

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 43 Transcript

A Lawyer's Path to First Vows (with Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM)

00:02 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

And it was a nice part, a beautiful gift, because I was working as a lawyer, but also as a Brother. So, I had these two parts of me being in these places trying to help people, either with translation or paperwork or different needs that they had, but also being present as a Brother. So, I think that through that ministry, I could apply what I like about the Marianist - be present for people.

00:34 - 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 time in aspirancy in the last two years at the Novitiate in Dayton, Ohio, Guillermo Pena Contreras, more commonly known as Memo, will profess first vows with the Society of Mary on June 8, 2024. In this episode, Memo shares what attracted him to vowed religious life, how his experiences of aspirancy and Novitiate shaped him, how his background in family law impacted his vocation, and his experience of coming to the US from Mexico. Please join us in praying for Memo as he anticipates professing first vows on Saturday, June 8 at noon Central Standard Time, which is 2:00 PM Eastern Daylight Savings Time. To join the live stream of his profession at that time, visit www.marianist.com/live. Without further ado, let's turn the floor over to Memo.

01:41 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

My name is Guillermo Pena Contreras, and normally the nickname for Guillermo is "Memo." that's why everybody calls me Memo, Brother Memo. I am from Querétaro, Mexico. It's in the center of the country of Mexico, and I am in my second year of my Novitiate with the Marianist Brothers.

02:02 - Mike Bennett

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

02:06 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

I met the Marianists because I was working in a group in a parish with young adults. And through this group, a Marianist priest invited us to work in one of the Marianist chapels, Padre Raymundo, in Mexico. And through this invitation, we started to have more relations with the Marianist Brothers. And then, with the time, I joined the choir in one of these chapels. And in this choir was one Brother, Brother Firmín [García], who just celebrated a couple of years ago his 25th anniversary. So, through this choir, I started to have more relation and conversations with the Brothers. I started to see their work, what they were doing through different Brothers and priests, and I saw how they are very close with people, how they are always trying to help in

different ways, and they are always available for people. I think that that's the main thing why I decided to join the Brothers, because they are always there for people.

03:15 - Mike Bennett

And your call to vowed religious life, was that something that came before your experience with the Marianists or after?

03:24 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

When I was a child, my grandma, she is the one who always gave me a little piece about religion. She's the one who was teaching me a little bit about praying the Rosary, praying with Saints. And I remember that once she told me, "Well, if one day you want to be a Padrecito (a priest), I can take you to the Padrecitos here in Amanecer Balvanera." And I said, "Oh, yeah, grandma." But I was a child, so I didn't pay too much attention. When I was visiting my grandma, I noticed that there was a house in this neighborhood, Amanecer Balvanera, but I never stopped to think what kind of house is that one. I just saw the house, and I said, "That house looks different." And then, I knew that that was the Marianist community, and that was the house that my grandma used to tell me when I was a child.

04:17 – Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

And before I met the Marianists, I didn't have a clear idea about what is religious life. So, I saw for example, the Franciscans, I saw the diocesan priests, and I was thinking that they were the same. But through a religious sister in a Mexican congregation called Esclavas de la Inmaculada Niña, Sr. Marie Carmen, she invited me to a retreat with the other branch of her order, with the Brothers. So, I went through a vocational retreat with them, and then when I saw the community life, I said, "Okay, I think that this is what I want. What I want is community life. I don't want to live in a parish or work in a parish the whole time. But living in a community, helping each other, working together, that's what I want." I was studying in university, so I finished my studies. I started to work, and I left that part on the side for a while until I was working in this other parish, and I met the Marianists, and that came back to me again.

05:31 - Mike Bennett

What was your path to entering the process of formation, the aspirancy, and the Novitiate?

