

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 44

An Aspiring Librarian's Journey to First Vows (with Joseph Choi, nSM)

00:01 – Joseph Choi, nSM

First, [when] I came in here, in NACMS, I was very surprised. It's very well organized, which means well-organized stuff makes good research. So, this is my paradise here. So, that's what I say, it's like, I'm just very happy to be here and study here and research here, work here. Many things make me happy. So, when I go back to Korea, I strongly want to do the library work.

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 the last two years at the Novitiate in Dayton, Ohio, Joseph Choi will profess first vows with the Society of Mary on June 22, 2024. In this episode, Joseph describes his journey from high school in South Korea through his time in the Novitiate in the United States, including his lengthy experience of the aspirancy, which included time in both South Korea and San Antonio, Texas. Please join us in praying for Joseph as he anticipates professing first vows. Without further ado, let's turn the floor over to Joseph.

01:23 – Joseph Choi, nSM

I'm born and raised [in] South Korea, so my Korean name is Hyeonsik Choi, and my baptismal name is Joseph. Currently, I'm [a] second-year novice till now, so my letter for the final vows is accepted, so I will make [my] first vows [on] June 22, on Saturday.

01:47 – Mike Bennett

And that will be in Korea?

01:49 – Joseph Choi, nSM

In Korea, in the Seoul community which is one of the Brother's communities.

01:55 – Mike Bennett

So, tell me a little bit about what led you to the Marianists. Where did you first encounter the Marianists?

02:01 – Joseph Choi, nSM

In South Korea, I was born in Mokpo City. In Mokpo City, there is Marianist Mission High School, and then, I went to that high school. I met the religious teacher, who is one of the Marianist brothers. His name is Bro. [Jin Bea] John Ko. And then, he was my religious teacher and also, he was my spiritual director. So, he led me to the Marianist spiritual things. And then, he gave some opportunities to have experiences about the Marianist life or communal life in the Brother's community. In the high school vacation, most of the time I spent with the Marianist Brothers in their community. So, that's the beginning of my Marianist vocation.

02:57 – Joseph Choi, nSM

In 2011, I had [a] chance to go on a pilgrimage about Father Chaminade. So, I went to France, Spain, and Rome with one of the Korean [priest], Fr. [Kwangkyu] Simon Choi, and the young

Lay people. So, it was an 11-day pilgrimage. So, first I went to Paris in France, and then I visited Bordeaux, which is the first foundation of Father Chaminade. And I saw [the place in] which the Father Chaminade celebrated Mass, the orchard, and his communities, and then I visited his cemetery. And then, I went to Saragosa, Spain and then I visited the Our Lady of Pillar Basilica. And it was good to see the big church, and it just inspired me a lot. And then I went to Madrid. And then, 2011 there was World Youth Day. During the World Youth Day in Madrid, I guess there's some Chaminade school, so I stayed a couple of days there. And then I went to Rome, and then one of the most memorable places is *Scala Sancta*. I guess in English, it is "Holy Stairs," that you can pray kneeling each stair. I pray [the] rosary in each stair. And then, when I finished it, the prayer of [the] Rosary, during prayers, I never [felt] hurt [or] pain. But once I finished my prayer, I realized that my knee was bleeding and I [felt] hurt. So, I just feel the power of prayer. After that I can say I have curiosity to be in the religious life.

05:02 – Mike Bennett

You said it was...was it your knee that was bleeding?

05:05 – Joseph Choi, nSM

Yes.

05:06 – Mike Bennett

Okay, that sounded pretty profound. And at least as you were talking about the pilgrimage, I was going to ask you if there were some more spiritually profound moments that may have informed your pursuit of vowed religious life.

05:22 – Joseph Choi, nSM

Yes. Of course, of course, yes. So, during the high school vacations, as I say, I used to go to Brother's community, and then, there's [a] small chapel. And then, of course, we have morning prayer, evening prayer. But sometimes I go to [the] small chapel, in the community like afternoon, when no one's around, no one's there in the chapel. So, it was empty, just only me and Jesus there. So, I just spend like one hour or two hours just watching on the cross. Actually, at that time, [it] was like I was just 17, 18. I don't know what does it mean, the cross to me, really. So, I just figured who am I, and why I'm here? Like this awakening myself, like knowing myself. That moment is very important to learning about myself or learning about how Jesus comes to me.

