Faculty/Staff Retreat – 08/11/2023

I want to welcome those of you new to Marist, along with the rest of us who are returning. In particular, I want to welcome J.D. Childs and thank him for the leadership he brings as president that will be put in the service of advancing the mission of Marist School. That mission 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.

I am pleased that my classmate, Fr. John Ulrich, has returned to Marist for the third time. I want to welcome him and hope Fr. Ulrich will get it right this time.

This morning feels like Groundhog Day to me. I will peek my head out of my burrow long enough to share some thoughts and then scurry back to where I belong as rector. I can enjoy my reduced role, knowing that the school is in good hands because it is in your hands. I will let you know if I see my shadow.

In my tribute to the faculty, staff, and administrators at Marist I wrote in June – seems like eons ago – I wanted to lift your eyes from the many responsibilities and daily concerns that preoccupy you as Marist educators and those of you who serve as staff and administrators. Some of those issues can become heavy burdens causing you to look down, as people are prone to do when carrying a heavy load.

I wanted to raise your eyes heavenward, to look at the bigger picture by reflecting on the person you have become and your mission or purpose in life and to do that from God's perspective. To see things as God does, to see how your lives and achievements fit into the divine scheme of things, is to participate in the wisdom of God. Such wisdom does not come naturally to us but comes to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit we receive in the Sacrament of Confirmation. This wisdom is rooted in God, who is wisdom itself. Jesus embodies this wisdom in his life, death, and resurrection, which human wisdom judges as foolishness.

Fr. Jean-Claude Colin, the founder of the Marists, viewed the education of youth from God's perspective when he identified the first of the three goals of a Marist education to form students into strong and faithful disciples of Christ. He understood that the more our lives conform to Christ, the wiser or more sensitive we will be in recognizing when we are serving the divine purpose greater than ourselves. God allows us to experience this consolation during those moments when we hear ourselves saying, "I am where I am supposed to be," or "I can do nothing else with my life," or "This is who I am meant to be." Nonbelievers often will speak of themselves that way. That choice of words reveals an implicit recognition that true happiness is found in the service of some great cause or purpose bigger than themselves.

From the Catholic and Christian perspective, that great purpose is serving a loving, triune God who says through the prophet Jeremiah, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11) We want our students to graduate from Marist having learned that lesson which is meant to accompany them throughout their lives.

Mary, the icon of the Holy Spirit, the first and model disciple of Jesus, was familiar with those words of the prophet. The exchange with the Archangel Gabriel revealed how her life was to fit into God's purposes that would bring hope and a new future to the people of Israel and, through them, to all creation. Her response was simple, sincere, and humble: "Let it be done to me according to your word." She was already following her Son who, when faced with his inevitable crucifixion, would pray, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done."

When Jesus predicted his death on the cross, Peter argued with him, wanting Jesus to abandon such foolishness. Jesus rebuked him. He could just as easily have said, "I can do nothing else with my life, nor do I want to." Regardless, Jesus' own response reveals inner strength, dogged confidence, and even a joy this world cannot provide, and that St. Paul would say comes from "having fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith" (2 Timothy 2:4). In other words, a fulfilling, blessed or happy life is the pearl of great price that reveals itself in being true to the person God has called us to be and faithful to our mission in life, come what may.

Fr. Colin wanted Marist educators to teach their students to know and exercise their rights as honest and upright citizens and to learn the humanities, sciences, the arts, technical skills, critical thinking, and the like. None of these was an end in themselves. Fr. Colin says nothing about a Marist education guaranteeing getting into the best colleges or worldly success. He viewed his students from God's perspective and wanted them to serve a greater purpose by forming them into strong, faithful disciples of Christ and to advance the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. They were to do this while immersed in the world of the humanities, sciences, and the arts, etc., and to do this in the spirit of Mary. That is what a Marist education is all about.

The more our students conform their lives to Christ, the wiser and the more aware they will be in recognizing the person God envisions they are to become and the divine purpose they have been called to serve. At this early stage in their lives, it means guiding them on the path that one day will lead them to say, not only to themselves or others but especially to God, "I can do nothing else with my life, nor do I want to."

In the Marist context, that path has a name. It is called the Marist Way of educating youth. A more detailed map is provided in the *Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education* that is currently being introduced to the school and the Board of Trustees. At some point, that document will be in all your hands. As I said earlier, the school is in good hands because it is in your hands.

I want to thank all of you, no matter your role in the school, for your commitment to advancing the Marist mission in education by adopting the Marist Way of educating youth. That means accompanying these young people in the spirit of Mary. It is worthy of giving your best and embracing challenges it places before you. That you have done, and I have no doubt you will continue to do so.

Lest I forget, I have not seen my shadow. I interpret that to mean we have something to look forward to because the best days of Marist School do not lie in the past but lay before us in the future. That history has yet to be written—no time like the present to get started.

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.