

*Sharing Our Marianist Stories* Ep. 8 Transcript

The Gift of Relationship, 17 Aug 2018 (with Fr. Norbert Burns, SM, Patti Gehred, and Gabby Bibeau)

**00:00 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Relationship is the keyword of my life. The Society of Mary we stress so much *community*. That's another word for relationships, family, belongingness.

**00:23 - Patti Gehred**

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I'm Patti Gehred.

**00:28 - Gabby Bibeau**

And I'm Sr. Gabby Bibeau. This podcast was a recording of an interview that I did with Fr. Norbert Burns, who is a priest in the Society of Mary. And he is 95, and he just celebrated what I think was his 75<sup>th</sup> Jubilee. So, Patti, I know you've listened to the interview. What were your thoughts, and do you know Fr. Burns? Have you met him or talked to him much?

**00:58 - Patti Gehred**

I just met him, you know, just quickly at things. But I've heard about him. I've just heard about him for years. But what I heard mostly is how he talked about marriage and the relationship in marriage and the struggles. But what I learned in the interview - I just loved this interview, just how he had decided that he was going to focus on relationships at the age of 17. And it starts with his relationship with God, his relationship with Mary. He's grateful for the relationship with his family. What does relationship mean when you've chosen the vocation of a religious life? He talks about - and I want to talk to him about this - talking to widows and widowers. What do you do when you've lost your best friend? And that really hit me. I mean, I'm going to talk to him about that because I've never heard that before and it's like, "Boy, somebody gets that." So, I was wowed.

**01:58 - Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah, he had a jubilee celebration, I think, this past August [2018], and he was talking a little bit just about his life and thanking people for coming. And as he was talking, I was like, "Oh man, I need to interview him for our podcast," because I think he would be a good voice to have. And we had just talked to Sr. Marie [Abmayr] who's giving her perspective as a Sister in her 80s. And I thought it would be good to get the perspective of a Marianist Brother further along in his life, too.

**02:30 Patti Gehred**

You know, here at NACMS we do so much scholarly work. And you can hear thinking about relationship, it's kind of light, but it isn't. And he understood that the depth of relationship and

the care and to love each other as they are and how difficult that is. And so, I think that gift to the Marianist Family is unique.

### **02:53 - Gabby Bibeau**

What he says a lot - I recorded so much more than what I could put in the podcast, of course - but he talks a lot about love, and I think it's really important to remember that love is a central element of our charism, and we see that in Jesus, we see it in Mary. And this podcast today is a reminder to everyone listening about the importance of love for our charism and our Marianist Family.

### **03:26 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

I am Norbert Burns, a member of the Society of Mary. Good enough. Okay, now you want to know how my life started? When I was a young man, 17 years old, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, where I wanted it to go. And I said, "Well, I'm gonna look at my life and on the basis of that, make some decisions." So, I looked at my life, and I came up with basically one aspect: the importance in my life of the relationship I had with the people that were in it.

### **04:11 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

First of all, my own family. What a wonderful family! I appreciated that so much. And then I went to Cathedral Latin High School in Cleveland. OH, and I met the Marianists. And I became very involved with them. I started out wanting to be a cheerleader, and that didn't work. So, I joined the Sodality and I joined the school paper. I became the sports editor. And I got to know some wonderful Marianists, people like John Jansen, Ray [Raymond] Roesch, Leonard Fee. And I said, "That's so precious to have these as my friends." And so, I'm looking at my life. I'm 17, I'm a junior in high school, and I was just offered the head of the Sodality for the senior year.

### **05:07 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

And I said to myself, "I don't know. My life is going to get so complicated." And women were becoming a big part of my life. And I said to myself, "That's all wonderful. But if I want to give my life, what's the best way I can do it?" And I said, "*Relationship* is the keyword of my life. That's what I want to preach, to teach, to live as well as I could, to foster." So, *relationship*. Then I said to myself, "What kind of relationships? With whom?" And I looked at my family, and I found that my mother had a deep, deep devotion to Mary. Every Monday we would go walk up to the Miraculous Medal Novena services. There were shrines all around. We just honored Mary so much. And I said, "That's the first thing. I want to spend my life fostering and cultivating and deepening my relationship with Mary."

