Inclusion and Diversity: A Work of Mary and a Work of Marist School – Part One

Love Your Neighbor

I want to reflect on "Inclusion and Diversity: A Work of Mary and a Work of Marist School." This topic receives a negative review in some circles. It may be for philosophical or political reasons that critics see this as being incompatible with the Catholic faith or needing more nuance in light of Catholic teaching. It may also be because of how it was implemented in the workplace or public and other private schools. Therefore, people conclude that experience will be duplicated at Marist. Unlike companies, public schools, or private schools, this is a Catholic and a Marist school. Consequently, inclusion and diversity will serve the mission of the Church and Marist School. It will not drive the mission, let alone replace it.

Let me begin by stating Marist School's Inclusion and Diversity Statement.

> Marist School seeks to foster a community of inclusion that respects the dignity of the individual in the areas of age, gender, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation. This obligation to build a community of inclusion is based on sacred Scripture, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the spirit and traditions of the Society of Mary. All members of the Marist School community are responsible for advancing an understanding of and respect for diversity.

As we will see later, promoting inclusion and diversity is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is also a work of Mary, Marist School, and the Church. For a more thorough treatment of these terms with the appropriate references to Church teachings, please read the *Guide to Understanding Marist School's Diversity Statement*, which was crafted by Bishop Joel Konzen, S.M. and Father Richmond Egan, S.M. A progress update on the work that Marist School has been doing in these critical areas of our school life is also available.

I want to look at inclusion and diversity from a Marist perspective and the role both play in uniting our school community. This is in keeping with Mary's role as the guarantor of unity in the early Church. First, we need to define what we mean by inclusion and diversity.

Diversity is a gift from God, and we seek to respect, understand, and celebrate the God-given gifts and dignity of everyone in our school community. Because we are fallen human beings, we are predisposed to gravitate toward and socialize with those like us. That means we tend to withdraw from those different from us, which can leave them feeling ignored, marginalized, ostracized, and discriminated against. Yet, their perspective and culture can broaden and enrich the school.

When we say we prize diversity, we respect and appreciate those different from us in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, and national origin. We also say that we will consciously reach out to those we might otherwise ignore because they differ from ourselves. That is true for adults and all the more so for high school students. This is hard work to which Marist School is committed.

Inclusion rests on the understanding that all people are equal in dignity and, thus, deserving of respect. That translates into students feeling welcomed, safe, seen, and heard. That respect is rooted in being created in God's image and likeness. Furthermore, God first loved us, which is the basis for loving one another. Take God out of the equation, and our "lovableness" quickly vanishes. Knowing God loves us, warts and all, is the basis upon which we can love others, warts and all. Loving others includes treating them with dignity and respect that is owed out of respect for them and our Creator.

In respecting the dignity of all human beings because they are made in the image and likeness of God, Marist School is committed to treating our students, faculty, staff, and administration fairly, justly, and impartially. That means providing equal access to opportunities and resources for all and being especially sensitive to those who have had a history of being wrongly excluded or marginalized. You and I know inequalities exist regarding intelligence, creativity, skills, knowledge, abilities, etc., that can lead to disparities in outcome and income. Not everyone can play in the NBA or be a doctor, teacher, carpenter, etc.

However, the inequalities that result from prejudice, racism, sexism, age discrimination, etc., are wrong and must be righted. That is the work to which Marist School is committed. That means Marist School will continually review its policies, procedures, and disciplinary practices to ensure that students and employees are treated fairly and justly.

Pentecost provides us with a template for how Marist School will promote inclusion and diversity. The Holy Spirit respected the *diversity* of the people on the streets of Jerusalem. They retained their unique culture and language. Yet, everyone was given equal access to the Gospel proclaimed by St. Peter and was *included* by hearing the Easter proclamation in their language. This is a primer on how inclusion and diversity can promote unity and serve the common good. At Pentecost, the unifying power of the Holy Spirit is at work. We see that the Holy Spirit is not threatened by diversity but affirms it. We also hear at Pentecost the call for all cultures to bow before the Lord and to conform their values, customs, etc., to those of the reign of God.

This provides the context by which Marist School understands inclusion and diversity. Providing student interest clubs or activities[1] such as the Hispanic Club, Black Student Alliance, Asian American and Pacific Islander Affinity Group, Girls Support Girls, and Lebanese Culture Club is in the service of school unity. How is that? Students in these groups feel seen, heard, welcomed, and are vital contributors to the school community. Without these groups, these students, who are in the minority, can feel unseen, unheard, unwelcome, and unsafe. With these groups, they have a voice, are seen, feel welcomed, and can share the richness of their culture, experience, and history with the broader school community. Failure to promote inclusion and diversity can create division and resentment, thereby undermining the very unity we seek.

Potential employees and families of color visit our website to see if we have a director of inclusion and diversity. That is very important to them because it signals a willingness of the school to be sensitive to the needs of minorities and to be proactive in creating a culture where they feel included. That translates into feeling respected, valued, and safe. We have repeatedly said we want a more diverse student, faculty, and staff. Well, then, we must be intentional about creating a culture that promotes those values.

The problems we have had with students using racist behavior and language are because we have *not* been as intentional as we need to be about creating a school culture that values inclusion and diversity. Some ask why our students can't be told to love their neighbor as Jesus tells us without resorting to secular language. How many would advocate removing the different policies regarding discipline from the Student/Parent Handbook and replacing them with simply saying, love your neighbor?

[1] High schools and colleges will speak about establishing affinity groups to respond to a variety of interests. When I was alumni chaplain, we established an affinity group for Marist alums who were attorneys.

Promoting inclusion and diversity paints a more precise picture of what it looks like to love our neighbor in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse.[2] The school must follow that path if we want our students to graduate as faith-filled, global-ready servant leaders.

[2] [210] Learning from Mary, Marist schools help to form students to become disciples who know that they are the object of God's gratuitous love. Everyone is brother and sister. We cannot know God if we do not love our brother and sister. *Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools*.