

Elizabeth Lau Skelton: What is the Role of the Marianist Family in the Future of the Church and of Society?

[*About the author:* Elizabeth Lau Skelton lives in San Francisco, California, and teaches art at Immaculate Conception Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school. Elizabeth's connection with the Marianist Family began in 2018 when she enrolled in the online course "Mary, Holy Possibility" and grew with her involvement in the Marianist Studies Program 2.0 in 2019-20. A keen lover of words and learning, she has also partaken in Marianists Write Now! weekends, as well as the Marianist online history course. Elizabeth wrote the following reflection as part of Marianists Write Now!, a NACMS-sponsored writing program held virtually from Friday, June 11 to Saturday, June 12, 2021. Each participant examined the question, "What is the role of the Marianist Family in the future of the Church and of society?"]

Let us get down to work with courage and not let ourselves be frightened by the grandeur of the enterprise. Let us concentrate on what we are doing at the present moment, but let us do it well. The progress that we can make in virtue depends on the fidelity and perfection with which we perform our ordinary actions.¹

Upon a cursory reading of today's theme, panic took hold of me because I, as one person, can't fathom being able to do anything for the future of the Church and society! However, as a member of the Marianist Family, as a group, and a collective of like minds and hearts, a role is envisioned and crafted, and I can see a part for me to play. The words of Adèle de Batz Tranquelléon are inspirational, especially her wisdom about not being frightened by the greatness of the task.

The part I need to play has become clearer in the past year as we have isolated ourselves during the pandemic. It's a role within the already-actualized drama that the Marianists have initiated for an inclusive Catholic Church functioning in a society that clearly needs a vision for greater love and understanding for one another. This pandemic we have experienced in our own part of the world has forced us to stay distanced and ensconced in our homes with our own nuclear family units.

Some of my friends have stayed out of town with siblings or parents or in their apartments with a roommate, and others have been alone. Friends who have been alone have suffered the most isolation; unfortunately, a friend from church who had some cognitive challenges lived alone in an SRO, a single room occupancy, a housing unit provided by the City and County of San Francisco for qualified residents with special needs.

In previous years, he would come to Mass; afterward, he would invite us to join him at the Irish Culture Center for a St. Patrick's Day event or to go to a baseball game, or he would inquire if anyone was hosting a New Year's party. He celebrated holidays with zest, donning a St. Patrick's Day leprechaun hat or a Fourth of July shirt or a Halloween sweater or a confetti-embellished sparkler hat for New Year's. During the pandemic, he was cut off from all of us. He was able to join our Friends in Christ group for a couple of Friday nights for the rosary on Zoom, but he had no computer and used his phone, so we couldn't see him, nor could he see us. Ordinarily, everyone would see him at church for the group's movie nights, speaker series, and other events. Sadly, our friend Al died earlier this year. And we feel that he died from loneliness.

This Marianists Write Now! workshop is my fourth writing experience with Marianists, not including the first time I participated in the Marianist course, "Mary, Holy Possibility," with Patti Gehred. There has to be a reason for my interaction with Marianists, and there must be a message, a call to action for a greater good, than merely a space for me to stoke my ego and write! This meeting with Marianists has not been random but orchestrated by God. I have looked forward to these opportunities to meet others; yet, this self-isolation during this past year has got me thinking of how best to support, show love,

¹ Adèle, *Letters*, no. 246 to Agathe Diché, Aug. 3, 1814; vol. 1, p. 253.

and acceptance for my Catholic friends who feel marginalized in our parish, particularly my gay friends at my parish, St. Dominic's.

After March's Marianists Write Now! meeting, I found an online video produced by the Marianists Social Justice Collaborative on the LGBTQ Initiative. I was astounded when I viewed it because I did not know about any of this outreach. I remembered that Mary Snyder had mentioned something about attending a Marianist event for LGBTQ, and I was curious because my brother is gay, and I have friends who are, also. I forwarded the video to my brother and his spouse because I wanted them to know something about the Marianists and their collective vision for wholeness as Catholics.

Since that time, I have been reading about the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative and downloaded the *Marianist Community Meeting Kit*, "Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Communities for LGBTQ+ Persons." Sharing this resource is something I can do. It is what Mother Mary wants for me to do when she said, "Do whatever he tells you." I see my participation with the Marianists community leading me to serve Mary in her mission to bring people to Jesus, not so much through my writing, but through my gifts of communication, organization, and teaching to bring more inclusiveness to the Church. Yesterday, I found a page for the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative for the LGBTQ Initiative Team, and in the group photo was a teacher I know from my school! I emailed her this morning and told her I want to collaborate and discuss the LGBTQ youth brochure for educators.

As an art teacher in an all-girls Catholic school, my students generally feel comfortable sharing with me. The Art Practicum, the study of art through the lens of humanities, reveals the language of visual culture. It is a field that taps into sensorial human emotions, passion. My twelfth-grade students usually feel comfortable sharing with me intimate details of their thoughts and lives. A significant number of students at my school have endured trauma, and some have told me they are LGBTQ. It is usually conveyed in written form through their reflections. While we love our students and our faculty supports *all* of our girls, what happens when they take religion class, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites same-sex attraction as an "inclination, which is objectively disordered"?² LGBTQ youth suicides are a tragic reality, and LGBTQ students have a disproportionately high rate of teen suicides.

Admittedly, I don't understand everything about LGBTQ. I know that transgender persons are greatly misunderstood, discriminated against, and many are physically harmed. It is hard for me to comprehend the surgical procedures some of them have to have performed to feel whole because I believe that God doesn't make mistakes. We are made in God's image by God. However, I am not in their shoes, and this is why we need dialogue to come together. We don't refuse to feed a hungry person; therefore, we must never disbar any person from worshipping God in the Church.

I am reminded that Marie Thérèse de Lamourous was initially repelled by the thought of ministering to repentant prostitutes but, shortly after meeting the women, found their presence brought her a sense of calm, peace, and joy. This remarkable and gifted woman opened herself to marginalized and ostracized women, and in return, she reaped their love and devotion. Marie Thérèse embodied the corporal works of mercy in giving hospitality to the stranger. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 25:35).

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§ 2357-58.