The Marist Way of Being a Catholic School

Part Two: Embedded in the Church

"Fr. Colin always stressed that the works of the Society of Mary were always at the service of the local Church."[1]

In the previous reflection, I spoke about the temptation to define Catholic identity only through a liberal or conservative ideology. If a Catholic school is judged insufficiently liberal or conservative, its Catholic identity and fidelity to its mission will be questioned. What drives that criticism is the desire that a Catholic school is either a liberal or a conservative Catholic school, depending on one's preference.

I should mention that the U.S. bishops are criticized for being too liberal and conservative. They are accused of not being sufficiently Catholic and having drifted away from the mission of the Church. Even the Pope is not immune from such criticisms. If a Catholic school follows the bishops' lead, it will be criticized for the same reasons. Again, the Marists are concerned about Marist School remaining a ***Marist*** Catholic school and not a liberal or conservative Catholic school.

Fr. Colin and the early Marists lived through immense political, social, economic, international, and religious upheavals in France that mirror our times. The early Marists believed Christ had delegated his mother to intervene in the Church and the world precisely during this time of "unbelief," as Fr. Colin described it. He understood that the Marist way of being Catholic (the Church with a Marian face) would be the most effective way of presenting and communicating the faith to, what we call today, a secular mindset.[2]

I suppose we could say that Christ so loved this secular age that he sent his mother to embrace this wayward child born during the Enlightenment but now has come of age in our present time. The Society of Mary is one way that the mother of God has chosen to make her presence known and felt. Remember, what distinguishes the Society of Mary from other Marian congregations is its emphasis on being Mary and not just imitating her. Marists are to think, judge, feel, and act like her. Just as this spirituality distinguishes the Marists from other Marian congregations, this same spirituality distinguishes Marist School from other Catholic schools.

For this reflection, I want to highlight certain aspects of being Catholic that are especially important to the Marists. Marist spirituality is ecclesial, Christ-centered, mission-driven, and rooted in the universal call to holiness. To get started, if I were to ask what you would associate with being a Baptist or an Evangelical Christian, most would say the Bible for a Baptist and Jesus for an Evangelical Christian. If I were to ask what you associate with being Catholic, most would say Church. That is because of the Catholic emphasis on the Church being the Body of Christ. Where do we encounter Christ but through the Church in word and sacrament? It also ties into the Catholic emphasis that our salvation is an individual and communal endeavor.

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[1] [1] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 3, #207, For Fr. Colin and the early Marists educators, a Marist school existed in the service of the Church to form the hearts and minds of students in the ways of Jesus Christ. Each Marist school declares Catholic character and is incorporated into the life of the Church.

[2] "The Essence of Marist Spirituality," https://www.marist.com/about/welcome-from-the-president

The Marist insistence that the Society of Mary be firmly rooted in the Church reflects the thinking of Fr. Colin who repeatedly observed, "The Blessed Virgin has said, 'I was the support of the newborn Church; I shall be so at the end of time.'"[3] That is why the Marist Way of being Catholic or Church will emphasize the importance of our students being involved (supporting) their local parishes now and when they go on to college. This is consistent with the Scriptures that situate Mary in the presence of or in reference to Jesus. Where Christ is, his mother will be close by. Marist students can be found where the Church (local parish or church) is.[4]

Yet, the heart and soul of our faith is our relationship with Christ. That is what I mean by Christ-centered. Everything the Church does, everything this school does, has as its purpose to cultivate, nurture, enliven, and deepen our students' love for Christ. Jesus wants to walk with them in easy friendship, as he had done with our first parents in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. That is his dream for them and all humanity.

That is why Marist emphasizes prayer and retreats. During the six years our students attend Marist, it is estimated they pray approximately 6,000 times: at the beginning of the day, at the beginning of each class, when they gather as a team, be it sports or academics, and at Mass. Each grade attends a retreat, some being overnight and others being over a weekend. As I said, everything the school does is to deepen their relationship with Christ so they can walk together in easy friendship.

