

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Ep. 42

A Path to Profession (with Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM, and interviewed by Mike Bennett)

00:05 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

I took that prayer to her, and [Our Lady?] just said, “Be with the people. Be with the people.” I was increasingly finding that the Marianists are my people – Lay Marianists, Brothers, Sisters, that I was meeting...

00:22 - 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. After spending a time in aspirancy in the last two years at the Novitiate in Dayton, Ohio, Chicago Joe Schuller, Memo Peña Contreras, and Joseph Choi will each profess their first vows with the Society of Mary this summer. We've sat down with each of them to learn more about their discernment to become a Marianist Brother and what their formation process has entailed. In this episode, we'll hear from Chicago Joe Schuller, who will be the first of the three to profess his first vows. Chicago shares about what attracted him to vowed religious life, how his experiences of the aspirancy and Novitiate shaped him, and the role intentional community has had in his call to be a Brother. In this interview, Chicago mentions the *Greehey Scholar* program at St. Mary's University, which is a four-year renewable scholarship program offered to undergraduate freshmen who are exceptional scholars that engage in principles of constant learning, serving and leading not only in a business environment but also in their communities.

01:39 - Mike Bennett

Fr. Jim Tobin is a Marianist priest who serves as the chaplain for the Greehey School of Business at St. Mary's University and lives in the Casa Maria community on St. Mary's campus. Lastly, *Rattler Awakening* is a retreat experience that invites St. Mary's University students to explore their faith lives in the context of a caring community. Please join us in praying for Chicago as he anticipates professing his first vows on Saturday, May 18, 2024, at 4:00 PM Eastern Time. To join the live stream of his profession at that time, visit marianist.com/live. Without further ado, let's turn the floor over to Chicago.

02:27 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

My name is Chicago Joe Schuller, and I'm currently a second-year novice out here at Mount St. John, preparing for first vows, we hope.

02:39 - Mike Bennett

Tell me a little bit about what brought you to the Marianists.

02:43 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Well, for me, it was at St. Mary's University. I'm a twin, and a lot of my teachers didn't think that my parents could afford to send both my twin brother and I to private institutions, let alone one of us to a private institution at the same time. And St. Mary's was coming and doing an automatic admissions program, and so my teacher said, "Just go see if they give you anything at all." And I was a pretty good student, so I wound up, I think, with a 50% tuition discount. And I went and visited St. Mary's, and there were a couple other scholarships that I was applying to, and I said, "This might work out." I talked to my mom. And she said, "You know, I think this will be good." My hope was to go through the Business School. I had gone to a business high school - a career, business kind of technical high school - and so, I was going to continue with doing business and hopefully going into law to go into politics. Well, of course, that changed over time, but I said, "You know, I think we'll make this work." And my parents, Mom and Dad said, "We can make this work; this will work out." And actually, the first Marianist I ever met was from the Greehey Scholar program. That's where I met Fr. Jim Tobin. And then I continued to meet the Marianists while I'm at school at St. Mary's University.

04:17 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

I wound up getting my work-study job for my second year at Campus Ministry. I had joined the choir after starting altar serving, so just more commitment and commitment. And, of course, you meet tons of Marianists at Casa Tuesday event, which is kind of an open house for prayer and for meal and socializing. And so, it was a free meal as a college student, which was great. But I began to fall in love with who the Brothers were, and who surrounded the Brothers and what they did for me as a student.

05:00 - Mike Bennett

Casa Maria, being one of the communities within the Society of Mary there at St. Mary's, I'm curious if there was an experience you had there that really sticks out to you?

05:12 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Not necessarily one memory that sticks out to me, but rather just the overall warmth that you felt being in the community. And the belonging and the welcome that the brothers offered and the hospitality they offered, which was a big value in my family. And so, I said, "You're doing something right here. This seems like the values line up for me."

05:42 - Mike Bennett

So, that's your first exposure to the Marianists. I'm curious about the attraction to vowed religious life. How did that rise within you?

