

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Ep. 28 Transcript

Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's Twenty-Five Years (with Sarah Gray, Fr. Ted Cassidy, SM, Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI, Jim Vogt and interviewed by Gabby Bibeau)

00:10 - Gabby Bibeau

Welcome to this special edition of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I'm Gabby Bibeau. So, we have something different for you all today. This episode is an edited conversation that took place between Sarah Gray, the Director of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative and Father Ted Cassidy, Sr. Leanne Jablonski, and Lay Marianist, Jim Vogt who were some of the original founders of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. This podcast was produced in partnership with MSJC, the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative, in honor of their 25th anniversary. So, this conversation was organized by MSJC and produced by NACMS. So, we're really excited to share this with you all, so you can hear about how MSJC started, some of the accomplishments of MSJC over the years, how it's a model for collaboration in the Marianist family. And some of their lessons that they've learned along the way. So, without further ado, here is this conversation that was recorded just a couple of weeks ago on Zoom.

01:38 - Sarah Gray

I'm Sarah Gray. I'm the Director of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative - MSJC for short. And I currently live in Cincinnati, OH. I grew up in Dayton and went to the University of Dayton where I met the Marianists. And I've been a staff person for MSJC since 2018, first as the Assistant Director, which was a part-time role in partnership with the Marianist Lay Community of North America, and then for the last year and a half, I've been [in] the Director position, which is now a full-time employee position for MSJC. And before that, I actually volunteered for about a year or two with the Death Penalty Abolition and Restorative Justice team after college. I really wanted to stay connected to the Marianists and justice. So, first [I] was volunteer and then moved into staff when the Assistant Director position opened up.

02:31 - Fr. Ted Cassidy, SM

So, I can go next. Hi, I'm Ted Cassidy. And I have been involved with MSJC from almost the very beginning and I was MSJC's Chairperson for a number of years.

02:48 - Jim Vogt

I'm Jim Vogt. I live in Covington, Kentucky. I've been a Lay Marianist for over 50 years and was the Director of MSJC for I guess, it was 2003, and then for about 18 years. And [I] was involved early on in some of the initial discussions that predated the actual formation of MSJC, but then also involved in the beginning stages, 1998 and beyond, some of the formative steps that were taken to institutionalize this concern that we had for social justice.

03:42 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

I'm Marianist Sister Leanne Jablonski. And I was part of this visioning meetings that were happening at the transition to the new US Province of the Society of Mary and hearing that inspiration. And then [I] was part of the team that we created of two representatives from each branch who kind of defined the initial a template or constitution or working statement of what we would be to then hire the first Director. And then as MSJC unfolded, I continued to serve on the Steering Committee, so set up as we had members two members of each branch kind of as that coordinating team at that time. So, I represented the Marianist Sisters on that for quite some time

until [Sr.] Grace Walle took that role. And then I'm back in that role again now for the last several years. I was also part of the founding of the Adèle Social Justice Project as we wanted to engage young adults and that voice and really be much more intergenerational. And [I was] part of the founding of the co-sponsored MSJC's Marianist Environmental Education Center Integral Ecology team as we live Pope Francis' vision and are now engaging MSJC in the Marianist Family Encounters Project. So, I serve as the Liaison in that as well.

05:17 – Sarah Gray

You all are already alluding to this, but I think what might be important as an as a next step is just if one of you could kind of tell us about the beginning of MSJC. How was the decision made to be a collaborative? I know that word is very intentional for our organization. And what was the importance among the Marianist Family to work on matters of social justice? So, what really was that beginning, those first steps during the beginning of MSJC forming?

05:48 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

So, forgive my ignorance, what is the pivotal event in '98 that we're saying actually started us?

05:56 - Jim Vogt

It was the meeting that took place in Cupertino, California, where - I don't remember who all was involved but my recollection was about 20 or 25 different people, most of whom had been part of some of the early discussions that led to a sense of, "We need to come together to formalize this." So, it's not just somebody calling us together once a summer and then we get together and then we go home, but there needs to be something on an ongoing basis. And so, the Cupertino meeting was the time when that happened, when people talked about what should it look like, at least initially and proposed that so. . .

