The Society of Mary, Discipline, and God's Attitude Toward Sinners (Part I)

This essay is the first of three articles that focus on the Society of Mary's approach to disciplining students while remaining faithful to its call to be instruments of divine mercy. A tall order indeed, but not one that is out of reach.

Before I finally get there, I want to remind ourselves about an essential feature of the Gospel, which means Good News. The Good News is that God is perfect and does not need us. Why is that Good News? The Good News is that we can add nothing to or take away anything from God who is love yesterday, today, and tomorrow. That means God never tires of wanting the best for us human beings, whether we are good or bad. "For he makes his sun shine on good and bad people alike, and he sends rain to the righteous…for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on just and unjust." (Mt. 5:45) But that doesn't mean God remains indifferent. More on that later.

When we sin, we cannot make God hate us. Why? Because as I just said, God is love, which means he only wants what is best for us and not because he wants or needs something from us in return. This truth reminds us that God is God and we are not. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord God. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways." (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

If you want to see what divine love looks like in this sinful world, ponder Jesus hanging on the cross, unjustly suffering and dying out of love for us sinful human beings, choosing not to destroy what the triune God created and sustains in love. Jesus' death and resurrection reveal that God doesn't have love but is love and that love is non-violent yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What are we to do when we read passages in the Bible where God appears to be violent, even vengeful, and nothing like the God of love I just described? Good question. Not everything in the Bible is Revelation. Yet, all of the Bible is inspired. Remember, God revealed himself to us human beings at the beginning of time with the act of creation but could not reveal himself "all at once." That means the Bible will contain some perceptions of God that need correction. Jesus is the correction. It took thousands of years to reach a point when we were ready to see God "face-to-face" in Jesus. Through the eyes of Jesus, we read those more violent passages and come to understand that what the ancient biblical writer meant by God's wrath was God's passion for setting things right, and that includes the sinner himself/herself. "I swear I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! Why should you die, house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11) Even in the Old Testament, next to those more violent and angry outbursts, we get hints of what will be revealed in Jesus.

Here are the points I am making to serve as the foundation for what will follow. First, God is love, and God's love is non-violent. Second, what we interpret as God's anger is God's passion for setting things right. Third, God does not want the sinner to die but to live, meaning, to be converted from his or her evil ways. That is what Fr. Colin had in mind when he described education as a second creation.

Already, we can see the broad outlines of how discipline will be administered in a Marist school. First, it will be administered from the space of love and non-violence. In other words, when students fail, they will

not be reprimanded with physical or emotional violence. Nor will they be publicly humiliated. Second, the first impulse toward the disobedient student is to save and not discard, go after, and not leave behind that student who is lost. Third, students will be given opportunities to grow from their mistakes, make amends, and be formed more closely into the image of Christ that is the school's mission.

Having laid the foundation, I will build on it in my following essay with an example of the divine attitude toward discipline and correction using King David as a case study. The third and final essay on this topic will focus specifically on the Society of Mary's approach to disciplining students while remaining faithful to its call to be instruments of divine mercy.