05:53 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

It was something that was called out of me through a continual process. When I first started discerning... people talk about their conversion to the Catholic faith. Mine being a cradle Catholic [on] the border of Texas and Mexico, from an Irish Catholic perspective, but also the Mexican Catholic perspective. Church is a cultural event as well as a faith practice. But for me, it was really throughout high school when I was going through confirmation, it really was just the motions, and I really wasn't believing in everything that I [was] saying. I was believing, and I definitely wasn't living it. And I went to a Rattler Awakening experience, and that was what I call my reconversion moment. And I sat down with that same person, Jim Tobin, and I just poured out all these sins. And he just looked at me and said, "You know, God loves you, right?" And tears coming down my face, crying, crying. And he just gave me this big hug. And after that moment is when I had started altar serving. And I had first had this experience - I actually haven't shared too much with most people - but it was this experience while altar serving with Fr. Larry Doersching for a Sunday Mass in Assumption Chapel. Throughout the consecration was this sense of peace, and everything seemed to vanish away, and it was just - I could hear the prayers. And they meant something new for me and the way that I entered into Mass from that point on. And so, I talked to Fr. Larry Doersching about that, and he said, "Well, maybe think about diocesan priesthood."

07:42 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

So, I went to the Assumption Seminary, which is the seminary for the Archdiocese of San Antonio. And I went there, talked to the vocation director, and he gave me a tour of the whole place. And I thought to myself, walking around, if my vocation is to grow more like Christ, this doesn't seem like the environment for me to be doing that in. Also, the thought of me living alone was rather scary. I knew I needed to be with people, and I carried that with me into a pilgrimage I did to Our Lady of Guadalupe. And I said, "Well, it's not diocesan priesthood. I don't know. What is this all about?" And I took that prayer to her and [Our Lady?] just said, "Be with the people, be with the people." And I was increasingly finding that the Marianists were my people, Lay Marianists, Brothers, Sisters that I was meeting. And so, I came back, and I said, "Okay." Bro. Esteban [Reyes Durán] was at St. Mary's, and I told him about this. And he said, "Well, maybe you should come to our Marianist Lay Community Formation meetings. Right now, we're just talking about Mary. So maybe you can process this experience in there."

09:04 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

So, that's what I did. I went through Lay formation for a year, and I think I was a junior when I finally became a Lay Marianist. And at that same time, I had Fr. Tim Eden and Fr. Marty Solma, who said, "Well, you know, it might be good for you to do an exchange program to Chaminade University in Honolulu." And I said, "Cool. Go to Hawaii. Why not? Why wouldn't I? Why wouldn't I?" And I got to see a different side of the Marianist Family there and fell more in love and had great brothers who helped me along, and Lay Marianists, too. In Maimoa, Bro. Dennis Schmitz, Bro. Gary Morris, who got me involved entering into the cultural awareness. Even

though I'm in the United States, I felt like I was immersed in a completely different culture. But still, some of the same values you see, the family values, were expressed in a more caring and thoughtful way and an embracing way than you do here in Dayton or even in San Antonio. It's easy to make plans when you're living in paradise. And so, I said, "Well, I'll think about doing the PULSE [Partners in Urban Leadership, Service, and Education] program," which is the year of service program after college that's sponsored by the Marianists. And I said, "Okay, well, I'll do this, and I'll live in community for a year and see how that goes." Then I come back, and the [Covid-19] Pandemic happens. I had applied for PULSE, so it was like, "Well, that's it." And I sat with that in prayer, and I said, "Well, God, this is your sign saying, 'Well, there's no better time to think about community, than when I was sent home by the university.'"

10:52 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

And so, I was living with my mom by myself, and I said, "Well, there's no better time than now to try out religious life." To give back the grace that I've received from Brothers throughout my time was just my initial drive, to say the way they live community and to be able to do this for other people. To be in service to the people of God through community was something that was very beautiful for me. And I say my first Marianist community was the Chapel choir that I had joined, and from there, everything else flowed from it. It was just that experience of community that really took me to each next step.

11:35 - Mike Bennett

You've spent the last two years in formation through the Novitiate in the year prior with the aspirancy. Can you talk a little bit about what those years have looked like for you and what that experience has been like?

