

Paul Garro: How Am I Called to Be Marianist?

[*Editor's note:* Paul, from San Antonio, Texas, wrote his 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?"]

As the birds commence singing in Grey Forest, Texas, the deer awaken from beneath our fig tree, and a peacock begins a search to satisfy the hunger of the peachicks, I find myself engaged in early morning preparations for a day of reflection and writing with a diverse group of lay Marianists from across the world. Although my eyes are not yet quite fully open, my notebook is permeating with images of gratitude.

I give thanks for
the Marianists . . .
the gift of community . . .
phenomenal friends . . .
abundant grace-filled moments . . .
and unconditional love.

I also give thanks for the gift of Father Tony Perfetto, SM. Father Tony shared a story with me nearly forty years ago that shapes my Marianist heart and habits to this day.

Living the Three O'clock Prayer

Hospitalized and lying in critical condition, Father Tony described the saving presence of Father Jim Fitz, SM, who stayed by his side at the hospital, prayed lovingly throughout the night, and remained vigilant until Father Tony opened his eyes the next morning. Father Tony could barely find the words to describe the moment of reassuring love demonstrated by his brother in Christ, so he simply recited from memory the Marianist Three O'clock Prayer.

Lord Jesus, we gather in spirit at the foot of the cross . . .

Approximately 10 years later, my wife called me at work distressed that children with HIV/AIDS did not have access to medicine like protease inhibitors. These children were often neglected and even mistreated. My wife's distress and phone call would change our lives. For many years we embraced newborns, cared for numerous children, wept at their deaths, changed our habits, and shared our hearts.

Holy Virgin, take us under your protection and open us to the action of the Holy Spirit.

One of the children who pulled on our heartstrings was named Egyptian. His mother was a prostitute, and she gave him a name to transcend mortality. We cared for him as our own until he died at the age of four. During his last hours alive, he requested that one of the nurses from the hospital join him at his bedside. We were absolutely against the invitation because of her almost abusive disposition towards Egyptian—a black child, born of a prostitute, and dying a horrible death from AIDS. We grudgingly complied with his wishes. When the nurse arrived, Egyptian asked if she would hold him. We placed Egyptian's favorite blanket on her lap and gently placed the child upon her. He drew near to her bosom and whispered; he then died in her arms, using his final energy, breath, and words to warm her heart. Her eyes filled with tears, and our hearts beat with gratitude.

“Saint John, obtain for us the grace of taking Mary into our lives as you did, and of assisting her in her mission.”

Perhaps this overwhelming gratitude serves as a singularly effective portal into the incarnational reality of God’s gifts in our lives. Collectively, Father Jim Fitz and Egyptian showed generosity and insight. They demonstrated beauty in both the ordinary and the extraordinary. They exhibited the splendor of hearts emboldened by love—truly faith-filled and loyal hearts.

May the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be glorified in all places through the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

The Brook in Our Uncertain Times

As I reflected this morning on Mary at the foot of the cross, I thought about human beings’ capacity to harm and destroy. Another Marianist image came to mind: Chaminade’s brook.

Recently, Texas experienced the largest mass shooting in state history when a gunman opened fire at a church in Sutherland Springs and killed 26 people. This horrific event was met with an outpouring of emotion and support from the local community.

Called to help rebuild and heal, one of our corporate citizens, Whataburger, reached out to my wife and me to coordinate hundreds of volunteers to create a sacred space for navigating the tragedy. We answered the call by creating a playground, a bereavement center, and huge murals to help navigate the grief, loss, and fear. I met with some of the victims’ families and asked them what kind of images they desired. We listened and were transformed. Simple, honest, human conversation was saturated with horror and embedded with love. These candid, truthful conversations revealed the paradox of threat and security. It was emphatically scary-wonderful, shockingly-incredible, remarkably startling, and even miraculous. After they shared their tremendous stories, we agreed on four large murals (one on each of the four walls that surrounded the therapy room) representing the four elements of nature: earth, air, fire, and water.

The water mural included an area with torrential rain so that victims in need of weeping had a space to cry. The water mural also included waves because the families wanted a sense of an ocean cadence; finally, the water mural also integrated a soft-flowing brook and a peaceful pond. We agreed that the tragedy was like a huge rock in the middle of a brook. That rock may not erode and disappear anytime soon, but the water could still rise above and navigate around the obstruction to keep its flow. I was struck at the human capacity to love, to overcome, and not to be defeated!

These same qualities were evident in the life of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, who reminds us:

. . . I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. That is how I am going to work.