

Beth Garascia: How Am I Called to Be Marianist?

[*Editor's note:* Beth, from South Bend, Indiana, 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?”]

What a splendid gift to us is our Marianist charism! Father John Totten, SM, called the Marianist spirit a “beautiful jewel with many facets” (East Africa Center for Marianist Studies, *Bulletin* 26). We can look at it from many perspectives, each time receiving a slightly different insight into the whole. We are invited to ponder these experiences and share them with one another—hopefully understanding the richness of the charism more deeply.

One of the foundational elements of our gift is community. This was the facet that first attracted me to the Marianist Family. I met the Marianists while attending Thomas More College in Northern Kentucky. I was invited by a classmate to a sodality meeting—as MLCs (Marianist Lay Communities) were called at the time. I don't remember what we talked about at that first meeting, but I know that it was important to all of us to reach out to the vulnerable and to protest the Vietnam War. We often discussed these values as we wondered together how to achieve the justice for which we longed. Those years were a deeply formational time for me, and I have vivid memories of conversations with the people who gathered in the group we eventually named the Advent Community. I met my husband, Tony, in that group. Being part of a community, building it, and working together to create a better world are all core values for me and part of all our lives as Christians.

Several specific qualities, however, make a community Marianist. Among them are meeting regularly, the structure of that gathering which includes eating and praying together, and supporting one another in justice work. There is also a sense of being home that is an essential aspect of Marianist community. The first Continental Lay Assembly, held in St. Louis in 1988, provided a concrete experience of homecoming for me. Along with the others who attended this gathering, I didn't know what to expect from being together. There were worries that no one would come, worries that evaporated when the registrations began to appear. I remember sitting in the assembly gathering hall next to Brother Fred Stovall, SM, whom I had just met. Tears were rolling down my face as I explained to Brother Fred that I hadn't known that I'd experience being so connected to the people gathered, most of whom I didn't know. To feel that we are all one people, joined in love, is a fundamental aspect of Christian life. Being there made me realize the power of our charism to draw people together—young and old, lay and religious—united as one.

Several other aspects of community life are foundational to being a Marianist. These are equality or inclusivity, commitment to growth in holiness, prioritizing social justice, and a desire to love and honor Mary. The equality of men and women is another core value that greatly attracted me to the Advent Community. Having been educated in Catholic schools where patriarchy was part of the air I breathed and being part of my family of origin where my dad's word was law, this principle drew me in immediately. After a few meetings, I found myself planning prayer services, then on the leadership team, and eventually, the leader of the group. Women could be leaders in our small group, and our voices were heard, valued, and called upon. I later learned that it was also part of Chaminade's vision that brothers and priests be equally valued, and laypeople were as important to the Church's mission as the religious.

This value of inclusivity has become more important to me in the past eighteen years since our son came out to us in 2002 and then our youngest daughter in 2005. My husband and I had some doubt on whether we'd be accepted in our parish as the parents of two gay children. However, we never questioned whether or not our two Marianist communities—Shekan MLC or Marianist Visitation State Community (MVSC)—would sustain us. In the years since, many significant events have occurred to reinforce our support. Dominic is our offspring who was most drawn to the Church, and he doubted that he'd able to

continue being active in Catholic life as a gay man. I told him that I was certain there was a place for him in the Church, having in mind the Marianist Family. He said he wasn't sure I was right, but he went on to join the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's (MSJC) LGBT Initiative and was its co-chair for several years. It's been a deep joy for me to see him develop as a young Catholic gay leader in our group and to be embraced by the Marianist Family.

The founding of the LGBT Initiative in 2007 is the second event in my journey of realizing the great importance of inclusivity. There have been several roadblocks in our group's history, but, overall, the Marianist Family's support in working for justice for LGBT persons has been stellar. The young LGBT persons who have been members of the team in the past, as well as those who are part of our group now, have enriched my life. They are leaders in our Marianist Family. Among other projects, we've produced a toolkit for educators and a video for use in workshops, community meetings, and retreats, and we've planned four yearly retreats. At a recent panel, the organizer wrote to those of us who were part of it, "I am beyond grateful to have been able to find a community that exceedingly goes out of their way to emphasize the need to express inclusivity for all. And I most definitely received further affirmation of that tonight." What a tribute to the inclusivity of the Marianist Family!