11:50 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

It's a little different because I joined in the middle of the Pandemic, and I wasn't even sure if I would start when I actually started. It was the summertime, and I was kind of waiting for a response back after I had submitted my aspirancy application. And I got a call on a Thursday night from Fr. Tim Kenney, who's the current Head of Religious Life or Office of Religious Life. And he called me, he said, "You know, this is great that you applied, and we think that it would be good for you to go to Dayton, Ohio, and live in the Stonemill/Keifaber community for at least six months." So, I went. What other choice [did I have]? I said, "If I'm going to try this, I'm going to try this." I started as a pre-aspirant for the first six months, or first semester really. And I said, "What's different between this and the aspirancy?" And they said, "Yeah, you're doing everything that's an aspirant is doing."

12:55 – Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

So, I became an aspirant [in] January of 2021, and then continued my aspirancy in the formal aspirancy house in San Antonio, Texas. But my time at Stonemill was very formative. My first formator was Fr. Jim Fitz, and he was really great at sitting down with me and learning about 1) community life, but also 2) about Marianist history. I had a very brief understanding of Marianist history. So, I was reading books from [Fr. Eduardo] Benlloch, from [Fr. Dave] Fleming and different things that I would sit down with Jim Fitz and go through these and how I was feeling about it, and what did I think about what that meant for me in formation. And so, that was really great. Ministry was kind of half and half. I spent a lot of time at Mission of Mary Cooperative just as a farm hand, because they lost a lot of the volunteers that would help as farm hands. And they said, "You know, you were going to come and do Mission of Mary during the PULSE year that got canceled, doing some sort of development or strategy work. But we really just need a farm hand." And I was like, "Okay, if you need a farm hand, then we'll go for that." So, I did that, and I led a couple of men's groups with Bro. Tom Pieper. And I just had a really great time entering into community. Then, I went to Casa Maria [in San Antonio] to continue my aspirancy, and I call that the busiest year of my life ever. I was working at Holy Rosary Parish being the young adult minister because they had just lost the young adult minister. So, I was filling the gap there. I was doing some Ministry of Presence at Central Catholic [High School] during the lunch hours and for different liturgies, and at Tecaboca on the weekends hosting retreats. And to...

14:51 – Mike Bennett

...that's all?

14:52 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

That's it. Well, and the cherry on top is I took one master's course in scripture each year. My background was in business and political science. And so, they said, "Well, it would be good for you to get some scripture." And one of my former theology professors said, "You can audit it as a master's. Just take the course, and if it doesn't work, then you can drop to an audit and just audit it, or you can take it on and the full thing." And so, I took it on and the full thing both semesters that I was there. And so, it's there that I really learned about how to be intentional with your community time. Because when you're an active ministry - which I was pretty active - how did it continue to build relationships when you have very little time? I had meals with them, and sometimes that's the only time that I would see some Brothers.

15:49 – Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

And so, I said, "I've got to figure this out," because my prayer life was taking a hit, and learning how to prioritize prayer. And so, I said, "This feels like the call to continue and to continue discerning how this all fits in with the idea of a communal life of prayer and a personal life of prayer, continue to build a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and with Mary who would guide me along my way and continues to guide me along my way." And so, after, consultation with the community, they said, "These are some things that you could work on, which we all do.

But I think that you're ready," which was great. So, that was a great moment to say, "Oh, okay, finally to the Novitiate," which I had been hoping to go to after my time at Stonemill, but they said, "It's time for you to go to Casa." So, I went to Casa.

16:49 – Mike Bennett

Transitioning into that Novitiate, what was that experience like? Can you say more about Novitiate life?

16:55 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Well, our first year - which we call the "canonical year" because of the Canon law, the Church requires 365 days plus one - entering into the Novitiate was an experience that I like to call "learning to abandon yourself without losing yourself." So, abandon your false self, abandon the you that tries to grip on so tight to the world, which I was doing probably a lot, and to enter into yourself. I like to think of it as the most selfless and most selfish thing, the most selfish time in your life. It's selfless because you're learning to lose your false self. You're learning to get rid of those things that put roadblocks up to building community, put roadblocks up to relationships, put roadblocks up to prayer and to be aware of "When am I starting to build up a wall?"