**06:14 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Secondly, I saw those precious relationships that I was having with friends at Cathedral Latin and otherwise. And I said, "That's what I want to do. I want to meet people in life, and I want to come to them as a friend. I want to come to them interested in them and asking them if they would permit me develop with them a growing relationship." So, then I looked at my life, and I said, "Where can I find that, Mary, and others that I could belong to?" And I said, "Right here, the Society of Mary." And I said, "Go now. Take the action while you're still fresh and alive before you complicate things."

**07:02 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

So, my senior year, I joined the Society of Mary. I came here to Mount Saint John [Dayton, Ohio]. First thing I did was visit the Grotto. I came by train, spent my senior year here, went to the Novitiate at a place called Beacon, New York, finished up, got my college degree and my first assignment. I'd never heard of the place. It was a small little high school in a suburb of Philadelphia called Manayunk, and I spent four years there. So, that was my first assignment. I had one year before I was to go for the priesthood, and the Brother who was the principal at Manayunk got assigned as the director for young men coming into the Society of Mary. And he said, "Would you come with me? I'd like to have you as the prefect."

**07:55 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

So, one year before I went to Rome for the seminary, I was working there. And that helps my thinking because when I left, they told me they'd like me to get a doctorate. And I said, "Well, you know, what do I want to get a doctorate in?" And I said, "I know what I want to do. I want to study the ways of relationship in forming young religious in the Society of Mary." And so, I wrote an 800-page thesis on formation at the beginning of the Society of Mary. If you ever go out, you could take a look at it. And my life as I saw it, I was going to spend my life with young men coming in.

**08:37 - Gabby Bibeau**

I asked Fr. Burns how he ended up working for so many years teaching about marriage and working with married couples since his early desire was to work with young men entering the Society of Mary.

**08:49 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

I go to the seminary. I get my degree. First thing, I come back, they appoint me as Chaplain at Beacon because of my thesis and my thinking. We had maybe 60 young men there. When I was at Beacon, a local parish said, "We'd like to have husband-wife sessions. Would you care to come and conduct them?" And I said, "Sure, I'm open to anything." And I got into that. And I said, "That apostolate is just so much in line with my thinking. The intimacy of belongingness, the dynamics of working with each other to try to fashion a good life." And so, it kind of started

there, I guess. And then I got sent to Mount Saint John, and I was a vocation director... But then I was also stationed at the Retreat House - what is now the Novitiate was called the Marianist Retreat House - and said, "Hey, you're doing this kind of work in New York. How about doing it here?" I said "Sure."

**09:58 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

So, I got up there, and I founded the Pre-Cana for engaged couples in Dayton, first Pre-Cana Dayton ever held, Cana conferences for married couples. Because I said to myself... "All I'm talking about is relationship. What's the difference between Brothers, with their [relationship], that's their relationship with this. And it just became - I founded a group called Names that's for widows and widowers trying to find themselves in relationships after they've lost their best partner.

**10:37 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Now out of the clear blue, I'm called in and I'm told, "Down at the University of Dayton, there are 86 seasoned old religious that are all important professors. The President of the university is also the Director of the Community. We want to change that. We want to make a director of the Community, who's not the president. And so, we're sending you down there for one year. He's got another canonical year, but we're sending you down there and then give you seven or eight more years." And so, all of a sudden, there I am down at Alumni Hall [with] 86 elderly religious. I'm practically the youngest in the group... I never found out why. I think they felt that they wanted somebody that would be very *permissive*, if you wish. I don't like that word, but it's a good word. Letting people be who they are and not trying to give them orders just so that...

**11:39 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

So down I went to Alumni Hall. And now, I am teaching down there, so I'm at Alumni Hall. But I'm also teaching the marriage course. Both jobs were very compatible, and that started my whole life from that viewpoint. I just went one thing after another. The years just unfold. I don't like [to think of] it as a job. I had a mission down there, but it was not a mission that preoccupied me. I was just present to help whenever I could, and I took the mission of relationship with other people, the marriage work, and so forth. And it's just was wonderful.

