The Society of Mary and Discipline as an Instrument of Divine Mercy (Part III)

Finally, I want to land on the topic for which I have been laying the groundwork in the last two essays: the Marist (the Society of Mary) Way of disciplining students.

Where is that to be found? We begin with our founder's vision for the kind of graduate a Marist student is to become. In our founder's writings, Fr. Jean-Claude Colin articulated his three goals of a Marist education. They are "to form students into faithful disciples of Christ; to encourage and instruct them how to know and exercise their responsibilities and rights as honest and upright citizens, useful to society; and to teach them the humanities, sciences, technical skills, critical thinking, and life skills."[1]

How a Marist student is disciplined is part of the broader educational experience at a Marist school that keeps its "eye on the prize," that being "to form the total person into the image of Christ through the instruction of religious values, the teachings of the Catholic Church in the spirit of the Society of Mary." *(Marist School's Mission Statement)*

After proposing such a lofty ideal, it is helpful to remind ourselves that we teach teenagers and not angels. They will make poor decisions for which they will be held responsible and from which they can learn. Now we have entered into the realm of discipline. Here I want to look at this critical facet of a Marist education through the lens of the Society of Mary's call to be Instruments of Divine Mercy.

How is discipline (correction) an expression of Divine Mercy? Those who have been on the receiving end of being disciplined for a major infraction that could include expulsion undoubtedly want to hear the answer to that question. Well, let's talk about what mercy is not. It is not saying we don't judge specific actions as wrong, or that there are no consequences for our actions, or that we ignore immorality, "relax the rules," or look the other way. You might say, "Well, if that is what mercy is not, then, what is it?"

Let's answer that question by looking at one example of Divine Mercy in the Gospels. Joan Watson points out in the parable of the Prodigal Son that the father does not send his son back to the pigsty.[2] Instead, he extends his mercy by welcoming him home and accepting him back as his son. She goes on to say that mercy is the act of calling the son to remember who he really is, inviting him to reclaim his dignity, and to offer him the solution to his suffering: conversion, meaning a change of heart, a renewed mind (way of thinking), and a life better than the one he had up to now.

When students are disciplined at a Marist school, the purpose is to remind students of their dignity in Christ. Fr. Colin put it this way, "They (youth) are truly children of God." To ignore or belittle the severity of a student's infractions by unduly minimizing the consequences is not being merciful. To help a student understand why the particular action is wrong, how others are hurt, to accept the consequences (discipline) of their actions, to make amends and be restored as productive members of the community have as their end "to form students into faithful disciples of Christ." The goal is to help students live their lives better than how they were living before visiting the office of the Dean of Students. That is how discipline is an expression of Divine Mercy.

Regrettably, there are times when a student must be dismissed, usually because of the severity of the infraction or after the accumulation of demerits leave no alternative. Where is the Divine Mercy found in this instance? A student's departure can be an act of mercy on behalf of the other students or teachers who have suffered long enough from the disruptive behavior. Fr. Colin himself had this sad reality in mind when he wrote, "Those who would give bad example or scandal to others should be sent away while safeguarding

their reputation in the best possible way."[3] The concern for safeguarding a student's reputation is why a Marist school will not divulge the particulars of disciplinary actions taken.

Discipline is administered through detention, loss of privileges, and demerits. There is a progression in the seriousness of the consequences. The hope is that the student will come to "his or her senses" before dismissal becomes the only option. Dismissal is a form of "shock treatment." Just as emergency professionals will shock a heart that has ceased to beat, dismissal is meant to shock a student's self-knowledge, serve as a "wakeup call," and be an expression of love that is painful though it aims to heal. It is intended to remind students who they are in the eyes of God and reawaken the desire to reclaim their dignity.

Over the 120 years Marist School has been in existence, students have been asked to leave or chosen to do so. Some of those students who, when they became adults, recognize that decision's wisdom and how it proved to be a blessing in disguise.

Fr. Colin sought to think, judge, feel and act like Mary in all things. Through his devotion to prayer and contemplation, he sincerely sought to channel the thinking and desires of the mother of Jesus whenever he wrote or spoke about the mission and spirit of the Society of Mary. For that reason, we can say that his *Instructions for Marist Educators* provide the basis for what can be called a Marist or Mary's way of disciplining students. At the same time, we can say that the *Instructions for Marist Educators* reflect Fr. Colin's beliefs and what was then considered the best educational practices of 19th century France. With that those thoughts in mind, I leave you with this thought of his:

"Marist educators resolve to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ in his reverence and respect for all human beings, even the most vulnerable. Let their hearts be filled with a religious respect for their students, lest they harm them in any way. Teachers will be pleased to relate with them with patience, a firm kindness, and appropriate correction. Marist teachers are aware that the faults due to the restlessness of adolescence, they should more often than not pretend not to notice, and that not everything needs to be exacted down to the last detail."[4]

That is sound advice for Marist educators and parents of Marist students.

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[1] *"On the Education of Youth and Schools," By Venerable Jean Claude Colin, translated by Fr. Tom Ellerman, S.M. '58, Rule III, page 6*

[2] "What is Mercy," by Joannie Watson, August 28, 2015, https://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2015/08/watson-what-is-mercy/.

[3] *"On the Education of Youth and Schools," By Venerable Jean Claude Colin, translated by Fr. Tom Ellerman, S.M. '58, Rule X, page 20*

[4] Ibid, Rule VIII, page 16