18:03 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

And for me, at least the first year and even the second year, it's learning to either break down that wall or take each brick and examine each brick and say, "Why was this placed here? How do I deal with that?" And take that with God and say, "God, what are you calling me to?" and the great consolation to have Mary as a guide who walked alongside Jesus. So, we hope through this process of abandonment that we become truly like Christ. We will never reach his perfection. We will only reflect, maybe, like on a pond of water, a little bit of Christ by the end of our lives. And that hope of reflecting Christ is really what I entered into and intentional community. In the Novitiate, you don't have a lot of contact with other people outside the Novitiate, except when they come in or you're sent out. That means that the people you're in community with, you really are in community with them, and so there's going to be a lot of rough edges and bumps along the way. But that is what any Marianist (Lay Marianist, Sister, Brother) in formation, that's what community does for us. Intentional community points out those places you need to work on to continue to reflect Christ.

19:46 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

I could probably say a lot more, but I think that's the essential, that the Novitiate is the personified and maximized and micro-level look into what the essential is, and that's the interior, as Chaminade says. So, we keep looking at that, and you might think, "Well, I'm still in this community. I'm not going anywhere." But still, you can take a missionary spirit with that and say, "I'm going on a mission into the unknown of my interior life, and let God strengthen me along the way." And when I'm at my wit's end, I like to think of Mary's putting her mantle over

me and saying, "It's going to be okay. Just keep going." And that's what it is to be a missionary in the Novitiate, to journey into the deep.

20:46 - Mike Bennett

So, that's a really good conceptual overview of the experience of the Novitiate. What's the practical every day? I know that there's a lot of course study, you know, those types of dynamics. What does that look like?

21:01 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

The way that the Novitiate is structured now, our classes we have in the morning until noon time on Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays. And they cover everything from the vows, Marianist history, Religious Catholic history, Church history. And a special NACMS course, I think every other Wednesday that delves deeper into Marianist history, but also in the second semester tries to get us to look into something that we really want to discover and talk about further. And so, we cover those courses and much more. There's also a course that our novice director, Bro. Dennis Bautista, has formed called Marianist Wellness. It's all these aspects of our life that are calling us to be well in, and we try to balance all these things. As he says, "Balance is unachievable, but we should still strive for it." So, it's everything from relational wellness, vocational wellness, digital wellness. How much time are we spending on our phones, and how does our time on our phones affect our relationships, or our vocation, or our career? All these different things that play into it our physical wellness. And so, for the first year, we do intensive study in all of those courses. We spend time in the work period in kind of the more monastic tradition that we have. Like on this day, we'll be going to make the sandwich bags for people in need on the west side of Dayton at the Corpus Christi Church through the Food for the Journey Project.

22:47 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

We partner with certain things like that to do some work together. And then every other Thursday, we have what's called a "Desert Day," and that's the time where you tap into the interior life. You have no distractions from electronics, everything is turned off, and you go into the desert like Jesus was. You may be tempted, but you will be fed manna from heaven if you stay faithful to that time. And that's a deep time for reflection, contemplation and not to study at all, not to read any of the things that you need for class, because that can pile up, too. But to say, "I'm going to take this time to be with God for the whole day." And then, we come back, and we like to joke that it's "desert day," but it's also "dessert day." So, you just add an extra "s," and there's always some sort of dessert ready.

23:50 - Mike Bennett

All that is happening within the context of that community there. There's ideally multiple novices journeying together, the novice master, assistant novice master. But then also others who have a ministry, maybe outside the community, but are also playing a role in that lived community standpoint. Most members of the Society of Mary live within the context of community. It's just that the Novitiate community looks a little bit different because of those added pieces, I imagine.

24:21 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Right, and I think one of those added pieces is a more intentional time of communal prayer. In more active communities, at least in the Province of the United States, there are some communities that they have Saturday morning off, or they have a Friday morning or a Friday afternoon off if they're in a community that is connected to a school, because that allows them time to be present to school activities and be a witness to the charism at those events. And so, each community has their own kind of thing. But with Novitiate, we spend time in communal meditation, meditation in common.