05:39 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

First of all, I was a Contact with the Brothers. During this time, they gave me some information... "This is how we work. We have the pre-novitiate [as] it's called in Mexico." That is the same [as] aspirancy. So, during that time as a Contact, I just requested or applied for the aspirancy or pre-Novitiate program. I had some dinners and moments to share with the Brothers. And then, when I applied and I was accepted to be part of the pre-Novitiate or the aspirancy program, I moved to the community in Querétaro, and I started to live with , with the Brothers,

and to work with them, too. So, I started the process of formation with some classes with Father Quentin Hakenewerth, Bro. Nareo [Ramírez Hernández]. I just started to take some classes of English, too, because I didn't speak English, any word. And, of course, they told me, "Well, the next step is the Novitiate, and the Novitiate is then the United States. So, you have to go to the States, and you have to learn English." And I said, "Okay, here we go!" And normally, it's one year, but in my case, it was a little longer because of the [Covid-19] Pandemic and different things with the paperwork. Everything was slower.

07:07 – Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

But once I came to the States, I started or continued with the second part of my aspirancy program, living at Casa Maria Community in San Antonio, Texas. And there I was learning English. I was studying English first at the MACC, Mexican American Catholic College, and then I continued at St. Mary's University. At that moment, I didn't have a specific ministry because the main thing was to learn English to continue with my Novitiate. In Mexico, I was visiting sick people and elder people, praying with them, giving the communion and different things, so that was a beautiful ministry. Then, at the end of my aspirancy program, I applied for the Novitiate, and I was accepted. So, I moved to Dayton, Ohio, to continue with my Novitiate. This is divided in two parts. The first one, the first year, is dedicated to the prayer [and] meditation, to study more about the congregation, more about our own history, and how our congregation started as well with the Marianist Sisters and the Lay people. Then, during the second year, we go out for a ministry. So, I was sent to St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, to work in the Law School. So, I volunteered at the Law school for a while, doing different things in different places.

08:51 - Mike Bennett

You have a background in law. So, can you talk a little bit about that? What did that look like for you?

08:56 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Yeah, I studied law when I was 18 / 19 years old in my university in Querétaro. I graduated, and I started to work as a lawyer. When I joined the Marianists, I just stopped any work or any relation with law stuff until I came back to San Antonio. And it was a nice part, a beautiful gift because I was working as a lawyer but also as a Brother. So, I had these two parts of me. Being in these places trying to help people, either with translation or paperwork or different needs that they had, but also being present as a Brother. So, I think that through that ministry I could apply what I like about the Marianists - be present for people.

09:50 - Mike Bennett

Did you have a particular type of law that your experience was within or that you were volunteering in at St. Mary's?

09:58 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Well, in Mexico, I was working as a criminal lawyer. Then I moved to work with the government, working with taxes and different stuff. So, that's the boring part of the law. At St. Mary's, I was working with Family Law.

10:18 - Mike Bennett

Okay.

10:19 – Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

That was something very interesting. But it's also sometimes a little hard because you have to be there for different situations - situations with families that are having problems. I was working with people with disabilities, so sometimes it's a little hard when you see how some people really try to work, and they have a good level of comprehension, and they can work, and they can study, and that's amazing. But also, how some people, the level of the disability is a little higher and they depend more on their parents or on another person. That's when the lawyer or someone has to act and be present to say, "Okay, we are going to the court." Also working with the people at the shelter. That was a little touching because I was translating. But then, I was just helping either Spanish-speakers or English-speakers. But when you are working there, and you are helping them to recover IDs, birth certificates or licenses or IDs, etc., they started to share their stories with you. And it's very touching, that part, how they trust in you, and they just want to talk. They just want to share with you. And I think that's that part of being present for people, be present for people. Probably, I was thinking that I was doing nothing, but just being present and listening to these people. That was something that they really appreciated, and I really appreciate that, too, because through those stories, I learned a lot, and that was very, very special for me.

12:17 - Mike Bennett

Well, and it sounds like there's an intersection there for you with the Marianist charism. You're talking about the relational culture of the Marianists, but it sounds like there's more to it than just that relational dynamic that has to do with the spirituality [and] the charism of the Marianists. Is that true?

12:36 – Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Yeah. A couple of days ago, my director asked me, "Okay, what is the difference between Memo the lawyer and Memo the Brother?" I said, "Well, you know, Memo the lawyer, he was just thinking about the case. He was just thinking about 'How can I do this? How can I finish this case?' But Memo the Brother and the lawyer are trying to see, 'Okay, how can I help not just in a physical way or in a material way, but also how can I help in a spiritual way? If the person needs, besides the paper-work... if they need something else, spiritual help, or - I don't know - any other help that we can provide, well I try to see how we can help them.'"

