

*Sharing Our Marianist Stories* Ep. 37 Transcript

Forming the Formators: The Nazareth Program (with Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI and Mike Bennett)

**00:01 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

As far as going deeper, I tell you, the week that we talked about the vows, there were so much richness there because we weren't talking about, "This is what the vow of poverty means." No, we were talking about, "What is your experience in your context with living this vow? What does that look like? What are the challenges? What are the gifts in your particular context?" So, what I was really learning was about context and culture, and how the Marianist charism is embodied in a different place than my own, and not necessarily content if that makes sense.

**00:35 - Mike Bennett**

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a podcast produced by the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. I'm Mike Bennett, media administrator for NACMS. For this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, Sr. Nicole Trahan shares about her 11-week experience in Nairobi, Kenya as a participant in the Nazareth Program. Sr. Nicole professed first vows in June of 2008, and perpetual vows in 2013. She serves as the vocation director for the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, amongst many other professional roles. This interview was recorded in early November 2023, soon after Sr. Nicole arrived back in the United States. She's currently on sabbatical in San Antonio, TX. And with that, we'll turn it over to Sr. Nicole to share her story as a participant in the Nazareth program.

**01:35 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Thank you for asking me to do this. I appreciate it. I was in Nairobi for 11 weeks for a program called Nazareth. And the Nazareth Program was named such because that is the place where Jesus was formed by Mary and Joseph as a child. And this program was a program to prepare new formators or people who will eventually or soon become formators, meaning directors of aspirancy or pre-novitiate, novitiate, temporary profession, which is called scholasticate in some places. So, it was preparation for those of us who are new to that role or soon-to-be in that role. I was the only one from the United States. There were 28 participants from Colombia, Ecuador, Malawi, Zambia, Kenya, India, Ivory Coast, Togo, Congo, Vietnam and South Korea.

**02:32 - Mike Bennett**

Wow, I imagine that's makes for a pretty diverse experience with people from so many different places.

**02:39 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Yes, it was wonderful. There's so much richness in the sharing, in the conversations and in prayer. It was common to pray in French, Spanish, English, Swahili, Korean, Vietnamese, all in the same day.

**02:56 - Mike Bennett**

Wow, all on the same day, okay!

**02:57 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Yeah! Well, it's interesting because we had different groups of people planning prayer. And if we had morning prayer and night prayer in English, then we had Mass in French and vice versa. However, the groups had people in them who spoke other languages. And so, even though it was prayer in French, we may have had songs or psalms in Swahili. Or if the Mass was being planned by a group that was English-speaking, well, most of the English speakers speak several languages. I think I'm the only one who doesn't, so we might have music or prayer said in Korean or in Vietnamese or some other language.

**03:39 - Mike Bennett**

Since you're talking about prayer, I'm curious if you could say more if there was a rhythm of life to the time there, how the structure of the day was?

**03:47 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Sure, absolutely. Monday through Friday, we had morning prayer at 7:00 AM, followed by meditation until breakfast. And then we had a session starting at 9:00 that would go until about 12:15 with a tea break somewhere in the midst. And then we would have a break after lunch until 3:00, and we'd have the Three O'Clock Prayer, which we prayed in either English, Spanish or French. And then, we'd have a session until 5:30-ish with a tea break, and then Mass at 5:45 followed by dinner. And then we had night prayer, and some days we just didn't have night prayers. So, it just depended on the day. So, that was Monday through Friday. Saturday, we'd have Mass at 7:00 and then breakfast and then we had our normal session from 9:00 to 12:00. And then lunch, and then a free afternoon with evening prayer at 5:30. No night prayer. And then, on Sundays we often would go on different excursions. Then we would have Mass sometime in the morning. That was the basic flow of the days. There wasn't a lot of variation Monday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday had some variation over the course of the 11 weeks.

**05:08 - Mike Bennett**

What were some of the topics or like the flow to those sessions?

**05:12 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

So, we started off with models of formation and human development, like all social, sexual development, dealing with trauma. How do you walk with people through trauma? How do you help people go through formation and deal with their trauma? And also recognizing your own and dealing with that as well? That's where we started, and then we moved into more history,

looking at Chaminade and Adèle on faith and prayer and faith of the heart. And we moved into charism things, so system of virtues, three offices. And then, we spent some time on mission and ministry and community and the Marianist Family. We also talked about Mary and the vows. Early on, we'd spend almost two weeks on a topic, and then as we progressed on, then we would have just a week.