06:28 – Joseph Choi, nSM

After evening prayer, I just asked my Brothers about my curiosity from this silent moment in the chapel. And then, they referred my curiosities. I realized, "Oh, this is what the communal life [is] in the Marianists." That experience was very inspired to keep maintaining my discernment in my vocation journey. So, since then, I asked Bro. John Ko, who was my spiritual director, "I think I feel the God's calling to enter the Marianists. So, what [can I] do? I'm still a sophomore in high school." He said, "[Wait] for your graduation." And then I say, "Okay." And then, after graduation, he says, "You still discerning to enter the Marianists?" I say, "Yes." And then, right after high school, I entered the Marianists as an aspirant. Different from others, I had [a] long aspirancy. In Korea, I had seven years [of] aspirancy.

07:38 – Mike Bennett

Wow.

07:39 – Joseph Choi, nSM

So, my Korean aspirancy director says, “You have two options: one is you go to college, university [for] four years, and then two-year mandatory service.” Because in Korea, the man should do the military service in two years. “So, college, four years, and then military service, two years. And then, you go to [the] United States and take a Novitiate program in Dayton. That's the one first option. The second option: have one-year aspirancy in Korea and right away go to the United States and take the Novitiate program. That's the second option.” But myself and then most of the people around me say, “You should take [or] choose the first option: Go to college.” So, I said, “Oh, I think it's a good idea.”

08:36 – Joseph Choi, nSM

So, I went to college [for] four years first. I majored [in] chemistry and education. So, after the college graduation, I got [an] education license which I can teach chemistry in high school. And then, during college, I did military service [for] two years. I was in DMZ [demilitarized zone]. I was not living in the Brother's community because it's military service. So, two years military service, four-year college, and then one year more living in the Brother's community. And then, as you know, 2020, there's a [Covid-19] Pandemic. So, I should wait for one extra year more. And then, [at] the end of 2020, December 28, finally, I came [to the] United States.

09:27 – Mike Bennett

When you talked about the two options, (you know, seek out four years of undergraduate study and then two years of service) that was the option you chose, what was behind that decision for you? Was it of value of undergraduate study, or were there other factors that caused that decision?

09:52 – Joseph Choi, nSM

First of all, as I said, I entered the Marianists right after high school, which means I [was] still influenced by many people, like teachers and their families or friends around me. But most of my friends went to college, and then teachers suggested [to] me to go to college first, [indiscernible] were around me. And my family also recommended me to go to college first. Even the Brothers, too, they say, “Yes, we need educators, even teachers, too. So, we recommend to you to go to college. But it's your choice.” But, you know, all the people around me say, “You go to college.” And so, that influenced me. And then, if I [do] not go to college first, I will have some challenges after that.

10:58 - Joseph Choi, nSM

I came [to] the United States on December 28, 2020, in San Antonio, Texas. So, I began to study English. First, [I] was at MACC - Mexican American Catholic College with Bro. Memo [Peña Contreras]. In San Antonio, I studied English and then took some aspirant program, and it was in a year and a half. So, I lived in the Casa Maria Community in St. Mary University in Texas [for] a year and a half. And then, I moved [to] Dayton in August 2022, and I began the Novitiate program, and then I began my first-year novice here with Dennis Bautista and Tim Eden and Tom Wendorf, Tom Redmond, Tim Phillips at that time. They are the perpetual Brothers in the

Novitiate community. And then, I'm with them as a first-year novice. And then, I was with Memo and Chicago [Joe Schuller]. We were the first-year novices, and then second-year novice, there was Bro. Juan [De La Cruz], who's now is [a] temporary professed.

12:16 – Joseph Choi, nSM

During [my] first year [as a] novice, I took many different classes [around subjects] like prayer life or community life or the vows (poverty, chastity, obedience, stability). In NACMS, I took a Marianist history class, and in the Novitiate community, I took a Church History, kind of general history of the Church. And then [in] 2023, May, I finished my first-year novice, and then I got my evaluations to continue in my Novitiate. I lived in the Chambers Community, which is nearby UD, University of Dayton. My work [as] a second-year novice was first at UD. I worked [a] kind of internship of [a] campus minister. So regularly, I went to the freshman year's dormitory, and then with Fr. Kip [Charles Stander, SM], I served the Mass for the freshman years. And on Thursdays at the main chapel of UD, Thursday night, the UD have the compline for the students. So, I served at compline, too. And other things I did then, I was observing the UD students' retreat programs, like [the] New Beginnings retreat program for the freshman years, and then learn about how I [would do] it as a campus minister.

14:09 – Joseph Choi, nSM

And then, [the] second thing, I was doing research where [I was] studying here in NACMS for [an] understanding of the librarian work. And then, the second thing, [was] my personal research. The first one, I did the understanding of religious work between the United States and Korea. It's about understanding of cultural differences, especially [in] the religious world. For example, in the United States, there is the 'virtue,' but the definition of 'virtue' in English is "quality of human being." But in Korean, the definition of 'virtue' means "quality and action of human being." So, in Korean, we include the action in the definition of virtue. So, we use the same word, virtue. So, I [was] just figuring it out why we use it a different way?

