The Marist Way of Being a Catholic School

Part Four: Becoming a Marist School with a Marian Face

Here, I speak directly about Fr. Colin's vision of a Church with a Marian face. Let me begin by contrasting Fr. Colin's vision with how the Church was perceived at his time. First, the Catholic Church, particularly the bishops and clergy, had endeared themselves with the wealthy and the powerful in French society. The Church had become out of touch with ordinary people and their concerns.

Second, the Church became defensive and suspicious of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason, its hostility to faith, the Catholic Church, and its waning belief in God. This marked a seismic shift in humanity's consciousness from the previous centuries that took for granted God's existence, the necessity of belief in God, and the need for a savior. To Fr. Colin and the early Marists, it felt like the end of the world (end times). It did mark the end of one way of thinking and the beginning of a new way or a new age that we now call secularism.

Third, the Church felt threatened by the push to a more democratic form of government, preferring a return to the monarchy. Fr. Colin was of that belief though he never made it a cause célèbre among the Marists. He didn't want Marists revealing their political views, fearing that would compromise their ability to proclaim the Gospel.

Whatever misgivings and concerns he had about this turn of events, he did not want the Society of Mary and, in turn, the Church to turn inward and assume a fortress mentality, more concerned with protecting the faith rather than engaging the Enlightenment from the perspective of faith. This explains why Fr. Colin wanted Marists, and, in turn, the students they taught, to be well educated about the faith so that they could hold their own in conversations with inquirers and detractors alike.

He wanted to educate the whole person and for students to be well educated in the humanities, sciences, technical skills, critical thinking, and life skills. This would allow them to gain the respect of their peers, thereby making them more effective witnesses of the faith. In addition, being well educated enhances the quality of life of individuals and society, which is a valuable contribution in itself.[1]

In short, Fr. Colin wanted Marist students to use their education to become upright citizens and useful to society. Today, we combine Fr. Colin's desire that Marists be well-educated disciples of Christ,[2] well-rounded in their education, and well-prepared to be upright citizens with educating our students to be faith-filled, global-ready servant leaders.[3]

However, Fr. Colin recognized that the Church needed to set a different tone for its message. He wanted the Church to lead with love, compassion, and mercy rather than with arguments to defend the Church or weaponize the faith that would ensure conformity but not necessarily heartfelt belief. He understood that

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[1] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 7, #217: "Fr. Colin insisted in his time that Marist schools develop curriculums that were well rounded and educated the whole person. Marist schools should not only succeed in providing spiritual guidance and formation but also be places of academic excellence. Fr. Colin recognized the importance of extra-curricular programs for the life of the school and the growth of students.

[2] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 4, #210: "Learning from Mary, Marist schools help to form students to become disciples…."

[3] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 8, #212: "Fr. Colin believed that Marist schools were platforms for forming good citizens."

the mother of Jesus desired to be present to the Church during these "end-times" because she best embodied the qualities the Church needs to present her son to this age of unbelief, as Fr. Colin described his era.

He understood that Marists were to think, judge, feel, and act like her in all things. They were to go beyond imitating Mary to channel her presence. In Article 49 of the 1872 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, which was painstakingly written by Fr. Colin and reflects his mature thinking about the Society, he wrote, "*…let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…"* Hold that thought!

I want to draw your attention to the recently published document, *National Consensus of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission."* Over 700,000 Catholics throughout the United States met during 2021-2022 and generated 22,000 reports. A common theme from these consultations discussed the need for the Church to lead with compassion. The synodal consultations mentioned several areas where tension exists between how to walk with people who struggle with the Church's teaching while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church. "People want the Church to be a home for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they are, and walk with them rather than judging them[4]; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority."[5]

That, by the way, is what Fr. Colin, founder of the Society of Mary, had in mind when he spoke about the need for a Church with a Marian face. Fr. Craig Larkin, S.M. put it this way, "A Marian Church is a Church that makes a choice for compassion over competition; an option for relationship over dogmatism; for humility over power; for service over dominance. It is a Church that pushes its boundaries to include all, rather than one which defines boundaries to contain the chosen."[6]

Let's see what that looks like in practice. Three years ago, Marist School sponsored listening sessions where the Marist School community could hear about the painful racist comments and behaviors experienced by Black students, alumni, and parents while at Marist. These were difficult to hear but necessary for our school community to begin the healing process and to initiate necessary reforms.[7]

This was the first time the Black constituents at Marist had the opportunity to speak to the rest of us about their experiences. While grateful for their education at Marist, their overall experience was painful for the reasons I alluded to above. For some, the hurt is so deep that, sadly, they have broken off contact with the school.

