

Marianist Charism, Mary, and Our Lives

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The three of us began work on this article by discussing our experiences over the last twenty years in the Family of Mary and the emphasis on Mary within our group. We were asking ourselves, "What is it we want to say about all that experience? What can we give to the Church and the individual women and men in it?" The conversation drifted, initially, to, "Why are we still in the Church?" as so many of our contemporaries have left the Church or bitterly state, "The Church left me." Ann articulated the common reality for all three of us. The Church to us is "home" and much of our identity is linked to that home.

"Home" has great power: it shapes our personalities; it provides a place of security; it can be a place of tremendous confrontation and hurt. Many of us who have left our parents' homes and started our own have, in that process, rejected some of what the first "home" meant; often we've accepted, in love, the failings of "home" or we've challenged some patterns of "home" and seen changes that helped all the family members.

We also know that, for some of our friends, the damage done by a painful home life has been severe, and only distance from the home can heal.

So, too, have our experiences been with the Church as a home. We've tried to look for specific ways to build the home in a way that all family members can grow spiritually and come to know the Creator-Savior-Spirit. Looking for a new model of "home" led us to the small community experiences of the Family of Mary.

We were all eighteen years when we joined the Family of Mary. The apostolates, the community life where everyone's gifts were valued and called upon, the model of Mary as a strong and steadfast woman with a commitment to justice, the idea of working in quiet ways, always to the end of inviting others to spiritual growth, were the attractions. The Church was in crises and for many of us the Family of Mary was an alternative to the restrictive Church structures. We felt we were living as Church members in a new way—a way Church could be. For many of us, to build our small communities was really a way to build the Church. So much of the way we've raised our children, acted or reacted in parishes, related to individuals in our workplaces and neighborhoods, flowed from what we had learned in community and most of what we do day-to-day we see in light of bringing the Church to wholeness.

So, with it now clear as to why we stayed in the Church, we looked at what we could offer to others from our experience. Over these twenty years, with its ups and downs, certain commitments among the members continue to reemerge in the Family of Mary and mark it as unique.

We don't find these characteristics in many other institutions. We know how sustaining and forceful these qualities have been for us and we think they offer a lot for others:

- Attention to the individual person is a given. A one-to-one relationship is often the way a person is invited, supported, and challenged within the community. People take time for the people—a task is also a medium for interactions among people. Individual gifts are treasured, and everyone is treated equally.
- The feminine aspects of spirituality and prayer are expressed and developed by men and women. The Family of Mary is a place where it is all right to demonstrate need, nurturing, hiddenness of work, lack of competition, earthiness, etc. The qualities are not seen as weak or submissive tendencies but very powerful and spiritually rich traits—traits which the world desperately needs. Many men in the Family of Mary have been drawn here because it was a place to freely expose part of their personalities that in other settings it seemed necessary to keep buried.
- People are continually called to depth. Opportunities for involvement are presented within the community as well as encouraged outside the community. Lots of time is spent reflecting on the learnings from these activities so one can integrate them into the prayer life and the prayer life can impact on the way we approach activities.
- There is a strong concern for the poor and issues of justice. “He has filled up the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty” is taken very seriously.
- Community is vital, and time must be spent to keep it healthy and growing.

All these traits are modeled in the person of Mary. Her Magnificat is a basic prayer for us and her appearances in Scripture—the role she had, the wisdom, strength, and faithfulness she displayed, are powerful images and ones to which women in the Church today can relate. We draw tremendous hope from Mary.

There is, however, the shadow side of this experience. We have seen a glimpse of how great Church can be and so to live daily with the gap between what we have and what we could be leaves us with a sense of tragedy. Women's deepest religious experiences have been excluded from the life of the Church. The masculine spirituality and the masculine model of powerfulness found as dominant in the Western Church is not recognized as incomplete. In our lifetime the feminine was not only ignored but devalued, trivialized, and often spoken of as the path to sin. Anger, deep sadness, and mistrust all grow in women from the limitations imposed by the sexism in the Church. Perhaps the dominance of the male spirituality, the raising up so high in the air of the half so it looked like the whole, is more a source of pain for three than the discrimination in the administration or leadership roles in the Church.

Things have to change. It is ludicrous (some would say evil) to act as if women don't have gifts of preaching or ministering or celebrating. How can we act as if the Spirit can be controlled, and the fruits of the Spirit are not allowed to be manifested by all within the community? It is inconsistent with the mission of the Church to bring ALL people to God.

How can this change? Rome will eventually change the rules, but in the meantime, the people who are the Church can look toward Marian spirituality as a way to develop the feminine and bring it into balance with the masculine.

Some examples:

- Humility can be seen not as a demeaning of oneself but as an honest relationship with the Creator. By embracing weakness, we allow the power of God to work through us.
- Openness and receptivity are sought in prayer so that we can empty ourselves of self and respond to all people and circumstances we're given. We are formed by those around us.
- Meaning can be found in seemingly mundane situations. It's not so much the importance of the work but what people come to know through the work or how that work serves people.
- Environments are created for sharing, reaching out, connecting. What others say must be listened to, especially those who are very different than ourselves. Children should be listened to. To grow spiritually we must open ourselves to others.
- Power can be negative if it's only seen as the bright spark of the initial charge. But we can begin to see power as energy and inject the power of who we are into situations.

As women Marianists we need to find ways to bring forth the spiritual sensitivities that women have. We should reflect on our deepest experiences and offer our insights to the Church by relooking at the "stories" we've grown up with—the Annunciation and Immaculate Conception, the Birth of Christ, the Presentation, the Crucifixion—and explore these mysteries from our point of view as women. We can explore the woman of the Magnificat who is deeply compassionate to the poor and those who suffer.

We can be the Mary of Cana who sees the needs, states the need to someone with the power to affect change and then waits, always expecting that the need will be met.

The Family of Mary experience, with the focus on Mary, has given us the lived experience that women are the Church too and that the Church is what we build it to be. We three are very stubborn. No one has the power to expel us, and we're not leaving voluntarily. So you see, we're stuck with the Church because it's home, but the Church is stuck with us.