06:40 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

And then the Bergamo Center meeting was after that?

06:42 - Jim Vogt

Yes.

06:43 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

Okay. So, the Cupertino people said, especially as the Society of Mary is forming the new Province, what ways do we want it to happen, and then proposing that other meeting as part of that whole transition then?

06:59 - Jim Vogt

Yeah. [inaudible]

07:00 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski

So, I wasn't there in '98, but I was at the Bergamo center one. Yeah.

07:04 - Jim Vogt

I think from the SM point of view, the movement towards the development and beginning of MSJC was to some extent a reflection of moving beyond what I think the SM had been popularly

seen as a teaching order, and I think the MSJC came about in part as a recognition from the SM point of view that there were a number of Brothers who were doing social justice work, social service work. And yet, there was no formalized way of supporting that, of offering ways to compare notes, to learn from one another and so forth. And one of the other things that came out very early on though is that there were other folks in the Marianist family, both lay people and Marianist Sisters who also were concerned about - involved in these kinds of efforts. And so, some of the initial discussions that actually predated the foundation of MSJC already involved all three branches in the Marianist family. And so, the move then to develop a collaborative just made sense. It flowed from those original discussions. And I think that in fact, MSJC has become one of the best manifestations of true collaboration within the Marianist family, for all three branches are really actively involved together in promoting social justice and developing social justice initiatives and so forth. And I think one of the things that happened institutionally is that it was decided early on that MSJC would be accountable to the Marianist Family Council, the group that represents all three of the groups in the Marianist family was the appropriate place for an organization, MSJC, that involved all three.

09:25 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

All regions of the country and all Marianist communities in different places and Marianist members, all were doing social justice in different ways. And we thought, "Wouldn't it be fantastic to truly be collaborative at this moment?" Where it was now the SMs were becoming Marianist Province US, as the FMI's were US as well and linking initiatives that had been happening, and to truly try to set up a system where all three branches had equal representation and maybe like a power structure or governance structure of equality. Like, how could we really live that initial vision of the Founders of true collaboration and all the steps in it? So that was really important to us. And all three of us were representing our branches at the beginning, as part of founding that. And I remember the statement written, it was a feast of the Epiphany, and that seemed to be that we kind of had that founding statement that really was a great manifestation and a witness, I think, to then how we would proceed within that and reporting to our respective governing bodies.

10:41 - Fr. Ted Cassidy, SM

Yeah, exactly. I don't really know whether Fr. [Stephen] Tutas was the main person suggesting MSJC in the very beginning. But one of the big moments was when we decided to hire a Director for the whole country... You, Jim, applied for that position. I think it was very significant that the Provinces and the [Marianist] Sisters - I'm not sure about the Lay people gave money at that point - to hire a director. So, you needed some person that's directing it and that was very significant. Do any of you know whether Fr. Tutas was the one that inspired the very beginning of it?

11:28 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

I think there were wisdom figures that were definitely supportive. And I do think there was financial commitment of each branch right from the beginning to different amounts. But it was really important that MSJC had a governance that was separate from reporting to just one of the two Religious Provinces or the laity.

11:53 - Jim Vogt

I think Fr. Tutas was the first chair of the steering committee. I think another key person was Dick Ulrich who at that point was - The old New York Province had an Office [of] Peace and Justice, and Dick was the Director. And so, he spent a good deal of time initially as a staff person in nurturing the organization, so I think Dick was important too. But I agree with Leanne that there were a number of people at that point who just saw, "This is the way we need to move. What can I do to help move it forward?"

12:40 - Sarah Gray

I think we've talked a lot about kind of the visioning and the starting, but once MSJC named a Director and became kind of its own, sitting on its own feet as an organization supported by the Marianist Family Council as a project... How did we move to - Obviously, the bulk of our work for the past 25 years has been volunteer-led issue teams. This is kind of how MSJC decided to focus its work and found a model that really worked for people to come and volunteer and commit to something. But the question is how did we get there? How were the first issues selected or understood to be what was moving in the spirit? And how did we connect with people to get people on those teams and actually kind of get the work going?

