, March 12 to Saturday, March 13, 2021. Each participant in this session of Marianists Write Now! wrote a personal reflection on the following question: “What does it mean for me to live a committed Marianist life?”]

How to Live a Committed Marianist Life, and Other Poetic Musings

*Flying high above the struggles,
flying high above the grime,
flying high above the crime,
flying high, flying high.*

I am a white, Catholic woman from Brooklyn, NY. I am the daughter of a married couple, daughter of a deacon, big sister, descendant of Italians and Americans. I am a past student of public and Catholic institutions, a current student of progressive education practices, and a lifelong lover of learning. I have grown from tradition, from culture, from family, from religion, from experiences, from school, from friends, from theater, from art, from therapists, from myself. I have had easy access to all of these and more. I am privileged, and I benefit from that privilege.

I grew up attending the Marianist Family Retreat Center in Cape May, NJ, from the ripe young age of twelve. I attended almost every summer Family Retreat, as a participant or as staff, since the year 2002. I sailed through the retreats, soaking it all in, understanding very little of my place in the larger world but very much feeling comfortable in the world of the Marianists even before I knew what that meant. I felt the community even after leaving the doors at Cape and Yale Avenues, especially if my siblings and I fought in the car before getting on the Garden State Parkway (community can be found in conflict, too!). I volunteered on staff at Family Retreats and continued to understand what it meant to be a part of the Marianist community, even in something as simple as being grateful for someone driving me there because this nineteen-year-old Brooklynite still didn't have her driver's license. I learned about the Marianist founders and was in awe that two women were the beginning of this religious movement that meant the most to me. I questioned my faith in conversations on college-aged retreats and brushed aside comments that I wasn't a true believer if I didn't do this, this, and that because I knew that I was

on my own journey. My young adulthood found a new respect for Mary. She, a brown-skinned teen refugee, had been through so many more struggles than I ever had at my age and probably ever will in my lifetime. "I was lucky to have found Mary's House, my second home," I often said to myself.

*Flying low below the conflict,
flying low below the soot,
flying low below the fathoms of the people underfoot.*

I am a white, cisgendered, demisexual, thirty-year-old female without children. I am a woman who has struggled with anxiety, with mild depression. I have failed classes at New York University due to anxiety and depression, "throwing away" thousands of tuition dollars because I couldn't "handle it." I take measures to deal with stress every day. I am not a failure, but some days it sure seems like it.

I found myself at some point veering away from the teachings of the Catholic Church at a time in my life when I didn't believe in myself. If someone were to have commented about what they observed about me at the time, they would have said that I was physically hunched over and unassuming, a small smile peeking out but mentally checked out of every social situation in which I found myself. Yet, when I circled back to the Marianists every year (often multiple times a year), I found myself joyful and full of life. Whatever I was struggling with, I unveiled it while in the presence of my Marianist community. I learned about social justice experiences and fights that the Marianists were tackling all over the world, and I was in awe. I saw the statues of Mary and pictures of Chaminade, Marie Thérèse, and Adèle all over Mary's House, and I felt protected, secure. But when I left Mary's House as a young adult and beyond, I often forgot who I was. I felt compelled to take bigger steps beyond my bubble of my family home, but my self-belief was one of being incomplete, often of failure. I went through daily life struggling in my own head, so much so that I couldn't see others' struggles clearly and suffered because of it. I strove for empathy, but all the teachings learned from years spent at Mary's House couldn't save me from myself. "I am still lucky to be alive; I want to be alive, but I want more," I often thought to myself.

*Flying through the air we breathe,
flying through the air we need,
flying through the air that sings,*

air that rings, air that stings.

*Flying high, flying low,
flying through, flying—*

I am a woman who muddles through and debates my own inner conflict daily. I am a woman who sees the injustices in the world and wants to change them. I am a woman who believes in a higher power and the good of humanity. I am a woman who sees the efforts that others have taken to get where they are and feels grateful for her own past while acknowledging and respecting others' paths. I am a woman who identifies as an empath. I am a woman who wants to be an educator for life in every aspect of life. I strive to be anti-racist in all that I do.

