In Tribute to the Faculty and Staff at Marist School[1]

June 2023

During the spring, I was listening to a Philadelphia teacher's podcast explaining why teachers are leaving the profession. She gave several reasons but zeroed in on one in particular. She said it was because of the violence occurring in the classroom. She describes her experience as akin to "Chaos! I can describe it as students running around the school like a pack of wolves all day long."

Another teacher from another part of the country gave the same reason for why she was leaving teaching. She had broken up three fights that morning and had yet to get to her homeroom!

It would be unfair to describe all schools that way. Many would not have that reputation and graduate fine young adults. However, it should give us reason to pause and recall these words of Abraham Lincoln, who said, "The philosophy of the schoolroom in one generation would be the philosophy of government in the next." That brings me to the message I want to share with you, who are Marist educators. What you teach, how you teach, the example you set, and, more importantly, the relationship with your students will have ripple effects and impact every facet of our society and culture, beginning in the present and extending into the future.

The future we want our students to make their own will be shaped by the mission of this school, which 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. Our faith is based first and foremost on our relationship with Christ, which is real and personal, meaning we believe he is whom he says he is, truly God and truly human, and that he calls each of us by name to make him known to others whose hearts ache for him but know not the source of their pain. Furthermore, to love Christ is to love His church, his mystical body, where we encounter him through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

We teach our students they were loved into existence by a loving God, placed on this earth in this place at this time, and for a reason. We teach that real happiness lies not in having things their way but in living God's way. We teach that their fundamental vocation given in Baptism eventually is to say it is as if I no longer live in me but Christ (Gal. 2:20). To show them how to get there, we teach them to look to Mary and to think, judge, feel, and act toward her son as she does.

We teach our students that they are to use their talents and gifts to advance the reign of God and hasten the day when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We teach them that history will culminate with the old order of sin and death being destroyed when Christ comes again in glory and majesty. Then he will reign supreme, and his kingdom will be marked by justice, peace, and joy. We want our students to advance God's reign and do this great work in the spirit of Mary, which Fr. Colin described as "a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…." In this way, our work becomes a work of Mary and a sign that she remains in the midst of the church in these troubled times as she was at Pentecost.

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[1] What follows is a more complete and thoughtful answer to the question posed to me in January 2018, “Father, what is your vision for the school?” The best I could do then was to say, “My to-do list.” Hopefully, the following will be more satisfying.

We want our students not to be content with narrowly defining their future as getting married, raising a family, and pursuing their particular careers. As good as all that is, it sounds rather dull compared to what I just described. Instead, a Marist Catholic education wants our students to dedicate themselves to getting married, raising a family, and pursuing a career to serve Christ and make his vision for humanity their own.

This future is revealed in Christ and entrusted to them to hasten its arrival through their contributions to help bring it about. We want our students to learn that this divinely inspired vision of the future makes life worth living, an adventure to be undertaken, and a quest to embrace. God's vision of the future is worth living for and sacrificing for, should it come to that.

That vision of the future is captured in Fr. Colin's famous insight about education being a second creation. It refers to the impact a Marist education should have on individual students. It also hints at the recreation of this earth so that one day it will become indistinguishable from heaven itself. That, too, is a second creation that Marist educators have a role in bringing about through their commitment to living their lives shaped by the divine vision of the future entrusted to them in Baptism. If there is one word that would capture what a Marist Catholic education offers to our students and, through them, to the world, it is this: hope.

The Reverend Billy Graham, the greatest evangelizer of the 20th century, recognized that hopelessness and despair plague the times in which we live. In this, he echoes Fr. Colin, who came to the same conclusion in the 19th century. Rev. Graham noted that St. Peter had given into despair because of his actions during the events of Calvary. Later Peter would write in a letter penned in his name, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again into a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."[2]

Rev. Graham explained why our hope depends on Christ's resurrection. He said, "There is hope that mistakes and sins can be forgiven. There is hope that we can have joy, peace, assurance, and security amid the despair of this age. There is hope that Christ is coming soon—this is called in Scripture, 'the blessed hope.' There is hope that there will come the day when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Then the Kingdom of God will reign in triumph. Our hope is not in our own ability, or in our goodness, or in our physical strength. Our hope is instilled in us by the resurrection of Christ."[3]

You may ask yourselves, "How do I teach that to my students when I teach health, math, music, history, etc.?" Well, follow Mark Craddock's lead. What endeared Mark to his students was his ability, in the words of one of his students, "to see me, to see that I was struggling, to reach out to me and encourage me." That student could just as easily have said, "He gave me hope." When Mark's illness had reached the point that his days on earth were numbered, he said, "I'm ready to go." That is what the theological virtue of hope sounds, feels, and looks like. That is why he could encourage his students.

When I say hope is a theological virtue, I mean it is a gift from God. Without a belief in a loving God and an afterlife, we are left to live without purpose or meaning. Consequently, we are condemned to walk this earth under the shadow of death and its companion, despair. The virtue of hope, however, orders our lives toward heaven and the things of heaven as our ultimate good. Hope pushes us beyond this world and its struggles and conflicts and directs us toward the ultimate good that lies in the transcendent realm beyond this one. Without the theological virtue of hope, why bother to encourage anyone if there is nothing beyond this world to make our struggles worth the effort? For a Marist educator, words of encouragement

[2] The Hope of the Resurrection, https://billygraham.org/devotion/the-hope-of-resurrection/.
[3] Ibid.

to a struggling student are founded on the hope that their struggles will be swallowed up in Christ's suffering on the cross; that was the prelude to his resurrection in whose victory over sin and death we find our hope.

That is the gift of a Marist Catholic education. We give our students love, purpose, and hope in a world where they are told their lives are the result of dumb chance and they should make the best of it because there is nothing beyond this material world. Marist educators are called to drown out those voices and listen to the voice of Fr. Colin, who said this about Marist educators, "Since they act as God's ambassadors, they are to be led primarily and, in all things, by the spirit of God."[4] St. Paul would describe the Spirit using these words, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7)

I want to thank all of you, no matter your role in the school, for hanging in there, in good times and bad, in sickness and health, for refusing to give up and give in to throwing up your hands in frustration and abandoning the noble task that is a Marist Catholic education. The commitment to advance the education of young people is a vocation, a calling that requires the giving of self that mirrors the gift of self between married couples. It is that profound, life-giving, life-changing, and worthy of devoting your best to embracing challenges it places before you. That you have done, and I have no doubt you will continue to do so.

On behalf of Fr. Hindelang, the provincial, the Marists of the U.S. Province, and those Marists whose vision of a future Marist school was born with a hope and a prayer, I am pleased to sign off as president and pass on the baton to J.D. Childs. I do so with these words directed to him, and all of you, "For God has not given you a spirit of fear but of power, love, and… hope!"

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.
Marist School President (2017-2023)

[4] On The Education of Youth And Schools, Venerable Jean Claude Colin, Fr. Thomas Ellerman'58, SM, Rule IX