



INTERNATIONAL TEAM / MARIANIST LAY COMMUNITIES
EQUIPO INTERNACIONAL / COMUNIDADES LAICAS MARIANISTAS
EQUIPE INTERNATIONALE / COMMUNAUTÉS LAÏQUES MARIANISTES

Gather at the River- Boldly Charting our Future

REFLECTIONS ON THE SM PROVINCE OF THE UNITED STATES GATHERING,
LOUISVILLE, KY, JUNE 30 TO JULY 4, 2010

It was a moment of deep grace to ‘gather at the river’ with our brothers of the Society of Mary of the Province of the United States. I have many treasured friendships with our American brothers, but when I walked into the assembly of almost 300 participants I quickly realized how many I do not know! There were many faces and names that I’ve ‘met’ through *Family Online*, and the *Alive* publication. Many introductions began with a mutual “I’ve seen your photo so many times. It’s so good to meet you in person.” God bless Diane Guerra and her team for the amazing communication’s work in the new province!

The purpose of the gathering was threefold. First, it was an opportunity to celebrate the first eight years of the SM Province of the U.S. It was an enormous task to unify four provinces, each with their own traditions, stories and cultures. Secondly, it was a chance to present and dialogue about the new strategic plan, *Vision 2020*. This plan, which was two years in the making, was the result of countless discussions and input from all the brothers in the province. And, thirdly, we celebrated the installation of the new Provincial Council. The presence of our Marianist Sisters and lay Marianists provided the family spirit that is so important to us all.

The theme was beautifully interpreted in the words of Brian Reavey, “there is gift in the gathering”. Others spoke of the image of a river as a body of constant movement and change. We were reminded of these realities throughout our presentations, discussions and prayers. There were many topics to ponder, explore and discern. The big question, as always, is how do we take inspired visions and make them a reality? And for us Marianists, how do we do this together - as a family? Here are some of my own reflections from the gathering:

Mission for Life

There were many beautiful tributes to our elder brothers. They were reminded often that their work is remembered by the many souls they touched over the years: teachers, students, parishioners, fellow brothers, and more. It was an inspiration to see how many brothers are able to remain active in ministry far beyond the normal retirement age. And, retiring from active ministry does not mean retiring from mission. Our brothers continue to support us with their presence and their prayers. We are grateful for the gift they are to us all!

The New Generation

It was an absolute joy to meet the new generation of our Marianist family –newly professed SM brothers and FMI sister, and the new and second year SM novices. Their zeal and passion is inspiring. Sr. Nicole Trehan, FMI spoke beautifully of the experience of most of our young, vowed religious. Her religious vocation was rooted in being a lay Marianist and working with the LIFE program. She was a lay Marianist first, and firmly believes that being Marianist is being part of a whole family. These young Marianists ‘get it’! We can learn a lot from them.

Mixed Composition

There is intense study taking place on the role of “mixed composition” within the Society of Mary – how to share and live a charism of equality while affirming the unique gifts of both religious brothers and priests. I was intrigued with the suggestion that mixed composition should also be studied in relation to our Marianist family. “Union without confusion”, a “discipleship of equals” and the model of leadership and organization that they promote, are very important to us as lay Marianists. It is at the core of our vision of a Marian Church that is inclusive, participatory, dialogic, and non-hierarchical. But we are also learning that equality does not mean a ‘great leveling’. It means acknowledging the gifts of all, and empowering all to use those gifts for the good of our communities and our mission. I hope that we will be able to be part of this ongoing conversation.

The Essential is the Interior

It was good to hear the many reminders that all our works, all of our lives, all of our being, must be grounded in prayer. We must develop the contemplative dimension of our lives, and we must learn how to share it with others. As a river is sent outward in mission, we must also focus inward on our spiritual journey.

The Importance of Knowing

To truly be family, we must know each other. How well do we do this? Thanks to the leaps and bounds in recent communication efforts, we are able to keep in touch with local, national, and international Marianist news. We know more faces, and more names than ever before. And this is good! But, how well do we *really* know each other? To do this requires huge risk taking and mutual trust. It requires transparency as individuals, as communities, and as distinct branches within one family.

