

Jessica González Uhlig: How Am I Called to Be Marianist?

[*Editor's note:* Jessica, from San Antonio, Texas, 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?”]

To truthfully answer the question of how I am being called to be Marianist, I have to go back to the year after graduating from the University of Dayton (UD). Like many graduating seniors, I did not have a clear path to a job or even graduate school, and my undergrad years at UD were quickly coming to an end. As fate would have it, and with a reluctant blessing from home, I found the opportunity of a lifetime and traveled with *Up With People* (UWP), the international service and performing arts group that began in the 1960s. This experience would lead to a job offer in UWP's admission office, still traveling but focusing on recruiting more young adults to join us, perform, do community outreach, and see the world.

I have UWP to thank for a path that led to a career in Catholic higher education and ultimately to discovering my vocation as a Marianist mission “officer.” The job, as well as that second year of traveling with UWP, allowed me to visit high schools and colleges to meet students who were curious about the world and its cultures. These were students who were eager to discover and develop skills they perhaps never knew they had. I learned to share and speak about the mission of an organization that would allow these young adults to serve and explore in an environment that was safe, creative, respectful, and—most importantly—welcoming of all races, beliefs, languages, and cultures. That year brought me back to Dayton for a quick weekend visit, where I was offered a job in the university's admission office after sharing how my post-UD graduation life had evolved. Who knew they were hiring at the time? Providential? I like to think so. I left the road to go on another road—that of recruiting high school graduates to enroll at my alma mater, another institution where students are welcomed and encouraged to develop their minds and hearts, discover new perspectives, and make memories of a lifetime.

Five days a week, at least eight to ten times a day, I had to explain to a student and sometimes his or her parents, “Why UD?” The “why” is because students do not graduate with only a piece of paper after four years. They grow in their faith; they seek truth holistically; they become lifelong learners and servant leaders. I was learning to articulate what it is to be Marianist-educated. I was also articulating that a Marianist educational environment is made possible thanks to committed faculty and staff who use their God-given gifts and talents to open young minds and hearts and encourage the use of their hands to do good in the world. I was becoming a professional staff member who could confidently explain what it was about a Marianist university that made it special—what made a Marianist university different from all the other hundreds of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States.

I can share quite a few more experiences that are part of my journey of discovering how I am being called to be Marianist. The previous paragraphs describe some of the beginning of the journey. However, there was a turning point, a moment of pause, reflection, and assessment in the summer of 2004, when I was a member of the University of Dayton delegation attending the Marianist Universities Meeting (MUM). This opportunity to gather with colleagues from the other two Marianist universities was an awakening for me. First of all, the meeting was hosted by St. Mary's University in San Antonio, where I live and work now. At the time, feeling the warmth of a strong Latino cultural presence, I felt at home. The campus was lovely, and many people who worked there spoke Spanish. I felt a sense of home. Providence struck again when I met two other women from Puerto Rico—one working at St. Mary's and the other at Chaminade University in Hawaii. That encounter was Providential. It hatched a plan that ten years later would manifest itself in my moving to San Antonio and eventually landing a dream job at St. Mary's.

A forward-thinking initiative—one very much rooted in the history of the beginnings of the Marianist Family—was introduced at that meeting. The new formation program for lay professional staff

and faculty at the three universities echoed the invitation of Blessed Father Chaminade more than 200 years ago. In the Bordeaux Sodality, Chaminade invited lay people to come together, study, pray, and live out their faith.

The Marianist Educational Associates formation program launched in May 2005, and I was one of the youngest members of a cohort that included university presidents, provosts, deans, and program directors. I was invited to “the table” and engaged in conversation about mission and identity and how I, from my own scope of influence on my respective campus, could live it out and witness the Marianist charism. It was about my job, but the focus was on how I did my job.

For me, being called to be Marianist is to live out the charism. A statement like that may sound easy or relatable to those who “speak” Marianist. Still, it is important and responsible for me to recognize that this is as much professional as it is personal and spiritual. It adds layers of complexity and opportunity. The charism—and its pillars of mission, faith, Mary, family spirit, and inclusive community—allows for conversation, dialogue, and challenge. To explore what these pillars mean and how they are interpreted in my life, I have to look at not only what I do but also how I do it. Currently, to coordinate the same formation program for faculty and staff that transformed me and so many others is to honor the gift from the brothers who were members of these campus communities for generations. I now invite others to participate, to pray, and to respectfully agree to disagree in a Marianist way: in community. I was taught to look at our Blessed Mother with different eyes, to see a strong and resilient woman at the foot of the cross, as well as a young and doubtful teen who pondered during the Annunciation. I now build an inclusive community of colleagues and friends who are grounded in faith and united in an educational mission of open minds, hearts, and hands so that students can see their own gifts and talents so that they can make a difference in the world.

Answering the call to be Marianist for me is as a mission officer: a Marianist “educator” committed to providing resources to university community members who support, sustain, and nourish the charism on campus. From the way a business professor teaches the ethics of good and moral leadership, to how the chaplains and the staff come together for prayer on a weekly basis, I am called to support the mission of our Catholic and Marianist institutions. I answer the call to be Marianist by bringing these pillars to life as best as I can—living out my vocation in formation for mission, celebrating my faith personally and professionally, and appreciating the value of the challenges that building healthy community brings, especially with the complexities of family spirit. We are not perfect, but we are perfectly committed to trying to live our best lives as a community and a family, educating the whole person and benefiting from the gifts we all bring to the table.

We have been given a gift called the Marianist charism: an invitation to be part of a global family that sees the value in community, collaboration, and consultation and is driven by our faith and the Blessed Mother, who gave us the child of God, the ultimate example of love.