13:22 - Jim Vogt

We at the beginning had a sweatshop labor team. And that really grew out of some discussions that happened primarily with the Visitation State Community about child labor issues, and "Is there something that we in the Marianist family could do?" And it was kind of just - I don't know if *coincidental* is the word - that at the time those discussions were going on, MSJC was forming. And so, it just made sense to say, "Look, let's move this discussion under the umbrella of MSJC and let's see if we can take it further because of that." So MSJC invited, in a sense, or provided the place where ongoing beginning efforts could be nurtured and grown.

14:18 - Jim Vogt

I remember also - this was a couple years after MSJC had gotten its financial support and I became the Director - Beth Garascia talked to me about why isn't there something in MSJC that focuses on LGBT Justice issues? And I said, "Well, would you like to try to make something happen?" And she basically said "Yes, I'm willing to do that." But it took probably a year and a half or so for the assembling of a group committee at that point, the development of a proposal to the Steering Committee, the Steering Committee thinking about, "Is this a direction we want to support, we want to go?" And then, eventually, the team being formed and acknowledged as one of the issue teams within the MSJC at that point.

15:23 - Jim Vogt

The third - and Leanne had alluded to this earlier - was the formation of ASJP, the Adèle Social Justice Project. And I remember one of the steering committee meetings at that point, there were one or maybe two, what I'll call young adults who were part of the steering committee who basically were saying, "If we really want this to work and if we want to involve younger people, we're going to have to make a more specific commitment to do that." And through some discussion with a number of people - Leanne and I were a couple of them - and then involving some young adults, out of that grew the Adèle Social Justice Project. And so, it was in that case just an acknowledgement that particularly young people were not just going to happen into us

We were going to go have to go out and reach out and provide the structure, the opportunities of programs to involve them. So those were as I see it, three different ways that gave rise each of them to issue teams within MSJC.

16:34 – Sarah Gray

We'll move on to the next question. Reflecting back on the past 25 years, what do you consider to be the biggest or one of the biggest accomplishments or impacts that MSJC has had?

16:48 - Fr. Ted Cassidy, SM

I think what MSJC has done is it's expanded the consciousness of social justice among the Marianists because we have all these teams, and because people are interested. But the sharing has developed among the Marianists a real sense of social justice. I think that's really - we are noted for being very concerned with social justice. And I think MSJC just enabled that. I remember in the beginning, we did so much work on racism, workshops on racism, and that expanded the consciousness of what racism is among the Marianists.

17:40 - Jim Vogt

I would echo, in a sense, what Ted was saying. I think as a result of MSJC, there's a much greater sense among many people in the Marianist family that a commitment to social justice is integral to a commitment as a Marianist. And I don't think people would have said that before. And it's not like people would have said it's a bad thing to be involved in social justice or wouldn't have supported people's involvement but I don't think there was as much a sense that this is a key part of what it means to be a Marianist.

18:26 – Jim Vogt

A couple things, though, I'd also mentioned by way of kind of the impact question that you're raising, Sarah - I know what now is the Death Penalty [Abolition and] Restorative Justice team has been involved in several states in advocacy efforts around the abolition of the death penalty. I know they were active in Maryland when Maryland decided to... I think it was a moratorium they put on the death penalty at that time. But still a big step forward in terms of where they were as a state before. And that team has worked closely with the Ohioans to stop execution in a variety of ways to further the movement towards abolition in Ohio.

