Part Five: Always Our Children[1] in a School with a Marian Face

> *"Marist educators resolve to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ in his reverence and respect for all human beings, especially the most vulnerable."*[2]

I want to demonstrate what a Marist school with a Marian face looks like when looking at students who are homosexual, wrestling with their sexual orientation, or questioning their gender. Parents of these students need help with how to care for them. They want some assurance that a Marist school will hear their cry for assistance and that of their children, for whom traversing adolescence is enough of a challenge without having to contend with these additional weighty concerns.

Some of these students have been brave enough to come forward and speak with members of the Marist professional staff and administration. They and their friends perceived that the Church "hates them." They live with the fear of their classmates' rejection and bullying, which some have already experienced. They live with an additional fear that their parents and the Church will reject them when they need to be reassured both love them.

Parents of these students suffer along with their children. They don't know where to turn for support and what to do with their feelings as they try to understand what their children are experiencing. They want to know how to be supportive and walk with their children while remaining faithful to Church teaching. Like all parents, they want their children to feel included (safe) at Marist.

All students should feel safe at a Marist school. After all, students who do not feel safe don't learn. Students who disclose they are homosexual, wrestle with their sexual orientation, or have questions about gender are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated and rejected. However, many may never feel safe enough to express their true feelings to anyone. However, from outside appearances, everything might seem to be fine. Yet, they often live uncertain about how and where they fit in. Marist wants them to know and experience the boundless love of Christ, who invites all to his Church. Slurs such as "That is so g--" are especially painful and only add to their sense of isolation and fear, which we associate with feeling unsafe, and work against their sense of belonging.

We want all our students to feel included, which means they feel welcomed and safe. For that to happen, the culture of a Marist school must respect the diversity of its students. To that end, schools will formulate a statement that seeks to foster a community of inclusion that respects the dignity of the individual in the areas of age, gender, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation. All students crave feeling included, which is the opposite of living in fear of being ridiculed or rejected, which are expressions of emotional violence that easily can become physical if left unchecked.

There is much we can do in the context of our faith, within the bounds of Catholic teaching, and guided by the spirit of the Society of Mary to accompany LGBTQ+[3] students the best we can lest Jesus' criticism of the scribes and Pharisees apply to us. "They tie up heavy burdens* [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them." (Mt. 23:4) In other words, it is not enough to present Church teaching, which sometimes can seem too lofty or nearly impossible to attain for those directly impacted by it, and then walk away, leaving the faithful to fend for themselves. Rather than

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[1] Taken from a statement (1997) of the Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers.*

[2] *On the Education of Youth and Schools, Instructions for Marist Educators*, page 16

[3] Please see *"Always our Children – Part Three,"* page 4 for an explanation about the use of LGBTQ+ at Marist.

presenting Church teaching and walking away, a Marist school will present Church teaching and walk with them.

Pope Francis put it this way when he wrote to priests on August 4, 2019, "How powerful is the example of a priest who makes himself present and does not flee the wounds of his brothers and sisters!" he said. "It mirrors the heart of a shepherd who has developed a spiritual taste for being one with his people, a pastor who never forgets that he has come from them and that by serving them, he will find and express his most pure and complete identity."[4]

Having "the heart of a shepherd" can easily apply to the faculty and staff because all the baptized share in Christ's ministry of kingship (leadership). Good shepherds will be found with their sheep, especially the wounded and most vulnerable ones. That translates into a Marist school leading with compassion when presenting the teachings of the Church. In other words, a Marist school with a Marian face will walk with LGBTQ+ students as we do with all of our students in their struggles the best we can.

[4] Pope Francis, *"To Priests on the 160th Anniversary of the Death of the Holy Cure of Ars, St. John Vianney,"* https://romana.org/en/69/the-roman-pontiff/letter-of-his-holiness-pope-francis-to-priests-on/#:~:text=Letter%20of%20His%20Holiness%20Pope%20Francis%20to%20Priests,patron%20of%20parish%20priests%20throughout%20the%20world.%20.