**06:09 - Mike Bennett**

As you talk about some of those topics, I'm sitting here thinking they're very key topics in our Marianist spirituality and charism. And I'm thinking about the dynamic that this is being delivered to people who facilitate formation or are going to. So, they themselves, [including] you, are well formed in the spirituality and charism already. I mean, we can always grow... So, to what deeper extent did these conversations go, or what was some of the fruit of that given that you're already a vowed Sister?

**06:44 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Wow, there's so many ways I can answer that question. There's a lot of facets to an answer to that question. So, I will say that there were some days that I was like, "We've done this. How many times have I looked at this information?" There were days like that, but that's me. We have a Sister from Vietnam. She did her formation in Japan, speaks English. There are a lot of resources she doesn't have access to because they don't exist in Japanese or they don't exist in Vietnamese, and the English is difficult to get her hands on. So, there was some information that was new to her that was not necessarily new to some other people because of the lack of resources or because English isn't strong enough to really get to the depth of what the reading is, or not knowing that some resources even exist. So, there [was] some of that as well.

**07:34 Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

As far as going deeper, I tell you the week that we talked about the vows, there were so much richness there. Because we weren't talking about, "this is what the vow of poverty means." No, we were talking about, "What is your experience in your context with living this vow? What does that look like? What are the challenges? What are the gifts in your particular context?" So, what I was really learning was about context and culture and how the Marianist charism is embodied in a different place than my own. And not necessarily content, if that makes sense. A lot of the richness came from that kind of conversation.

**08:12 – Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

And then again, we also had some experts who came in and shared with us very detailed information that is helpful. For instance, Letter #605 from Father Chaminade said something very specific that we all need to go back and look at. That kind of detailed information was also highlighted, helpful. We also did a lot of conversation on case studies, things you might face as a formator and taking everything that we had heard. - So, this was later in the program. - So taking

everything that we had heard and applying it to difficult situations, and what does that look like, and how might it differ in the US as opposed to India?

**08:51 - Mike Bennett**

And you mentioned numerous facilitators for this program. I'm curious if you could kind of give a synopsis of that dynamic of the structure.

**09:00 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Okay, so the planning committee was Fr. Marty Solma, Fr. Ignace Pagnan, SM. He is from Ivory Coast, I think. And then Fr. Pablo Rambaud, who is the General Assistant for Religious life on the Brothers GA [General Administration], Bro. Eric Otiende, and then Sr. Tere [Teresa] Ferre, who is Spanish. She lives in India. She's a regional superior for our sisters in India. And then Sr. Prudence Adoki, who is the FMI Assistant for Religious Life on the General Administration. That was the team. Marty and Ignace were there the whole time. Each person sort of was responsible for a week or two and then brought in different experts to speak or they did it all themselves.

**09:52 - Mike Bennett**

You mentioned the richness in content, but also, I heard you talking about the richness in - I kind of want to say, "expanding awareness," but I don't know that that's the right way to say it. It kind of gave me a feeling of a real sense community amongst the people participating in this. You've mentioned kind of the rhythm of life. But more so, the sharing of experiences and that sense of really digging deep in your own experiences. I don't know if you can say more about that communal dynamic to this?

**10:24 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Yeah, I would say yes. By the time the program was over, when you've lived with people for 11 weeks in a pretty intense situation and cut off from outsiders I guess, we had some people come in. And it was hard for them to come in because we were very close knit. I guess you could say there were some very strong bonds formed among us. You know, a common experience and sharing close quarters, it'll do that to you. But also sharing deeply from a place of vulnerability, sharing anxieties and fears and hard experiences, but also joys, can unite a group of people.

**11:05 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

The first conversation that we had that I thought "This is bringing us closer together" was a conversation we had around the witness of religious life. And it was during the week of talking about consecration, and there are some places where people's lives are in danger for being Catholic, for being Priest, Religious, that I was really was not aware that Marianists lived in those situations where two people in our group had been held at gunpoint for being Christian. Sharing those experiences, yes, opened my eyes a great deal to my own privilege and to the

reality outside of the Western world, but also created a sense of bondedness among us. By the end of the program, we had a speaker come in and he said, “You seem pretty close. It’s a little intimidating.” Sorry?