Brother Jesse O’Neill modeled this beautifully. He shared the very personal story of being diagnosed with AIDS many years ago. In his fears, he was supported and loved by the brothers of his community. He told us that we are all “lifted by someone’s love”. The more you know about someone, the greater the compassion that is shared. He described our Marianist story as “oozing with compassion”. One simple story, shared with courage and purpose, touched the hearts of us all.

Marianist Lay Communities

It was heartening to hear the many calls in Vision 2020 to a deeper and more intentional collaboration among the SM, FMI, and MLCs in the United States. This is a vision that we share as lay Marianists around the world. It is reflected in our recent document, [*Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*](#).

Many of our SM brothers and FMI sisters have worked closely with Marianist Lay Communities. But, there are still some who don't fully understand who we are, or our role in the Marianist family. One of the biggest questions I came home with was how can we know each other better? We can begin by describing our recent history: the rebirth of sodalities as Marianist Lay Communities in the 1950's and 1960's, the journey toward becoming an international organization in Santiago, Chile in 1993, our canonical approbation as a Private Association of the Faithful in 2000 (finalized in 2006), our participation in Vatican sponsored congresses, and our membership in the World Council of the Marianist Family. But, this only describes our official recognition as a lay ecclesial movement in the Church.

Perhaps the answer is a simpler one. To really know *who* we are, we must share our stories – especially our Marianist stories. We must take the time to sit with members of our family and share our journeys, our 'love stories'! How did you become a Marianist? Why do you remain a Marianist? Does being a Marianist make a difference in your family/community life? Your mission and work? Your faith life? Perhaps this will help us to recognize the unity that binds us – a shared charism in mission with Mary, though lived in different ways. Perhaps, as we learn more about our joys and struggles, we can learn how to collaborate more concretely and support each other more deeply.

Geographical Presence

Vision 2020 proposes that, in this time of diminishing numbers, the Society of Mary should consider concentrating their presence in specific geographical areas. The many unknown factors of this proposal are a cause of concern and anxiety for some. Meanwhile, our Marianist Lay Communities continue to grow in geographical locations where no vowed religious Marianists are present. As lay Marianists move around the country and around the world, they are forming new communities. This year, we are celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Marianist presence in Haiti – a presence that began with the lay branch. In Malawi, lay Marianist teachers are beginning new communities wherever they go.

The good news is that the Marianist charism will continue to be present in many places through our Marianist Lay Communities. Remaining connected to the larger Marianist Family is the challenge. How can we support each other and collaborate across the miles? What can we learn from the many communities that already exist far from the Marianist "hot spots" of universities and schools? It is important that we not only acknowledge these communities, but bring their wisdom and experience to the table as we dialogue together for the future.

Multiculturalism

There is an increasing awareness of the growing multicultural needs in the USA, especially among the Hispanic communities. There were many voices in Louisville, young and old, speaking out for an effective involvement within a multicultural reality. It was good to hear the simple suggestion to learn a new language – a suggestion for initial formation, and for life-long formation. Calls were made to study present situations and seek necessary resources. We must not forget that we are already an international Marianist Family. We need only look to our Marianist sisters and brothers in Mexico or Latin America to see examples of social justice works among the poor and oppressed. They can also provide us with a treasure of resources and formation materials through their web-sites and regular newsletters. There is a wealth of networking that we can tap into!

Conclusion

Leaving a meeting with the sense that all is good and all questions are answered is not the measuring stick of a successful meeting. A good gathering will promote respectful and honest dialogue among all those who are present. And, the dialogue will continue in the minds of all when they return home. The dialogue will be deemed important enough to not only want to continue it, but to allow others to become part of the conversation. I know that this will be the result of the Louisville gathering.

On behalf of our international community of MLCs, I want to extend our gratitude and affection to Brother Stephen Glodak and the past Provincial Councils of the Province of the U.S. And I want to assure Fr. Martin Solma and the new Provincial Council of our ongoing friendship and prayerful support.

May the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
Be glorified in all places through the Immaculate Virgin Mary.
Amen!



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