

Laura M. Leming, FMI: What Is the Role of the Marianist Family in the Future of the Church and of Society?

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Picture this, not too far removed from the feast we used to call “Corpus Christi”: a one-person eucharistic procession through a university student neighborhood. Me, gently holding a small ciborium on loan to our community for the duration of the pandemic lockdown. Having walked the three blocks between our home—Annunciation Community, where six Marianist sisters in varying stages of formation live—and the Stonemill Community of our Marianist brothers, I slip quietly into their chapel after their Mass, where a priest has consecrated the hosts for our small ciborium. Then, I carry Jesus through the quiet student neighborhood (10 A.M. on a Saturday), smiling that this is indeed a strange sight. I am smiling, too, in gratitude that we are there for one another in our religious family, allowing us to feast on Communion, even while having to fast from in-person eucharistic celebrations. We are, after all, called by our Founders to be experts in communion, enacted through sharing the gift of community with those who most need it. Marianists, lay and religious alike, were made for this!

The year of COVID lockdown was a long reflection on the meaning of Communion: the Communion that is the gift of Jesus to us in his flesh and blood; and the *enacted* communion, building community with one another as the Gospel demands. It also was a long reflection on fasting and hunger. We wanted so much in the Triduum of 2020 to be with the gathered University of Dayton community, welcoming our catechumens and those coming into full communion. Instead, huddled in our basement, gathered around the TV, we watched and listened to the Benedictine Community of St. Meinrad celebrate the Triduum. Because of the kindness of our Marianist brothers, we—unlike so many others, laypeople and sisters alike—were able to physically share in Communion, the Body of Christ, consecrated in communities where priests live. This kind of fasting, from the Eucharist itself, imposes a hunger for spiritual nourishment and accompaniment that Marianist life is built to foster.

The realities of living with COVID have underlined so many vulnerabilities, including to our fragile bodies, spirits, and minds, as we have weathered illness, the deaths of people we love and care for, and the malaise that accompanied the many kinds of losses experienced. But COVID also underlined our desperate need for community. Frequently, I offered a prayer of gratitude that I had three (and later five, when two new pre-novices arrived) faith-filled women to walk with in person during this storm. The term “social distancing” was a misnomer—as the focus was actually *physical* distancing—and even then, we learned that touch was not necessarily the problem and, in

fact, was a needed remedy for the isolation from which so many suffered. Having a community to abide with (ideally in person but also in “bubbles” or pods or virtually) became a key mechanism for healthy emergence from 2020’s challenges. The original inspiration of the Marianist Family was that community was a way to rebuild the Church and society that were in tatters. Father Chaminade and Mother Adèle both invited young people to join in prayer and ministry as a way of revitalizing the Church, and Marie Thérèse, a laywoman, was at the center of that effort. When the time came for the religious orders to begin, Marie Thérèse mentored Adèle and her sisters during their first weeks living in community. Father Chaminade went on to give us structured approaches to growing in the virtues needed for developing community and organizing community life to accomplish its mission. Marianists—lay and religious—are called to become experts in community building, not for ourselves but for the Church and world to be put at the service of Jesus and Mary, who continue to work through us.

So, what have we learned as Marianists? I’m tempted to invoke the adage as a kind of sad joke that “Hindsight is 2020.” Seriously, how can we look back on this year (plus) and learn something about our role as Marianists going forward in the Church in the world of our times? Are we empowered to listen to our Founders again about the necessity of community as a response to the signs of our times? Are we delighted that we have something vital to offer the world rocked by the disruptions in life that affected schools, families, workplaces, supply chains, and worship practices? I hope that we answer “yes” to these questions. As Marianists, we have gifts to offer. In fact, we have an imperative to share these gifts or risk giving a counter-witness to our charism.

On personal levels, COVID reminded us of inequalities in our Church. The simple fact that all but those living in households with priests had such limited access to Eucharist—the source and summit of the Christian life, according to Vatican II documents and the Catholic Catechism (Arts. 1324-1327)—might raise alarm bells for us that access can be so limited. Of course, I am writing this from an overdeveloped world context, and our sisters and brothers in many parts of the developing world, and even in rural settings in the US, have experienced this limitation for a long time. As we treasure the Gospel account of Cana, let’s not forget that Mary had to risk crossing the lines of separation between women and men at the wedding feast in order to present the need she saw to Jesus. How are we called to boldly cross barriers in our Church to make sure that we respond to urgent physical and spiritual needs?

The social inequalities exposed and underlined by the impact of COVID challenge our sense of community. Our Marianist forebears found ways to assist workers who lived in difficult situations. Father Chaminade incorporated chimney sweeps into the Bordeaux Sodality. Marie Thérèse centered her life around a ministry to sex workers and their children. And Adèle visited, taught, and in one case even took in, the children of the sick and poor of the Agenais countryside. We have borne sad witness to the labor demands and the health threats to low-wage and health care workers, many of whom are people of color. How do we share the gifts of solidarity and sharing that living community after the model of the Acts of the Apostles communities suggests? The Founders’ focus on responding to the needs of the young and the poor asks us to find ways in our local places to make sure that children in families that are most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID have greater access to the supports needed.

We have also seen the dangers of social isolation and seen many people, young and old, decline and even give up in despair of finding a life-giving connection. If, in the spaces where we live and work, each of our communities and its membership shares the gift of community we've found in the Marianist Family with even one other person we recognize as having a need, we can have a significant impact. Can we be a compassionate face of the Church to LGBTQ+ persons who feel rejected in many Catholic spaces? Can we consistently, honestly, and humbly engage in efforts to grow toward anti-racism—both inside and outside of our communities? Can we work to make access to the Eucharist more of a reality in our world, whatever that looks like? Perhaps it is giving more support to our ministries in urban spaces, and maybe it is joining the ongoing study of how the ordained priesthood might be renewed to make sure the Church continues to feed her children. It may be something as simple as setting up new visiting programs to bring communion and community to those who still need to be apart from public gatherings or live far away from family members. It also may be sharing our Catholic faith and listening to people who belong to other faith traditions to find common ground that allows connections that can foster life in the world.

On a broader scale, COVID has taught us some things about how current systems do not provide for widespread human flourishing. Unbridled capitalism and excessive deregulation have not been up to the COVID challenge to protect the middle class, let alone the vulnerable. What does Marianist life have to say about that? We often lean toward the softer sides of Mary's and Jesus' personalities in our spiritual striving. But Jesus turned the tables on moneylenders, and Mary stood with her son, who was publicly executed. The strong virtues for Marianist living in these times need further exploration. We are called to not only serve the Church but also to stretch it toward growth. We are invited to be prayerful persons and use our powerful gifts to challenge rampant individualism and excessive consumption patterns wherever we find them, including in our communities.

We have been through a time, which continues in many parts of the Marianist world, when people have needed to fast from Communion and community. Now is the time to prepare for the feasting. In the spirit of our Founders, let us strengthen our communities for mission and be willing to go to the ends of the earth if that is what's necessary. Certainly, we must confront the evils of our day, which are many. But, also, we must share the sweet consolation and companionship of community with those who are most in need of it. May we be faithful to our mission as we respond to the needs of our Church and our world. As Adèle wrote in a¹ letter to Agathe Diché in October 1813, "Lord, give new courage to walk in your footsteps!"

¹ Adèle, *Letters*, no 199 to Agathe Diché, Oct. 20, 1813; vol. 1, p. 207.