**12:02 Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Yeah, I would say I gained some knowledge in terms of all of these topics. But I think more importantly, my mind was opened, as you said, about different contexts, about how Marianist life is lived in different places. I learned about my own biases and my own blind spots. I learned so much from more communal cultures than the US non-communal culture. Those are the things that I'm walking away with more so than topics.

**12:35 - Mike Bennett**

How did those impact you, whether that be in your work as a formator in your continued call and vow as a Sister? What do you do with that?

**12:46 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I am still processing that, I think. I believe or I hope that this program has helped me become a little bit more open-minded or empathetic in terms of other people's experiences. I hope that it's helped me to more clearly recognize my own biases and things about my way of thinking that need to be challenged or purified, the areas in which I still have to grow. I hope that as a formator, I'm also able to bring in a broader perspective now, instead of being so US-centric, or even just US and European centric, bringing in some of the richness that I gained.

**13:28 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Also - and I've mentioned this to our Sisters - that we are in the US FMI. We are one of the few units that has no cultural immersion aspect to our formation where people in formation spend time outside of the US as part of formation. I mean, we've had people do that, but it's not formalized. I hope that we take a look at that and change that. I think not only is it helpful in terms of opening people's minds or expanding experiences, but also building connections. We are one family, right, and an international family, but if we stay so US-centric, then that sense of being united as a family is weaker. So, anything we can do to strengthen that I think is really helpful, especially as in the Western countries we become smaller. So those connections are going to be really important.

**14:29 - Mike Bennett**

You mentioned the international experience as part of formation. I am not familiar with that dynamic of formation.

**14:37 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I think it's both religious branches. For instance, in Latin America, for us [in the United States], it's one region, Latin America. They are not separate by country. So, someone from Chile will go to Colombia for Novitiate and may work in Brazil later because it's all one unit, right? And there, that happened fairly recently. They became one unit in the FMIs. So, they're working on those relationships. And so, they gather. And so, the Novitiate is in Columbia. And then, our Sisters in Vietnam do a lot of their formation in Japan. We have temporary professed sisters from Togo, Ivory Coast, Malawi, who study in Italy.

**15:23 - Mike Bennett**

Oh wow.

**15:23 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

So there's a lot of movement in other places, not so much here. And with the Brothers, and just look at the region of Eastern Africa, the aspirancy is in Zambia, the Novitiate is in Nairobi, the Scholasticate is in Nairobi. Right now, at the Scholasticate, I think, most of the temporary professed Brothers there are from Malawi. So, there's a real sense of movement. We're all one. There are two brothers from Ivory Coast, maybe, who are studying in Nairobi right now. So, it's kind of a normal part of formation and just the experience of being Marianists in these places in a way that is not true here. Part of that could be the fact that some of these countries are the size of our states, like individual states here.

**16:14 - Mike Bennett**

Yeah, I was thinking about that, because my understanding - I might be wrong here - is that the Pre-Novitiate is in San Antonio and Novitiate is here in Dayton.

**16:22 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

For the Brothers that is true.

**16:25 - Mike Bennett**

Okay, and for the Sisters?

**16:26 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

The Sisters, it is where the director is. So right now, Pre-Novitiate is in Dayton as well as the Novitiate. And if you look at the Brothers, the Brothers from Mexico do their aspirancy and novitiate here in the States and Brothers from South Korea do their Novitiate here in the States. But we don't have that same reciprocity.

**16:48 - Mike Bennett**

Yeah, I see. Was there a particular reason why the program was specifically in Nairobi that you know of?

**16:44 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I don't know for sure. I didn't ask the organizers. However, my theory, my educated guess, is that the retreat center is very large. It had private bedrooms with private bathrooms, and so it was conducive to a mixed gender group of people. It's closer to the majority of people who were there, as opposed to if they were to have it here [in Dayton]. That's a lot of people who would have to come a great distance. That's my understanding. There were eight participants from India and six from Eastern Africa. It's easier for visa purposes, too, than some other places. So, even though the majority of people came from India, there's no way all of us could have gotten visas into India because of their policies about anti-Christian immigration policies and being very careful about proselytization. They don't want people coming in to make converts. So, it's a lot more difficult to get a visa there. So, those kinds of issues.

**17:59 - Mike Bennett**

I can imagine having a group that has that dynamic of geographical cultural diversity that there may have been topics that there was some maybe dissension on, different interpretations of what something might mean, what formation looks like, challenges, something that comes with community dynamics that you've already mentioned, too. So, I'm just curious how that may have played a role or how that showed up at all?