**12:29 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

It's so encouraged me, I found it so. My classes at the university, I ended up my last class and shut-out auditorium with 125 seniors. They were flocking in... We had to turn them down. Because they heard that if they came, I wasn't going to preach some type of heavy doctrine. I wanted to talk to them about the importance in their life of finding somebody, if that's the way they wanted to go, who would be their best friend, with whom they could really spend a good life, and whom they ought to be searching for, how they ought to be looking. And it's just it was so rewarding.

**13:15 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Meanwhile, all kind of offers are coming to me, getting me ready to move up, and I didn't want that. I wanted to spend my life in the intimacy. I didn't want to spend my type with documents. And yes, somebody's got to do it. But I'm not very good at [saying] "No's" to anybody. And so, calling somebody in and telling - So, I just turned all that down and I said, "Mary, you take me. You do with me what you want. You guide me."

**13:44 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

I spent probably, you might say - I was living at Alumni Hall to at least '85, just absorbed the radio program every day and so forth and so on. And then people just coming into my [life] and pouring in. And I guess you could simply say that's the way my life has unfolded. But then the time came - 10 years ago, 11 years ago - when I was 83, 11 years ago. And people said, "We think you should consider retiring." I was teaching full time until I was 83, which is much older than a lot of people. And just about the time that I got off of that job, I had been living over here at Indiana Avenue, this place we were told to come here and live. And so, I live in this community with four others. We're all so very different; very, very different. But we do our best to love each other and form relationships as much as we possibly can.

**14:50 - Gabby Bibeau**

In this next part, Fr. Burns talks about how his marriage work enriched his vocation as a Marianist priest and his life in community. He especially talks a lot about love. How did working with married couples, how did that enrich your religious vocation?

**15:07 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Because I talked about love all the time, I talked about commitment all the time. I talked about [how] in the Society of Mary, we stress so much community. That's another word for relationships, family, belongingness. And I was saying, "If I'm telling them this is the way. This is, for example, a dynamic of relationship," that they have to talk to one another. They have to try to understand. I've written many things about conflict resolution. When two people don't see the same, how do you ameliorate that so that they can work out something that meets the needs of both and brings them closer together?

**15:53 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

Because when somebody agrees with you, that's already wonderful. But when they disagree with you, how do you then create this oneness, and especially if their personalities are so very, very different? Like in this community, I'm a very effervescent, outgoing, talkative person. In this community, we've got people who are very quiet, wonderful people, generous people. So, they have to understand me and my talkativeness, and I have to understand them with their quietness. And that's all part of - If I say, "I love you. I let you be who you are. I don't try to change you. I

just take you for who you are, and let you grapple with that yourself. If you come to me and ask me about anything, I'll tentatively give you my thinking on it, but be very careful to do so."

**16:46 - Gabby Bibeau**

So now every time I see you, you always talk about - and it's very encouraging - about how religious life is a wonderful life. What makes it such a wonderful life to you?

**16:58 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

I just think there's nothing better I can do with my life than to give my life to God in this total way. So, every day we have the opportunity for prayer, to go to Mass, to Eucharist. And today, now, I just came back from a visit to the Grotto at Mount Saint John. Because I've given many talks on relationships and what I call "the dynamics of a relationship," that if you want a relationship to be healthy, if you want it to grow, you've got to feed it. You've got to do the things that will enable it to blossom. And there are many ways people do that; many, many ways.

**17:46 - Fr. Norbert Burns, SM**

First thing, when I wake up in the morning, I say, "*Ave Maria amica optima*. Good morning, Mary, my very best friend." And then I go to the Chapel upstairs - I'd like to show it to you - and I spend some time there. Secondly is that I'm able to reach out to so many people in so many ways that you come to somebody, and you come just who you are, and you say, "I'm completely yours. How would you like me to be present to you?" And I just think that's a noble way to live. You're putting down your life. You know, we honor the veterans and the people who put down their lives and go on a battlefield. In this case, you're taking your life and you're putting it down for this belongingness. And I just think that that gets so, so wonderful.

**18:46 - Gabby Bibeau**

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