19:30 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

I really want to give credit to MLCNA, our lay branch. When I'm thinking back to the Assembly in 1988, and I think Marge Cavanaugh was a keynote speaker there, and the social justice themes were very much always part of the Lay Assembly. So, we're thinking about kind of seeds that kind of blossomed and emerged. And then the other event I'm thinking about, and I think it was called Exaltation of Voices, [a] youth-oriented event that had everything from the Rockaway Park Boys to those who had been in LIFE programs, universities, and high schools and all, and brought them to San Antonio. And I remember when they had a speak out at the end, they said, "I'm just so excited to be part of the Marianists because they're so social justice-oriented." And it was like that voice of what they had experienced among us, and one of the young men saying, "Mary was a real tough broad" as was a teenager. And there was that whole sense of just seeing her as this radical teenage woman example for them. And I still cry thinking about that because here they came, and this is what they experienced in us. I said, "Yes. Can we continue to show

this face,” in a sense to make social justice more mainstream so that now the Marianist Family Encounters Project, which is really very social justice based and integrating with the [published] *Characteristics of the Marianist Education*. Everybody's like, “Oh yeah, that's an important thing we should all be doing.” And young people continue to push us and say, “This is not just political choices for us. This is our everyday reality; we need to be acting.”

21:17 - Sarah Gray

Something else I'm thinking about, too, that's a little more recent and a little more broad... Obviously, MSJC has been a national organization since the beginning, so we've always found ways to connect with one another, even across distance. And when COVID-19 started and the world shut down quietly, we already were meeting on Zoom and prepared to kind of be in the virtual space, but we hadn't done a lot of things virtually. We hadn't offered a lot of things kind of in that avenue. I think I've always been really moved the last few years, the last three years, three plus years at how in-tune MSJC can be with staying relevant and being in touch with responding to the signs of the times. I just was looking at some of our programs over the last three years, and we've had over 40 events. And we have the most teams we've ever had. Right now, we have seven active issue teams. We have two staff people. I just think there's this power that MSJC continues to kind of expand and create more space and make more opportunity for raising the questions as Jim said and for folks from all different avenues to get involved with MSJC and with this kind of arm of justice.

22:35 – Sarah Gray

Our next question is a more personal one. How have you been affected personally by MSJC, the work of MSJC, your connections to MSJC, the community here at MSJC? All of you have been involved on issue teams and also on leadership. Could you also talk about maybe one challenge or high point of your experience with MSJC?

22:55 - Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

When I began my life as a Marianist Sister, I wouldn't have ever thought that the term *activist* and politically engaged in the United States and really being engaged in the advocacy would have been part of who I've become. And I realized that the work of justice and certainly seeing the concern of environment and faith being interlinked has always been part of me, but really moving into the realm of what does it mean to change systems, learning how to organize people, learning how to take that voice... MSJC has been part of it, bringing certainly what I've learned in being involved in a broader way in faith, climate, and energy advocacy, work back to MSJC. But also, really feeling kindred to, what the Founders felt like at the beginning, and how do we build and organize people to really rebuild a Church and a society where no one is left out and where everybody can be involved, meeting the real needs that we have and how can we keep doing that by supporting each other in a community that at most times it's really fun to be part of?

24:15 – Sr. Leanne Jablonski, FMI

And I think for me, I get touched. I can tell [you], I'm crying actually right now. I'm moved to tears doing this interview right now, thinking about all these precious moments that really are the spirit and really living Mary's Magnificat and doing it with this motley crew of disciples that I am too, in that upper room and her pushing us out and saying, “Go forth. You can do it. I'm with

you.” And she certainly has understood the pains and the joys and to keep treasuring and ponderings sometimes longer than I would like. And yet, we do get those moments where the spirit’s like, “Push out. Go. Just speak it. Everybody’s ready to hear it. So just express.” So, I’m deeply grateful for this journey which has transformed me and that I would never have dreamed of.

25:06 - Fr. Ted Cassidy, SM

At the very beginning of MSJC, I really got into racism. And I actually didn't really understand what racism was and studied it and even did my work in the university on racism. And then when you give a workshop on it, and you recognize that so many people don't realize what it is. And they're resisting it, you might say, but there's some great satisfaction in helping society, people understand what that kind of an evil is. So... I'm very proud of being able to do that, discover on my own and then share with so many workshops we did regarding racism.