**18:24 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

When we talked about case studies and, "How would you handle different situations in community life or in formation," I wish we could have spent more time on that. Because there were some differences in terms of, in some of our regions, aspirants and novices aren't allowed to have phones, and can only use a community computer once or twice a week because of the time being sacred. But also, the people in formation being young and wanting to shape them or influence them in a way that is not supported by the way that sometimes things you can find online are not supported. So, there's that, and we had good conversation about that. We had a conversation about tattoos and how people feel about that. One of the Brothers, his sister passed away while we were there, and he did not go home for the funeral or anything, and he said that his Brothers back home would represent him to the family and that he could feel okay, because his Brothers, his community would...

**19:32 - Mike Bennett**

Yeah. Other Society of Mary members.

**19:34 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Correct. And for him and for his region, that's the same as him being there in person. There were some who were there who were like, "Oh, absolutely not. If I were him, I would have been gone already. I would have been on the first flight back to wherever it is I came from." Grappling with that, I think, was really enlightening, I guess, for a number of us.

**19:55 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I can remember I was sitting down talking to a Brother who's from Malawi, but he lives in Kenya. Maybe about a week after, we found out his sister died, and we realized he wasn't leaving. He was staying with us for the rest of the program. And this was pretty early on in the program, so he could have - in my mind - could have gone and then come back. That just wasn't going to happen, and we were talking about how different that is from our own understanding of what was right or what was just to the family, or even just for his own peace.

**20:29 – Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

He made his peace with it. I mean, there's only so much conversation I could have with him, though, because he's a French speaker and understands and speaks some English, but has trouble with the American accent, so had a lot of difficulty with me, understanding me. But as far as I could tell, he was at peace. So, you have the silly differences in conversations. They're silly on the surface. They point to something deeper. But then you also have that very real example of how different our regions are. And family connection, how connected we are to our family of origin and how we understand our place in the Marianist Family. It was very interesting.

**21:16 - Mike Bennett**

Not knowing the people involved, I imagine there's also a layer of what that continued presence with the program rather than with the family, says about commitment and vow, right? You're there talking about formation, and I'm assuming this is someone who's involved in formation. And so, for that region or area, what's the expectation as far as a commitment and vow that they make? What would be a hope you have for the Marianist Family having experienced this program?

**21:46 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I hope that this program happens again. I mean, maybe it wouldn't be quite as long. Maybe there are some things that would be different about it, but I hope that the program happens again as new formators come up. Because I really do think it was invaluable, and I know that it was a huge financial commitment, but well worth it, I think, personally speaking. I hope that as people enter into the work of formation that they feel a sense of support from the group of us who were gathered that we can be supportive of each other as we face different issues as formators.



**22:26 - Mike Bennett**

Before we hear Sr. Nicole's response to our concluding question, I'd like to offer Sr. Nicole a word of thanks for sharing her Marianist story, particularly how her experience with the Nazareth program helps highlight our global Marianist Family, the diversity within it, and the significance that formation plays in our commitment to the Marianist charism. Thanks to you, Sr. Nicole. I'd also like to offer a word of thanks to you, our listeners, for listening to this episode and for your engagement with the North American Center for Marianist Studies. Make sure to subscribe to *Sharing Our Marianist Studies* wherever you listen to podcasts and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube at "ThisIsNACMS. Now to wrap up this episode we return with our final question.

**23:18 - Mike Bennett**

We know that the Founders corresponded via letter writing, so if you were going to write anyone a letter, dead or alive, and be guaranteed a response, who might you write to and what would be the topic?

**23:32 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

I might ask the Sisters who came to the US first, like the three Spanish sisters who first came to the US and established themselves in the middle-of-nowhere Texas. I would love to know from them how they made that decision to go where they went, how those early years were, what were their priorities and hopes and disappointments, and what support did they have?

**23:57 - Mike Bennett**

Well, Sister Nicole, thank you so much for spending some time doing this recording. I know that you've been back for maybe a week...

**24:07 – Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Yes, a little over a week, I got back last Sunday, yeah.

**24:07 - Mike Bennett**

Yeah. So, the experience, I'm sure, is very fresh. Transitions are a lot. And so, I appreciate the vulnerability of talking about the program and its impact on you and hopes for the future as well.

**24:21 - Sr. Nicole Trahan, FMI**

Sure, no problem, and it will continue to unfold. So, if we were to have this conversation probably in two months, two months from now, it would probably be very different. Thank you.