To help me grow in holiness, I am committed to daily prayer, leading a reflective life, and educating myself about the System of Virtues and other aspects of spirituality, such as Mary, LGBT issues, and the saints. I am enriched by my reading on the Virtues, the classes I've taken, and the conversations I've had with my spiritual director. An example is growth in my understanding of *trans* persons. The first time I remember hearing about a trans person was from my oldest daughter, Jessica, who shared a story from her first job. Her coworker left for Christmas vacation as a man and returned later as a woman. My reaction to this story was, "How very weird!" Since that time, I've read about trans persons of faith, heard the story of a trans man who spoke to our LGBT Initiative, and met many trans people. I'd now reframe my initial reaction to, "God in Her wisdom sometimes bewilders us. What a wonderful diversity our Creator has called us to enjoy!"

Social justice, or mission, is an integral part of Marianist life. Members of the two Marianist communities to which I belong work on various justice works, such as Al-Anon, equality for women in the broader Church, environmental justice, prison ministry, and assisting immigrants. Service to others means, in the words of Pope Francis, "caring for vulnerability . . . set(ing) aside (our) own wishes and desires, (our) pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable. . . . Service always looks to their faces" (*Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020). Of course, the work of the LGBT Initiative is also part of this advocacy for social justice because many still don't see LGBT persons as equal. In some parts of the world, respect for the very human dignity of gay persons is sadly lacking. In our group's video, "Living the Marianist Charism: Embracing the LGBTQ+ Community," Miguel Ochoa says about Jose Martinez, "I see and receive God's love through the way he loves me." This is an example of what devotion to justice is all about, caring for and valuing the vulnerable.

In addition to community, inclusivity, and growth in holiness, a dedication to Mary is essential in our lives as Marianists. When Brother Hugh Bihl, SM, an important Marianist mentor for me, became a member of his high school sodality, he wanted to be part of doing "Mary's big job." This was an attractive way of framing a Marianist call in the late 1940s and the image that attracted Hugh. As an adolescent twenty years later, I reflected on Mary, who is not only the comforter she was portrayed as in those days but also the challenger, which continues to be an important part of my spirituality. This is Mary who says "yes" to the angel Gabriel, not fully understanding what she's saying "yes" to, but open to God's call. It's also Mary, the forceful Jewish mother, who told the servants at Cana to do whatever Jesus told them, even though the Son of God said to her that his hour had not yet come. She calls us to work unceasingly for justice, to care for the downtrodden, and to be present to the disenfranchised.

So, Mary was there with me when I took a walk with Jim Vogt at another Continental Assembly, this one in 2006 in San Antonio. This was shortly after our youngest daughter, Margaret, had come out to Tony and me. I had gone into the parents' closet for a while, and now I was ready to act. I was, and still am, angry at the Roman Catholic magisterium for making it so difficult to be the parent of a gay child and Catholic. Among my issues are the negative language used in the *Catechism* ("objective disorder" and

“morally depraved”) and the firing and unrequested transfer of so many gay Catholic ministers, some in Marianist institutions. If a person is gay and Catholic, he or she is not permitted to enjoy romantic love, marry, enter the seminary, adopt children, or work for the Church and be open. However, my greatest sorrow about having two gay children is that neither of them, nor our daughter Jessica, feels welcome in the Catholic Church. They all define themselves as outsiders. Having a gay family member is an issue that affects the entire family. On that day in San Antonio in 2006, I asked Jim Vogt what he thought about creating an MSJC issue team to advocate for LGBT persons in the Church. He replied that it had been considered previously, but he thought it was worth pursuing again. That first step led to the creation of what would eventually be named the LGBT Initiative.

For me, then, being a lay Marianist means being tender but fierce. It means building community, committing myself to grow in holiness, advocating for social justice, and honoring Mary, the Mother of God.