13:29 - Mike Bennett

Tell me a little bit about your experience of the Novitiate. I'm curious if you can paint a little bit more of a picture of what the day-to-day life of a Marianist novice looks like for you.

13:41 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

The Novitiate is a very good time of discernment. It is also probably one of the strongest times of discernment because you have a lot of time to be with yourself... So, it's the time when you learn more about your, where you come from yourself, and you can see all the gifts that you have but also all the reality. So, sometimes that can hurt, yes. Sometimes, that can be challenging, yes. But it's also a beautiful gift because the best way to continue with formation is knowing yourself, knowing what is inside of you.

14:32 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

So, normally, our days are dedicated to prayer: community prayer, and personal prayer. We have our breakfast community. Different Brothers have some ministries, so some Brothers are working at UD [University of Dayton] or in different activities. Also, novices have classes. So sometimes we have classes in the Novitiate, sometimes we have classes at NACMS, sometimes we have classes outside of the Novitiate. For example, I was taking this course of Christology. We have our Mass together, our prayers together, and our dinners together. That's the part of living in community. Sometimes, we spend some extra time, like, "Okay, let's play a game. Let's go out for a walk, or let's go to a park, or let's go for a coffee or something together." So that's a beautiful part of being a family and living in community. But also, we have all this time to be just with ourselves, to be in solitude, to be in quiet, dedicated to meditation, prayer, personal prayer. And that's also something that helps us to continue with our daily life.

15:55 - Mike Bennett

I'm curious how discernment looks different in the Novitiate than it did prior to the Novitiate.

16:01 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

In the Novitiate, you have [a] better idea of your own person, the reality, and that's a little bit more helpful to continue with the discernment. Before the Novitiate, I probably could have my own idea about discernment, but probably it wasn't very deep. In the Novitiate, it becomes deeper. It becomes something more that is inside of you in your soul, in your heart. And also, when you are learning about the congregation, about the Founder[s], about the different Brothers who have been working and dedicating their lives to the Society of Mary, it's like "Wow, I really want to be part of this. I want to continue with this." And those testimonies help you to continue with your discernment. And also, it's a good time to think if this is what I want to do for my life. I remember that one of the first questions that I had in my Novitiate was, "Is religious life the way that I want to live my life for the rest of my life or not?" And it is challenging sometimes.

Sometimes during this period, we have some difficulties, some challenges, and it's like, "Okay, is this how I want to continue with my life?" Yes. And sometimes it's a little harder, yes. But I think that through community life, prayer, and working with this part of maturity help us a lot with our discernment.

17:43 - Mike Bennett

You mentioned starting the aspirancy in Mexico and then finishing it in San Antonio. What was that experience like of coming to the United States and being engaged in that formation process?

17:58 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

I [grew up] in a different country, in a different culture, with my language, and then I moved to the States with different language, different culture, and everything was different. I remember the first day when I met my director in San Antonio, Bro. Dennis Bautista - the director of the aspirancy in San Antonio - he asked us, "Hey, how are you?" [I replied] "Oh, good, good." [Bro. Dennis asked] "Did you sleep well?" [I replied] "Yes, yes." [Bro. Dennis asked] "Did you eat something?" [I replied] "Oh yes." [Bro. Dennis asked] "What did you eat?" [And I replied] "Oh, yes." So, he realized that, "Okay, they need to learn more English." So yeah, I was in shock with everything. I was afraid of conversation. I was afraid of going outside [and] seeing people because I said, "Oh, they are going to ask me questions, and I don't know how to answer. I don't know these words."

