Faculty/Staff Retreat: Doing the Work of Mary

January 3, 2023

It seems like only yesterday we were saying goodbye and wishing each other a Merry Christmas as we embarked on a well-deserved Christmas break. We're starting a new year, which picks up where last year left off. We continue to reflect on the Marist theme, "Doing the Work of Mary." I want to link doing the work of Mary with Fr. Colin's vision of a Church with a Marian face.

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 emerged from these consultations for the Church to lead with compassion. The synodal consultations mentioned several areas where there exists a tension between how to walk with people who struggle with the Church's teaching while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church. The document states, "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; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority."[1]

In other words, love first and ask questions later. Or rather than leading with, "This is what the Church teaches, take it or leave it," the desire is for a different approach summed up in these words, "This is what the Church teaches, let's talk about it." That is what a Church with a Marian face looks like.

What this can look like in practice is found in the friendship between John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York, and Mayor Edward Koch. They kept the practice of having lunch together after the Cardinal had retired and Mayor Koch had left the rigors of being Mayor. One month, they would meet at the Cardinal's residence and the following month at the Mayor's. They would discuss the significant issues that divided them, with neither one winning over the other. They published their conversations in a book entitled, His Eminence and Hizzoner, A Candid Exchange: Mayor Edward Koch and John Cardinal O'Connor. When Cardinal O'Connor died, Mayor Koch gave a moving eulogy on behalf of his friend. The Cardinal's approach was, "This is what the Church teaches; let's talk about it." I note the Cardinal

[1] *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.

conversed with passion and evangelical zeal. He did not speak with indifference as if to say, "This is what the Church teaches, take it or leave it." That is what a Church with a Marian face looks like.

This is a Marist Catholic school. As such, we want our students to know the Church's teachings and be prepared to explain them to those who inquire or challenge them. It is unacceptable for students to understand their faith and keep it to themselves, as if solely for their benefit. The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation do not permit that. In addition, the world won't permit that given the growing number of people who identify as atheists, former Catholics, or do not identify with any organized religion and are not bashful in making their opinions known.

A school with a Marian face prefers that our students not lead with arguments though they should have explanations at the ready. We prefer that they lead with the beauty of the Christian life lived well as a Catholic or within the faith traditions of those other than Catholic. We prefer that they lead with service and accompany people in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. We prefer that they love first and answer questions later. Hopefully, the quality, generosity, and commitment to help others, especially by advancing the Reign of God, also known as social justice, will raise questions about what motivates such actions. Here is where our students need to have answers ready.

In time, that will attract and invite the conversations that Cardinal O'Connor and Mayor Koch pursued. Neither changed the other, though they grew in mutual respect and admiration. However, those remain the prerequisites for conversions to occur. Given the nastiness that characterizes too many interactions these days, the Church with a Marian face is more appealing. Such a face stands in sharp contrast to the faces contorted in rage and intolerance that we see so much on display.

This is the work of Mary: to be her face that people will see in their perceptions of the Church and Marist School. For that to happen, additional work is required to breathe in her spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor. That, too, is the work Mary offers to accomplish in us so that through a kinder, gentler Church and school, it will be easier for people to come to her son, who first came to us as an infant, with that intention in mind. We humbly admit this will always be a work in progress.