As you know, Marist intentionally teaches our students to cultivate empathy or compassion. In these listening sessions, the hope was that by hearing the pain and hurt of the Black members of our community, hearts would be moved to empathize and then to compassion to right these wrongs and create a school culture where the diversity of our students and employees are understood, appreciated, and

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[4] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard # 107: "Colinian spirituality and pedagogy inspire us to work together in fulfilling the Marist heritage and urges us to build a Marian Church – a servant church, a church that meets each person where he/she is and welcomes them in the name of Christ."

[5] *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, pages 7 – 8.

[6] https://www.acertainway.info/life-from-within/life-force/a-marian-church/.

[7] https://www.marist.com/news-detail?pk=1395317

everyone feels included (welcomed and safe).[8]

These listening sessions were what the Synodal participants described as their vision for the Church that I quoted earlier. "They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they are, and walk with them rather than judging them; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority." Mary, the mother of Jesus, his first disciple, and model of the Church, pleads for that kind of Church as well. That is what a Church, and, in this case, a Catholic school with a Marian face, looks like.

Another example of the Church with a Marian face is when victims of clerical abuse meet with Church authorities. What do they want more than anything else? They want to be taken seriously. They want to be heard. They want Church authorities to listen with empathy and compassion. They don't want their pain trivialized by Church authorities responding with excuses or challenging the legitimacy of their experiences. They also want an apology and to hear what steps will be taken to correct this wrong.

The spirit of Mary was the spirit behind hosting the listening sessions with the Black community, and I would add the books for that summer's reading. Fr. Colin described this as a spirit of humility (admitting failure and accepting responsibility), self-denial (refusing to become defensive and willing to walk in the other person's shoes), intimate union with God (knowing this is pleasing to God), and the most ardent love of neighbor (shouldering their cross). In other words, the school was not doing the work of promoting a particular party or ideology. Instead, the school was doing the work of Mary. That also is what the Church or a school with a Marian face looks like.[9]

The above examples illustrate the need to be proactive in nurturing a culture that intentionally welcomes and fosters a sense of belonging among students and their families in all their diversity. Failure to do this results in painful consequences, such as what Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics at Marist have experienced.

The word Catholic means universal or, as Tom Groome, professor of theology and religious education at Boston College, puts it, "Catholic means here comes everybody!" Along with everybody comes challenges pertaining to diversity and inclusion. Inclusion can be another name for hospitality, meaning creating a welcoming environment where everyone feels they belong and, therefore, safe. Balancing the claims of diversity and unity and promoting inclusion by being just and welcoming have been constant companions of the Church throughout her history.

I will end here with how I began. The Marists are not concerned that Marist schools be either conservative or liberal Catholic schools. The Marists are concerned that the schools they own, or sponsor, will be Marist Catholic schools. In fact, what may appear to be either too conservative or too liberal may be simply Marist School being Marist and Catholic.

Given the times in which we live, liberals and conservatives should find a reason to complain or be pleased with how the Marists want Marist School to express its Catholic identity. That means the school is where it is supposed to be in the middle, like Mary at Pentecost.

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[8] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 4: #210, “Everyone is brother and sister. We cannot know God if we do not love our brother and sister.”

[9] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 6: #215, Marist schools develop in students the ability to assess in a critical manner the values, goals and objectives fostered by the contemporary culture and promotes a commitment to lifelong learning in an increasingly global world.” And #216, “A Marist education should aim to help the students confront social injustices such as racism, sexism, and intolerance. A Marist student should learn to collaborate with other men and women of good will no matter their creed, race or social standing to help build communities where the dignity of the person is manifested.”