

## Elizabeth Lau Skelton: How Am I Called to Be Marianist?

[*Editor's note:* Elizabeth, from San Francisco, California, wrote her essay as part of the inaugural session of Marianists Write Now!, a NACMS-sponsored writing program held virtually from Friday, November 13 to Saturday, November 14, 2020. Each participant in this session of Marianists Write Now! wrote a personal reflection on the following question: “How am I called to be Marianist?”]

“The radical change that our Marianist vocation demands is usually gradual and progressive. It is seldom sudden, and it is never violent. It is Mary’s way of forming us.”<sup>1</sup>

I am inspired by Father Quentin Hakenewerth’s quote about how the Marianist vocation is a gradual and progressive formation. My journey for discernment has been, and still is, a slow and simmering awakening because I have only known Mary in the last decade, and I have come to love her. I was raised in a mainline Protestant tradition, and my spirituality and religious faith were lukewarm in general. I was certain of one thing through my regular attendance in children’s Sunday school—that Jesus loved me because “the Bible told me so.” I knew only of Mary at Christmas, the mother of baby Jesus.

I fell away from attending church during college, in those years when the Vietnam War was at its peak, and I asked that same old philosophical question, “Why, God?” Had I stayed by God’s side and not strayed as I did into areas of self-destruction and doubt, I would have saved myself a lot of uncertainty and emotional anguish. Looking back, I conclude that Jesus never left my side because I am here now, and I never stopped praying the *Our Father* throughout my entire life. As for Mother Mary, I still did not know her.

Before I decided to become a Catholic in 2008, I was practicing my faith as an Episcopalian. When my husband and I moved to the countryside, we were many miles from a town, and I didn’t attend church services. When Jim died suddenly and tragically, I moved back to San Francisco and began attending church regularly at a small Episcopal parish where the Lady Chapel was graced with a beautiful Russian Byzantine icon of Mary and the baby Jesus. I was captivated by the beauty of the icon and felt far more moved by this Marian image than, say, a statue of Mary. I read my first book about Mary, written by an Episcopal woman priest. Subsequently, in 2007 I moved across the country for six months and immersed myself in sacred art courses at a Catholic retreat center in Connecticut.

One week a month, for six months, January through June 2007, I attended daily Mass, ate meals and interacted with Catholic artists, drew and painted images of Jesus and Mary in the medieval tradition, wrote Biblical verses in calligraphy, and learned to chant *Veni Creator Spiritus* and *Salve Regina*. By the time I returned to San Francisco that summer, I was ready to find classes for RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and begin my conversion to becoming a Roman Catholic. I remember saying to my Episcopal organist friend, “I’m thinking of becoming a Catholic. I want to learn the rosary and receive the Eucharist.” Sometimes what comes out of our mouths is so prophetic, we don’t even realize it at the time. I think Mary was calling me.

I bought my first rosary and an instructional booklet and feverishly dove into learning the mysteries. It was slow going at first, but eventually I memorized all 20 mysteries and learned other Marian prayers. I wanted to immerse myself further, so I learned how to make my own rosary beads. The only Catholic I knew who could sponsor me was one of my instructors from the sacred arts school in Connecticut, who turned out to live in Sacramento, California, about 90 miles from where I live. She graciously became my sponsor. To this day, we remain good friends.

I did say my Marianist discernment is a slow, simmering process. My story continues with my reception and confirmation into the Church on Easter Vigil, 2009, at St. Dominic’s Catholic Church,

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2000), 21.

where my faith continues to flourish under the Dominicans. I have served over the years in the usual lector, eucharistic minister, catechist, and docent volunteer roles. I've also led iconography workshops.

In 2017, I went on a Marian pilgrimage to Fatima, Lourdes, and other locales. Though I had been on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Rome some years earlier and cherished those memories, I was deeply drawn into the presence of Mary on that pilgrimage to Marian shrines. While on pilgrimage, I was wrapping up my 33 days of "Total Consecration to Jesus Christ through Mary," using Louis de Montfort's book. Upon my return home, those of us who had completed our 33-day consecration attended a Mass where we received the priest's blessing and our brown scapular.

I found myself in so many simultaneously occurring Marian occasions that I was feeling that Mary was calling me, and I was being given an opportunity to use my particular gifts in communication and art. Through a newly formed lay group, Missionaries of Mary, that hosts presentations on the Marian dogmas, the rosary, apparitions, apologetics, Mary's virtues, Mary in Catholic art, etc., I was given an opportunity to make slide presentations about Mary in art. The group's purpose is to bring more people to understanding Mary's role in leading people to Jesus.

I started enrolling in courses with the the University of Dayton's VLCFF (Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation). Through Patti Gehred's course, "Mary, Holy Possibility," I was introduced to NACMS' Marianist Studies Program 2.0 in 2019-20 and completed my research paper on "Praying the Rosary with Father Chaminade." I learned so much about the Marianist vow of stability in writing that paper, and I can finally say that I am rounding the corner in staking a claim to discernment of the Marianist charism.

I discern my Marianist calling to serve through writing and my art, and I try to bring more souls to Jesus through Mary. Teachers never know what impact they may have on their students, just as I do not know if my writing will leave a favorable impression on anyone.

I hope and pray that by using my gifts in Marianist discernment, more people will come to know Jesus. I have a Marianist community on Zoom now. Two years ago I returned to teach at Immaculate Conception/Cristo Rey School, a Catholic high school for girls. I serve my students and their families, some of whom are at risk because of financial, racial, and social issues. I have my lay group Missionaries of Mary, where I am given free rein to create PowerPoint slide presentations on Marian art, and my Dominican family, where we meet weekly for Zoom rosary prayer and COVID-19-themed Stations of the Cross, eucharist, and podcasts.

All in all, I am grateful for my blessings from God. Thank you, NACMS, for this opportunity to tell my story.