The Marist Way of Being a Catholic School

Part One: Neither Liberal nor Conservative but Marist

"Every Marist school publicly declares its Catholic identity in word and in deed."[1]

I want to speak to the issue of Catholic identity that has come to the forefront as a concern for Catholics in general and Catholic schools in particular. Before I go any further, I want to speak to those who are not Catholic and either work at or send their children to Marist. Hopefully, you will find that much about the Marist Way of being a Catholic Christian resonates with you. Let me also say you are welcome at Marist, and the school values your perspective and support of the Marist mission in education. In a future reflection, I will address the Marist Way of being Catholic, which includes a commitment to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

Returning to the topic of Catholic identity, let me quote from the mission statement of Marist School:

> The mission of Marist School is to form the whole person in the image of Christ through instruction grounded in religious values, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the spirit of the Society of Mary. This mission is advanced through the communal pursuit of excellence in academic, religious, extracurricular, leadership, and service programs.

I want to link Catholic identity with the spirit (charism) of the Society of Mary. In other words, I am suggesting that there is a Marist way of being a Catholic Christian that is integral to the school's identity and mission. Marist is not only another Catholic school. It is a Marist Catholic school.

The Marist dimension is not the same as icing on a cake. After all, you can have a cake without icing. The Marist and Catholic dimensions are linked together to make Marist School uniquely Catholic. In other words, you can't talk about one without talking about the other. That also means being faithful to its Marist charism will have practical consequences that will impact the school's decisions, policies, curriculum, conduct, culture, and how its Catholicity is expressed. That will become evident in the fourth reflection.

Now, I will contradict myself and consider why Catholic identity is receiving so much attention. I grew up in the 50s and 60s when only a few dinosaurs were still around, making their way on the road to extinction! There was considerable anti-Catholicism then that centered on whether one could be a faithful Catholic and an American. The argument was that Catholics owed their allegiance to the Pope and, thus, to a foreign state (Vatican State), negating the possibility of Catholics being "real" American citizens, let alone being president. In addition, Catholics were easily identified by the practices of not eating meat on Fridays during Lent, attending Sunday Mass, which was celebrated in Latin, going to Confession, devotion to Mary, and belief in the Real Presence. All that and more made Catholics suspicious in the eyes of the rest of the citizenry.

When John F. Kennedy won the presidential election in 1960, he became the first Catholic president. For Catholics at that time, his election signified that Catholics "had arrived" and finally were accepted as being both Catholic and American.

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[1] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 3: Marist Schools, Serve the Mission of the Church, #1.

Fast-forward 60 years, and the situation in our nation has changed considerably. Our country has become much more secular and pluralistic, with many identifying as atheists or choosing not to affiliate with any organized religion.

These days, Catholics cannot feel entirely at home with either political party's platform. In addition, many Catholics do not feel at home in the Catholic Church. As many as 30 million in the U.S. identify as former Catholics. Many of them now attend other churches. It is estimated that 70% of Catholics do not attend Mass regularly.[2] As a point of reference, during 1965-1966, 67% of Catholics attended Mass weekly.[3] To add to the disarray, liberal and conservative Catholics accuse each other and the Church of compromising Catholic identity by being either too liberal or too conservative.

This reality is reflected in data published on September 15, 2020, by the Pew Research Center. Data from registered voters found that when it comes to specific policy issues, Catholics are often more aligned with their political party than with the teachings of their church. Two examples are cited:[4]

> "On abortion, for example, 77% of Democratic and Democratic-leaning Catholic adults say they think abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 63% of Republican and Republican-leaning Catholics say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, according to a 2019 survey. This divide exists despite the Catholic Church's formal opposition to abortion."
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> "On immigration, 91% of Catholic Democrats oppose expanding the wall along the border between the U.S. and Mexico, while 81% of Catholic Republicans favor expanding the wall, according to a separate 2019 survey. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has condemned [the] plan to build such a wall, and Pope Francis described the desire to build a border wall as "not Christian."

I note the irony that Catholic adults feel free to disagree with Church teachings while insisting that Catholic schools do not deviate from them!

I visited the Pew Research Center to learn where Black Catholics fit into the above descriptions. "Black adults from all religious backgrounds are strongly Democratic…At least eight-in-ten Black Protestant, Catholic, and religiously unaffiliated adults identify as Democrat."[5] In addition, Black Catholics, like their counterparts in Protestant churches, prefer homilies that relate the gospel to current political issues and address the need for reform of the criminal justice system.

I find the Pew Research Center data helpful because it identifies the temptation for Catholics to define Catholic identity through a liberal or conservative political ideology. If a Catholic school, for example, is judged too liberal or too conservative, its Catholic identity and fidelity to the Church's mission will be questioned.

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[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/

[3] https://news.gallup.com/poll/232226/church-attendance-among-catholics-resumes-downward-slide.aspx.

[4] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/15/8-facts-about-catholics-and-politics-in-the-u-s/.

[5] 8. Religion and Politics, February 16, 2021, Go to https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/religion-and-politics/.

The Marists, however, emphasize Marist School being a Marist Catholic school! That means being faithful to Church teaching.[6] Because many Catholics follow the teachings of their political party over and against the teachings of the Church, conflicts will be inevitable.

During the fall and winter of 2020-2021, focus groups representing core constituents of Marist School were interviewed by the marketing firm, Mindpower. These groups were asked to share their perception of Marist. Some said the school was too conservative. Others said it was too liberal. I can live with that because that is where Marist School wants to be, in the middle. That is where Mary is often portrayed with the apostles and disciples at Pentecost: in the middle.

Keeping this ship called Marist School in the middle is no easy task given these times. Like most ships sailing the ocean blue, we zig and zag, which means we will make the appropriate corrections to stay in the middle when needed. Depending on the issue or circumstances, we may tilt toward the conservative or liberal position but always the Catholic one, which remains the harbor where the school seeks safety when the political and social seas become stormy.

I am happy that the same focus groups all said that Marist School is a Catholic school. I want to emphasize that there is much more to being a Catholic than being a conservative or liberal Catholic. In my following reflections, I want to explore the Marist Way of being a Catholic school!

[6] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 3: Marist Schools Serve the Mission of the Church, #3: School Personnel take great care to clearly and honestly present the fundamental beliefs of the Church relying on the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other approved sources.