

Beth Garascia: What is the Role of the Marianist Family in the Future of the Church and of Society?

[*About the author:* Beth Garascia lives in South Bend, Indiana, with her husband, Tony. They are the parents of three adult children. Beth is retired but worked as a teacher for forty-five years, most recently teaching adults who had left school before graduating. Beth has been a lay Marianist for almost fifty years and is now a member of the Shekan Community in South Bend, the Visitation Marianist State Community, and the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's LGBT Initiative. Beth wrote the following reflection as part of Marianists Write Now!, a NACMS-sponsored writing program held virtually from Friday, June 11 to Saturday, June 12, 2021. Each participant examined the question, "What is the role of the Marianist Family in the future of the Church and of society?"]

As members of the Marianist Family, what is ours to do? The many gifts I have received as part of my specific experience as a lay Marianist are part of who I am and give me joy, and I want to share them with others. Which of these learnings are critical for our time, and how do we impart them to others? Three aspects of our mission on which I wish to focus are the following: deepening society's understanding of Mary, inviting others to the table, and broadening the Church's understanding of leadership in community. These are not tasks only we can do, but we do them well. And they are sorely needed in today's world.

Continuing to learn about Mary is a delight of being a Marianist. My understanding of her has been enhanced throughout the years, due in large part to insights shared with me from members of the Marianist Family, lay and religious. My love for Mary began when I was a child. From a young age, I wanted to be a mother, and I saw Mary as a compassionate, understanding, and sweet mom—all characteristics I wanted to nurture in myself in order to take good care of my future children. I was taught in elementary school to make a May altar for her and to bring her flowers from my family's yard. What a gift in my life it was to create such a beautiful tribute to her! Of course, I also participated in May crownings, always longing to be the one chosen by my teacher or others in authority to place the crown on her head as everyone sang, "Oh, Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today." I was not ever to be the chosen one.

When I was a sophomore in college, I did get chosen; I was asked to join the Advent Community! Later, Hugh Bihl, SM, saw something in me and invited me, once I had become part of the Advent Community, to consecrate myself to Mary and then to join the Marianist Visitation State Community. Consequently, I've had many conversations in prayer with Mary, being mothered by her, asking her to be a friend and mentor to me, and learning from her how to be a mother. In addition, I've learned about who Mary is by listening to others, reading the Scriptures and articles about her, reflecting on her life, and contemplating Marian artwork. One insight that broadened my understanding of her was the realization that she had a choice when Gabriel announced to her that she was to be the mother of God. Instead of saying, "Be it done unto me according to thy word," she could have said "no." That insight gave me a deep appreciation of Mary's strength and power and was a factor that encouraged me to be a stronger woman. As the parent who, along with Joseph, raised Jesus, Mary had to have been a fierce-though-tender woman.

A painting I love and still meditate on is Henry Ossawa Tanner's "The Annunciation." Here her youth is apparent to the observer. The shining light and Mary's response to it are central. She must have been terrified when the angel appeared to her; nonetheless, she accepted an invitation heretofore unimagined. In doing so, she changed her life and the lives of those of us who are her children. Did she weep for long hours afterward, wondering what was to become of her? I think she did and that she must have been both thrilled and petrified.

Sharing with others our understanding of who Mary is as a mother, friend, and model is a critical way the Marianist Family can play a role in the future of the Church. Encouraging those we know to stretch their understanding of her through conversation, reading, artwork, and learning is another way we can grow ourselves and form others.

Just as Mary said “yes” when invited to become the mother of Jesus, I said “yes” to a much less formidable call when I was asked to join the Advent Community. By reflecting on their life experience, Marianists know the importance of both the invitation and the response to deepening one’s commitment. This call and opportunity to respond were critical in my journey, and I’ve learned to offer it to others. Because I know that hospitality is important, I pay attention to those who are sent to me and do my best to recognize their gifts. If they accept the invitation to join a work group or come to a community meeting, the next steps along the journey include asking them to be part of a community or to deepen a commitment during times of conversation with them. This process of seeing who other people are, inviting them to walk with us, and being with them as they travel through life is central to our lives as Marianists, and it is the second task that is ours to accomplish.

As part of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative’s LGBT Initiative, one group I have invited to walk with the Marianist Family is LGBT persons and their allies. As a parent of two adult gay children, I feel strongly that our Church is called to be a home to this group. I, therefore, became a founding member of this team in 2007 and soon after invited my son, Dominic, to join. He said “yes”! With the entire team, the two of us have worked hard to make the Marianist Family a more welcoming place for gay and trans persons by educating the Marianist Family about LGBT persons and issues to ensure that Marianist institutions are places where LGBT persons feel they belong. Even though challenging Church policy is not within the goals that the Marianist Family Council has approved for our team, I think the Marianist Family is more hospitable to this particular marginalized group as a result of our work. The young people on our team are our future leaders, and they are amazing in their tenacity and commitment to the Roman Catholic Church. By broadening the understanding of the entire Church on this issue, and in some cases changing Church teaching, we can challenge the people of God to grow and flourish.

Mary’s deep commitment to social justice—to filling the hungry with good things and lifting up the lowly—is an aspect of who she is that I learned about when I became part of the Marianist Family. After she said “yes,” one of her first thoughts was to consider Elizabeth, whom she’d just found out was also pregnant. She immediately left to visit her cousin and tend to her. Mary stands with the marginalized, reaching out to others. Just as she stood with Jesus at the foot of the cross, she calls us to be with the poor, with the immigrant, and with LGBTQ persons. In being with Jesus through his suffering, she grew an expansive heart, and she calls us to do the same. The third task we are called to is including the marginalized and calling on their leadership skills.

“Do whatever he tells you” are Mary’s words to the servants at the wedding feast of Cana, as well as her words to us, the followers of Jesus (and, in a special way, to the members of the Marianist Family). In Chaminade’s 1839 letter to the retreat masters, he says carrying out these words is the object of the Society of Mary’s vow of teaching, and this extends to “all classes, both sexes, and all ages, but to the young and poor especially.” In my opinion, it is now also up to the entire Marianist Family, not only vowed religious, to accept this role, sustaining the mission Chaminade laid out for us more than 200 years ago. Offering our love and knowledge of Mary, our mission to welcome others to the table, our outreach to the marginalized, and our rich community life are some of the gifts we can offer to our Church, society, and world.