25:03 – Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

We're all setting an example for each other. When those times that come that say, "I'm not really feeling like my time of mental prayer or meditation is really feeling bright or responsive or open," you can look across the aisle of chairs and see a Brother who is attending very well to prayer, and that is inspiring and one of the graces of communal meditation. And we enter into the prayer of the Church, and we have time for adoration and for rosary, which other communities, because of their active life, don't always have time to do as much as they would probably want to. And so, that's a distinctive mark of our community is we're very intentional about our prayer time together and is one of the sustaining things for any community. You look at the prayer life of the community and you can see sustaining aspects of it in their relationships in their ministry, etcetera.

26:20 - Mike Bennett

You've really touched well on the formative dynamics of that experience of the Novitiate and the aspirancy. I also know those are strong times of discernment as well. I'm curious if you can talk a little bit about how that discernment piece is different within the experience of the Novitiate versus your discernment to go into pre-aspirancy?

26:50 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Everybody is going to have a different experience. I have found that my step into pre-aspirancy and aspirancy is, "Can I do these things? Can I check off that question box? Am I continually able to do the things that the community does?" And even getting into the Novitiate, that's what I [asked]. "Can I do this? Am I drawn to this? Yes. Yes. Am I being affirmed by my other Brothers? Yes. Okay, go to the Novitiate." The Novitiate is still asking that question, "Can I do this?" But it's also our living the evangelical counsels, the vows. Are these the best way for me to

grow in Christ? Is this the best way for me to love? Does the vow of obedience, does the vow of poverty, does the vow of celibate chastity, are all of these ways? In the context of community life, is this the best way for me to love? Can I love within these guidelines of the vows?

28:07 – Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

I don't really like to see them as constricting. I mean, the big joke is no money, no funny, no honey for the vows. But really, when you get deeper into the vows, they are guidelines for how to be free. And so, the ultimate choice is, am I free to freely take on these vows, to receive them, just to be able to give them away in service? At the end of just the first year, I don't know if I could have answered that question fully. And so, having the second year to go out into ministry, see new ministry opportunities, but also to be living that out, my promises as a novice to practice these vows for these two years, does that look like it's lining up to be what I want? And that experience was very helpful in me saying, "Yeah, this is exactly what I want to be living."

29:12 - Mike Bennett

What would you say to someone who is considering vowed religious life with the Marianists, either Society of Mary or Daughters of Mary Immaculate?

29:13 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Take the first step. The first step for me was telling my parents, "I don't think this law school thing is for me." That was one of the first inklings where it was like, "This isn't lining up with who I am." So, it's take that first step. It requires courage and vulnerability. To be vulnerable is the most courageous thing that a human can do. And to be vulnerable enough to say, "I think this is what I want," and then to take this an actionable step. Discernment isn't about waiting around for an answer. Discernment is making a choice and letting the Holy Spirit confirm or deny what that might be. So, take the first step, and let God handle the rest because He is already handling it anyway.

30:23 – Mike Bennett

What's the hope you have for the Marianist Family?

30:27 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

My hope for the Marianist Family is that we continue to unify and strengthen our bonds as a family unit. That looks different in every place and requires a lot of effort and intentional effort by people to put in time for dialogue and discussion about what the signs of the times are, and where Marianists are needed the most in these times. And I'm just speaking about the United States of America. There's a lot more that the Family of Mary on a global scale is already doing to unify. I think if we continue to strengthen those bonds and be authentic to who we are and what we can offer each other as a family, then we can move forward to respond to the signs of the times.

31:23 - Mike Bennett

Before we hear Chicago's response to our concluding question, I'd like to express our gratitude to Chicago for doing this interview with me and sharing a bit of his Marianist story. And I'd 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 Stories* 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. We know the Marianist Founders corresponded through letter writing. So, if you were going to write a letter to anyone, dead or alive, and be guaranteed a response, who would you write to, and what would be the topic?

32:17 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

My maternal grandmother, she passed away when I was in college, so she never got to see the final steps of my discernment. So, it would just be a letter about everything that's happened in my religious life so far to my grandmother.

32:36 – Mike Bennett

Well, Chicago, thank you so much for sharing a little bit about your story and giving us a little lens into the life of formation with the Marianists.

32:45 - Chicago Joe Schuller, nSM

Appreciate it. Thank you.