25:57 - Jim Vogt

And actually, Ted is being a little too modest because he also wrote a book on racism... A couple things come to my mind. I'd say for me the impact of the people has been really a key thing. One of the organizations that the Death Penalty/Restorative Justice team partnered with early on, is called the Journey of Hope. So, it's an organization that was made-up of primarily family members of murder victims or exonerees. Hearing the stories of those people, especially when you think about people who have had family members who were murdered, and what they had to deal with to move from probably initially wanting to strangle the other person if they could, to a sense of oftentimes building a relationship with the other person who was in prison. And trying to find peace, sometimes reconciliation, but certainly having grown to see that the death penalty was not an answer.

27:41 – Jim Vogt

So just hearing those personal testimonies of what people went through and how they came to where they are about, as I say, issues of reconciliation, even forgiveness is very powerful. I've met a lot of people that - Well, it's not like I would not have known them before, but I met them in the context of their passion for justice and their desire to make a difference. And in a lot of ways, MSJC for me has been just trying to [say], “Okay, how can I help those people do what they want to do?” It's coming to know those people in a deeper way. There's some pretty impressive people that I've connected with. And that's been really a really neat part of it for me.

28:34 – Jim Vogt

The second thing I'd say... As I mentioned, I've been involved for over 50 years in the Marianist family. And I believe that we, even though we're relatively small, let's face it, it's not like we have some national prominence or something. We've never sought that. We've always been a kind of quiet worker in our approach to ministry. But I feel like MSJC is part of, in a sense, the formation of what the Marianist family is to be in the future. The fact that we took this step to form MSJC, that's an important dimension of what the Marianist family has to embrace now, has to be because it is something that I believe we're creating together. The Marianist family and what it's going to look like in the future and how we're going to be together, and I think MSJC for me has been a key part of that.

29:44 – Sarah Gray

Yeah. Thank you all for those beautiful responses. One thing I'm thinking about, too - which I know is something that's really important, that many of our volunteers have named is a key piece of why they show up and then why they stick around - is just MSJC creates a community where you can show up to do this hard work, right? We can't do the work of social justice alone.

It requires us to be in community. And we couldn't do it alone anyway, because it would be too much to carry for one person. It's really hard work. And what we haven't talked too much about today is the true sadness that comes with facing some of these issues all the time. And we know that many of us in the Marianist family and in the world, we see these hard things and we want to change, and it's hard to know how to do that for such complex, universal issues. But having a community, a group of like-minded people who care about the issues, come together and really figure out where the joy and capacity is to create positive change is just so personally affecting.

30:50 – Sarah Gray

One story I'd like to tell... So, in the Fall of 2022, the LGBTQ initiative team had hosted their sixth LGBTQ retreat, which is just a normal retreat like any other Catholic retreat you would go on, but it specifically invites LGBTQ Catholics, their families, allies, to come just as a safe space to gather, to be spiritual together, to share experiences, listen to keynote speakers, things like that. And this past one, which was held in St. Louis, we had three families there from a parish that we had reached out to. [We reach out to] some local parishes just to invite people who have LGBTQ children who just were so in need of a pastoral place to come together and meet people and affirm that their children are children of God, as we all are. And I'm tearing up thinking about it. And [to] just be together and have that community and find space where all of us can be recognized for who we are. It's really powerful to be with people who lift us up when we're doing really hard work and trying to face challenges that sometimes seem insurmountable or that there hasn't been enough change that we want to see. But we keep showing up, and we keep making the small changes, and that does really matter. So, that's just something I was thinking about too.

32:16 - Sarah Gray

Thank you, Sr. Leanne, Jim, and Fr. Ted for all your commitment to MSJC over the past 25 years. We look forward to your support in the next 25 years, too. But thanks for coming today and just celebrating this history with us. I think it's really rich and it can be really fun. It's important to continue, to share our history with the Marianist family and have a practice of seeing where we've been, looking back and then also, hopefully that informs how we move forward and continue to be impactful in the Marianist family of the church and the world.

33:00 - Gabby Bibeau

Thank you all so much for listening to this special episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. Stay tuned for more podcasts in the upcoming months. In the meantime, for more information, you can go to nacms.org. That's [www.nacms.org]. Or you can go to the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative website at [www.marianistsjc.net]. Thanks so much for listening.