

Barbara Belle: What Does It Mean for Me to Live a Committed Marianist Life?

[*Editor's note:* Barb, from Rock Hill, South Carolina, 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?"]

Marianist formation has taught me to be welcoming and to learn about unconditional acceptance and inclusivity. I have also learned that I have gifts to share and that I can be a full partner at a decision-making table. Some things are done on a personal level, but so much more can be realized with a commitment to a community.

I bring this up to compare my formation with the Marianists to the almost nonexistent formation that I received as an adult Catholic in my parishes. When I was younger, I had a hard time relating to stories of the saints who were too "perfect." I had a hard time imagining their real struggles in their daily lives; that comes with a commitment to look deeper and listen harder to the full history and sometimes to imagine how their daily lives may have played out. I was a part of a small faith community in my parish, but it was as much social as prayerful.

What I love best about the commitment we make to a lay community is the feeling of being at home. I feel as if everyone is being completely honest in our discussions and there are no pretenses. Amid the challenge to discover who I am and where I belong, the Marianist Family helps me search for meaning. I feel love and concern from all members of my communities and share the same love for them. They know me better than almost any of my longtime friends or family. There is a commitment from all community members to show up faithfully and walk our faith journey together. We need each other, and we need reminders that there is a Family that thinks and believes that we are part of a shared history of working to do good (something is bigger than any one of us).¹

The Catholic Church Is Different in the South

After moving from Hawaii, I attended a Changemakers retreat organized by the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative (MSJC). Changemakers led to my participation on MSJC's Women and Justice Issue Team, which challenges me to stay aware of what is happening in the Church and the world, and it reminds me to act in faith. It is an essential thread in the fabric of my Marianist being.

"Each of the threads in the Marianist fabric . . . is necessary for a whole cloth that has texture, richness, flexibility, color, and beauty. The characteristic structures and processes are all of a piece. When they are not present, something vital is missing or not as effective and satisfying as the promise that the charism portends."²

Maybe I am still too new to my parish, but since I moved to South Carolina in 2015, I have been disappointed in the conservative nature of the Catholic Church. I feel I have returned to my days of grammar school. I wonder if the local parishioners believe that it is enough to go to Mass on the weekend and sit in the pews. Although I find the liturgy to be refreshing, it seems that something is lacking in the practice of my faith. But, as with our Marianist forebears, it is in the disconnects of life that faith can be discovered.

¹ Thomas F. Giardino, SM, *The Promise and the Path: Starting and Sustaining Marianist Communities* (Dayton, Ohio: NACMS, 2011).

² Giardino, *The Promise and the Path*, 24.

“Like Chaminade, Adèle, and Marie Thérèse . . . we live in the gap (full of unease amid the political, spiritual, religious, and social turmoil) between our vision and current reality . . . in the tension of the gap, grace erupts as charism.”³

Maybe pastors and bishops in local areas should do more to affirm those who work for justice and respect the challenges involved? I don’t feel the level of support from other parishioners and don’t know what or where their personal callings are taking any of them. I am very grateful to be formed in Marianist values and to remember the call to the elements of Catholic Social Teaching.

I know my faith and practice of Marianist spirituality have helped me personally identify my vocation as a widowed female in the Catholic Church. While working with MSJC and studying the life of Marie Thérèse, I have developed my lay vocation more fully in these specific ways: to advocate for women’s roles in the Catholic Church, to find out more about prison ministry, and to gather folk of many faith traditions to discuss important issues related to justice.

Since I joined MSJC, I seem to have found my voice. When I joined the Women and Justice Issues Team, I began to study the topic of women as deacons in the Church. This study only caused me to be more frustrated with the lack of evidence for denial of women’s call to be priests and deacons. How can these gifts be denied? At the same time, many in my parish have said that women already “do” serve in so many ways; God sees their efforts and blesses them in their work. Isn’t it better to work humbly for our God? For me, a question keeps recurring: *Why, then, can’t the Catholic Church recognize and bless these efforts?* This is when I remember my Marianist commitment to be persistent about what God teaches and know that the Church will somehow catch up.

My formation in the Family of Mary has led me to be someone committed to living out the values taught by our Founders and to persist in serving others. Members of my lay communities constantly remind each other of Father Chaminade’s System of Virtues.⁴

I have learned to take time regularly to reflect and discern whether I am living out those virtues. The **Guide to Life in the Marianist Lay Community of North America** identifies four areas that our Marianist Lay Community is called to adapt and change following Pope Francis’ call to be a New Church.⁵

Best Marianist Practices

I’d now like to talk about two “best Marianist practices” and the possibility of bringing these practices to the diocesan level.

(1) Development of **formation processes** in our Catholic spirit: I know there are many programs (such as Dynamic Catholic) that are available to help us learn about what God is calling us to do. I don’t find many parishes in this area that encourage dialogue and discussion among the parishioners. A priest told me that would only stir up trouble! I love my Zoom meetings with many lay Marianist programs, but I would personally appreciate regular gatherings with fellow Catholics in my local area as we continue on our faith journey.

(2) Growth in **community and our personal commitment**: I have been looking for educational opportunities offered by the bishop’s office. I would welcome training and education to encourage working in a prison ministry. I believe that our current political climate has awakened many Catholics to explore racial equality and possibly work toward systemic change. It has been hard to find any resources, but I am still looking. All Catholics could use some time to learn about whatever challenges exist for the “others” in our neighborhoods surrounding our church buildings. Such programs could encourage everyone to step up to another level of understanding.

³ Giardino, *The Promise and the Path*, 3.

⁴ Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *The Grain of Wheat: Dynamics of Spiritual Growth* (Dayton, NACMS, 1997).

⁵ *Guide to Life in the Marianist Lay Community of North America* (2016): www.MLC-NA.org,

Inviting parishioners to dialogue about their own experiences could be an easy way for the Church to teach us to appreciate the struggles of many in our community. It is “the experience of being called by God, formed by Mary, and sent on the mission of Christ to embody the good news in one’s time and place.”⁶

We read in our newspapers (and other media) about college students who are motivated to take leadership roles and to speak out on behalf of those on the margins or whose voice is overlooked or unheard. How is it that, as older Catholics, we get distracted with our responsibilities to our jobs and lose sight of our larger community’s needs? I pray that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped us evaluate what is essential and come out of our isolation to a new sense of serving others.

“Traditional” Catholics in South Carolina have told me that getting laity involved is risky. They see this delegation of responsibility as too much (negative) change in the Church, and they fear that we will harm their sacred institution. I try to be careful not to say that we Marianist know better. But we can bring some of the best elements of our charism to share with those who have not had such a strong formation. I hope I can work from within the parish to help others who want more of the life-giving energy of a community of like believers.

⁶ Girardino, *The Promise and the Path*, 14.