My year spent as the intern at The Marianist Family Retreat Center, Mary's House, uplifted me to a higher path that I knew I wanted to be on, but I struggled to find footing through it. Eventually, I found my world centering back into education, first as an administrator and then (finally) as a teacher in an early childhood classroom. Finding myself at a crossroads, yet full of opportunity after being furloughed during the COVID-19 shutdown of 2020, I decided to take much-needed downtime to continue to explore my inner passions. If there's anything the Marianists taught me, it's that an inclusive community is essential to being fulfilled, which is essential to being a person of God. I delved into different ways to assist in the larger NYC community's struggles while also feeling accomplished in my own goals and needs as human. I joined the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative podcast discussion group on "Seeing White" with Sister Nicole Trahan and Matt Meyers on Zoom for eight weeks. My mind was blown as far as how overdue and necessary the Black Lives Matter movement is. I finally started graduate school and moved to a preschool job that actually cared about me as a human being instead of simply an employee, particularly during this crisis of a year. The Bank Street Graduate School of Education in NYC prides itself on educating educators to be progressive and attuned to the racial and social inequalities that our society has created. I am using these anti-racist teachings at this wonderful new job that prides itself on inclusive STEM activities for all of these burgeoning, resilient, intelligent young children. "I see how a lifetime of being involved with the Marianists reaches into my daily life," I often mused in this last year, a time when positive self-reflection was inherent to my state of being and productivity.

So

Fly beyond the tepid air - we need despair to take us there -

Where wings unfold and are made new

And blossoms thrive amidst the dew

I am Chaminade. I am Marie Thérèse. I am Adèle. I am Saint Catherine of Sienna. I am Saint Cecilia. I am Saint Paul, struggling with my mission in life. I am Saint Peter, denying the existence of something holy. I am my great-grandparents, Italian immigrants. I am my white southern ancestors, potentially slave owners. I am all the white educators in NYC, striving to reach through years of oppression to change the segregated Department of Education. I am the mother struggling to assist with her child's homework after working two jobs. I am the group of socialites in a taxi, aggravated at a protest blocking the way. I am the child in my two's class frightened for one moment of a mask-less teacher. I am the tired homeless man on the subway, mask-less, shoe-less, scared of being kicked out but relishing the moments of peaceful slumber. I am Jesus. I am Mary.

The poem "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver was presented to this session's group of Marianists Write Now!, and I found inspiration. "Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air, are heading home again," she writes. It almost feels like that now, here, after finally receiving my second Moderna vaccine shot and taking [most of] my anxiety of being on NYC public transportation daily off the table. It's one year after America shut down, a year since I was at a job that didn't give any extra support to teachers concerned about the growing news of COVID around the world. It is one year since what we thought would be a simple fix, where everyone stayed home for a few weeks to a month, ended up being an explosion of politics. It's been a year since hope seemed to die. I didn't grow up in my grandparents' generation of World War II, not knowing if I would make it back home to my brothers and sisters after being stationed in a war zone, but it feels like it's pretty similar. One year of self-reflecting on all of my downfalls and all of my strengths simultaneously. What got me through it? My mission. What is this mission? It is to live my life as a committed Marianist.

How am I living a committed Marianist life? The same way I am living as a woman filled with anxiety and stress and yet striving toward self-healing. The same way that I am strolling through life as a white woman in New York City, recognizing the injustices of black and brown peoples next to me on the

subway, and researching ways to help and places to donate time and resources. The same way that I am regularly walking through historic Green-Wood Cemetery in my neighborhood to visit my deceased paternal grandparents and reminding myself of my family's sacrifices by keeping their traditions alive. The same way that I am taking all that I am learning, and have learned, about early childhood education and influencing the next beautiful generation of God's children to treat this Earth better than we have. The same way that I fuse my passions of art and social justice on social media platforms and further spread knowledge and healing. The same way that I see a sparrow on the sidewalk picking up a twig for her nest and recognizing that I, too, am building the world bit by bit with each moment of goodness and positive energy. The same way that I see my humanity—as Mary saw in Jesus, the sole savior for the world—I recognize the empathy in my own and others' misfortunes, but I use this empathy to build others up at the same time. I've grounded myself in Marianist charism over the years; I've recognized my strengths and weaknesses; I've understood the need to focus on positive change for the world, and I've allowed my life to be no less than any other's I've seen. After all, if the whole world lived a committed Marianist life, what could we accomplish then? Wouldn't Mary be proud. . . .

*Land on soil, sink right in
Only then the work begins
Of righting all the wrongs made past
Of changing all the throngs of wrath
Of bringing light into full view
Of being equal, me and you.*

This poem was written exclusively during Marianists Write Now! Thanks to Patti Gehred, George Lisjak, Sr. Gabby Bibeau, FMI, and poet Mary Oliver for the inspiration.

"Flight"

By Catherine Amore

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