15:17 – Joseph Choi, nSM

In Korea, [the] Brothers, they made a first draft of *The Spirit of Our Foundation, Volume One*. So, my Korean Regional Superiors sent [an] email to me about finding errors and then edit it for the Korean brothers, and then I did it. So, I compared the French one, English one, and Korean one, and then I just figured it out. I believe the French one is first, and then I should compare [it] with English and then in Korean, which is different. And then I found that... for example, in Korean [it] says, "This letter is from 1831." But English says 1832, and French says 1832. And then I [went] back to the letters of Chaminade, and then finding it is 1832. So, this Korean one is wrong. So, we need to edit it. So, I [was] just checking. Not 1831, it should be 1832. That I did in August to November. And then [in] December I [went] back to Novitiate. And then, January to until now I [was] just organizing what I did in the whole of my life in the United States.

16:52 – Mike Bennett

You talked a little bit about your research when you were here at NACMS and the comparison of the different texts and the cultural differences and language differences. Many people may not realize the level of significance that that work has, as well as the dynamics of expertise that go into that. I've heard a lot about the kind of expertise that you bring, and I'm curious if you see that dynamic potentially continuing for you, that dynamic of study or library services or different things like that in the future you have with the Marianists.

17:30 – Joseph Choi, nSM

Yes, so I like organizing. So, that's the first thing that I want to be, a Marianist librarian. I like organizing the books in the Marianist library. And then I see that's wonderful. They're wonderful works. So, it was very wonderful. So, the first [time] I came in here in NACMS, I [was] just very surprised. It is very well organized, which means well-organized stuff makes good research. So, this is my paradise here. So that's what I say. It's like I'm just very happy to be here and then study here and research here, work here. Many things make me happy. So, when I go back to Korea, I strongly want to do work [around] the librarian work things, or the kind of organizing [is] something that I can do.

18:31 – Mike Bennett

I'm curious about your perspective on how the experience of discernment in the Novitiate is different than the discernment that might come before the Novitiate.

18:43 – Joseph Choi, nSM

First of all, in [the] case of this Novitiate community, we are [an] international Novitiate community. So, [this] means we can see how [different our culture is], our cultural differences that we can see. For me, in my case, I'm from South Korea, and then the other novices is from Mexico and from in here in America, [an] American novice. So, I met the two different cultures. And then, they met [and] see my culture, too, which means we should understand how different it is. But another thing is we also noticed how many things that I based on my culture. Even [if something] is natural [to me], and then it is not natural for their culture, so that means that other novices feel that does not make sense. And then from the differences, from the gaps we have, we don't understand each other, so that makes distance. And so, that makes... good interaction with each other.

20:00 – Joseph Choi, nSM

So, I realized, "Oh, what we need to solve these issues is honesty, [which] is important, showing yourself." In [the] case of Korea, we don't hug much. We don't contact much. Just shaking hands is enough. Even greeting or saying goodbye. And then here, in [the] United States or Mexico, they come to me and just hug. They try to hug me a lot. So, it's like I try to push it. But I realized they really want to welcome me [with] hospitality for me. That's why they want to hug or [shake]. And then, I realized that it's just fine. Kind of these things, understanding cultural differences in this international novitiate. And then, that makes my discernment before the Novitiate was – Like, when I go back to Korea, I will do the Marianist work just in Korea and then just around in Korea, so [I will] not go outside of Korea. But in the Novitiate community, I realized I should interact with international Brothers. So, that makes my discernment wider, broader, and [deeper] that I can get into.

21:24 – 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 Founders corresponded

through letter writing. So, if you were going to write a letter to anyone, dead or alive, who would you write to, and what would be the topic because you're guaranteed a response?

22:11 – Joseph Choi, nSM

To Father Chaminade. First of all, I just write letters to explain about nowadays situations. And then I would say, “This seems similar as what you have right after [the] French Revolution. And then you found the Bordeaux Sodality first.” So, like, in this situation nowadays, I [will] just ask [for] some advice. What spiritual things that I can continue to build the new Christian community or the re-Christianized community, [that] kind of thing? I would send the letter to Father Chaminade.

23:00 – Mike Bennett

Bro. Joseph, thank you so much for taking the time to share about your Marianist journey and some of those nuances which you have, and I hope that our paths continue to cross. Thanks.

23:11 - Joseph Choi, nSM

Thank you.