18:58 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Going to the stores, I was afraid to just ask for something because I was like, "What I'm going to say?". Surprisingly, I noticed that many people speak Spanish in San Antonio, and sometimes they were helping me. The people were helping me with, "Okay, you know, I speak Spanish, so don't worry." Okay, good. But also, I [tried not to] use too much my Spanish, because I said, "No, I want to learn this. I want to learn English." And that's a gift that probably we all should have to learn another language. Because when you learn another language, you can see the other culture through their own eyes, I can say. So, in Mexico, I saw the States in some way, but when I was living or now that I'm living here, and I am using English or speaking English, it's different than that view that I had in Mexico. So, once you are just involved in the culture, it's just wonderful. And also, I have been very, very grateful that in all the communities that I have lived are international communities. All the Brothers are very open to share and to learn about Mexican culture, or even Asian culture, because I have lived with Joseph Choi from Korea. So, our communities are very international. Sometimes, we have Brothers from Africa, Korea, Mexico, Colombia and different places. So that's a beautiful gift, that part of being international in a community.

20:47 - Mike Bennett

I was actually going to ask you about how that dynamic shaped your experience in formation? Specifically, what you mentioned [about] living with Bro. Joseph and Bro. Chicago [Joe Schuller], that there's almost three different kinds of cultural backgrounds between the three of you. And I'm curious, were there ways that that kind of nourished that experience or shaped that experience?

21:10 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

I have learned a lot from Chicago and Joseph, and they share their cultures with me, and I share with them. Even Joseph, he learned some Spanish, words in Spanish, and I tried to learn some Korean. My pronunciation is not the best. I try to say some words in Korean. I have met some Brothers from Korea when they came for visits. So, that part of being in community with people from different places is just a beautiful gift that helps you to be more open to other personalities, other cultures, and other languages, to welcome others. Being there for Brothers, being there for communities are things that are helping me to continue with my formation. Sometimes, we go to visit our Brothers in the different residences that we have. When we hear the Brothers who have dedicated their lives to the Society of Mary, it is just something beautiful and amazing that inspires me to continue. And when I heard all the challenges that they had, all the situations, but also all the gifts that they had through Jesus and Mary, it's something beautiful.

22:34 - Mike Bennett

I'm curious about people who may have been really influential so far in your time of formation.

22:44 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

One of them Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth. He is a good testimony of being a Marianist. When I saw how he dedicates his life to work and prayer, that's the meaning of being a Religious. On one occasion, we had a situation in Querétaro, and when Brothers asked him, "Okay, Fr. Quentin, What [do] you think that we should do?" [He replied] "Well, you know, we have to work, and we have to pray, and God is going to take care of us." At the beginning, I didn't understand very well. Then I said, "Well, yeah, he's right. All that we have to do is just work and pray." Don't believe that the challenges of our daily life destroy that relationship with Jesus and Mary. And also, don't leave these situations to take your time and don't work. No, just work and pray. And don't worry. Jesus and Mary are going to take care of you. So, I think that there are many things in Fr. Quentin that helped me to understand the Marianist charism. He's probably the first person who inspired me to the Marianist life and to continue in the Marianist life. I have met many, many Brothers who are also an inspiration for me, either for their spiritual work or their work with communities, with the schools. Another Brother is also Tom Redmond. He shared a little bit a year ago about these Brothers who were working, or the "Working Brothers" in the Marianists. And also, when he was talking, I could just have that feeling of how he was talking from his heart about this part of the Brothers and how he was talking about the congregation in a beautiful

way that inspired me, actually, to write my research paper about the Vow of Stability. And I think that his passion for the Society of Mary is also something that inspired me to continue with my formation.

25:03 - Mike Bennett

Before we ask our concluding question, 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 @ThisIsNACMS. Now to wrap up this episode, we return with our final question. We know the Marianists 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 might you write to, and what would be the topic?

25:48 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Well, I would like to talk with to Father Chaminade, and there are many questions that I would like to ask him. One of them is about this Vow of Stability, because he founded Brothers and Sisters, and we both have this vow, but in different moments and probably in different meanings. But that's something that I am very curious [about]. And also, to know all this part of the foundation, you know that moment or at that time that everything was very different in the middle of persecution, just trying to wear different clothes. And being in Spain and then go back to France and, you know, living all these experiences that helped him also to generate a different vision of a religious congregation.

26:39 - Mike Bennett

Bro. Memo, thank you so much for taking some time to share your Marianist journey with us and a little bit about your life.

26:46 - Guillermo Pena Contreras, nSM

Thank you for the time and for the interview.

26:50 - Mike Bennett

Sure. My pleasure.