For Christ's dream to be fulfilled, our students' relationship with him must be real, personal, dynamic, and alive before they can bring that reality to others. But Jesus wants more than a personal relationship with him. The triune God wants to make us a part of his family. "Then I will be a Father to you. And you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:18) We want our students to add to the family of God where Christ will encounter them in word and sacrament and become a part of his mystical body, the Church. Why is that important, you may ask?

All the baptized are called to help each member of God's family to grow in holiness, including advancing the reign of God (social justice) and assisting them on their earthly pilgrimage, that is to end up being with God in heaven. When we leave this earth and return to our heavenly home, we can expect to be welcomed by everyone we have helped to get there. We will do the same for those who come to heaven after us. Be prepared to be surprised by the presence of those you will not know but who assisted you with their prayers. Also, be ready to be surprised by whom you may meet. "Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." (Mt. 21:31), and who might be missing, "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' Will enter the kingdom of Heaven." (Mt. 7:21)

We will stand before God as individuals. No one can "stand in" for us. However, we can expect to be greeted by the family of believers, both living and those who have gone before us, those we have helped and who have helped us return to God. Catholics understand that our eternal salvation is not only a personal or individual matter but, as I said earlier, a communal endeavor. It comes with being a member of the mystical body of Christ, the Church. I suppose it takes more than a village to raise a child of God. It takes the Church Triumphant (saints in heaven) and the Church Militant, the Church on earth that is fighting the battles of the Lord, to which Fr. Colin would add under the banner of Mary.

When the baptized are dismissed from Mass, they are to "Go and make disciples [of his] of all nations." The Church is mindful of this mission, given to the faithful in baptism, and how they are strengthened to

[3] Keel, Edwin, A Book of Texts for the Study of Marist Spirituality, page 6.

[4] (For more about the relationship between Marists and the Church, go to the Marist Way of Worship.)

exercise it when they are confirmed.[5] That explains why the faithful are dismissed from Mass with the words such as, "The Mass is ended. Go in the peace to love and serve the Lord." This is consistent with the life of Mary, who was all about her son. We want the lives of our Marist students to be all about her son, too. We also want them to follow her lead when she says, "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn. 2:5)

That is done best through serving others, which Marist sees as a priority for our students to learn while they are with us. While students may see their service as a requirement to fulfill, the Marists see serving others as a spiritual practice (corporal and spiritual works of mercy) to be cultivated throughout one's life and an important lesson to learn when they are young. It also ties into one of the three goals of Marist education that Fr. Colin identified as teaching our students to be useful citizens. [6]

Mary's admonition to "Do whatever he tells you" also is why Marist engages our students in discussions about vocations, which is rooted in baptism.[7] Then they were called to a specific way of being holy by conforming their lives to Christ, to be able to say with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live in me but Christ." (Galatians 2:20)

They learn about how the saints, both living and dead, canonized and yet-to-be-canonized, Catholic and non-Catholic, responded to God leading and guiding their lives to serve a divine purpose. They are reminded that real happiness lies in being in sync with or on the same page as Christ so that someday, they can say, "I am where I am supposed to be," and "I am the person I was meant to be."

It is in the context of the universal call to holiness that Marist School introduces the vocations to the priesthood and religious life to the students. "Vocation talk" is no longer limited to those two vocations. It includes marriage, single life, and students putting their talents before God to be used to serve his purposes. This directly opposes a secular mentality that counsels, "It is my life, and I will do what I want." We want our students to say with Mary, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

In addition, it challenges the assumption that happiness will be found through acquiring wealth, status, and power that is abusive, manipulative, and serves the ego, not Christ. Fr. Colin put it this way: Marists should say NO to greed, pride, and power.[8]

In my following reflection, I want to link the Marist Way of being Catholic, the Church's mission of evangelization, and the mission of a Marist school.

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[5] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 1, #203: "…the Marist mission is simply the evangelizing mission of the Church."

[6] [6] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 5: Marist Schools, Serve the Mission of the Church, #212, "Fr. Colin believed that Marist schools were platforms for forming good citizens"

[7] For more information about the Marist Way of promoting vocations, go to https://www.marist.com/about/welcome-from-the-president, "The Marist Way of Fostering Vocations."

[8] Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education: U.S. Province Schools and Sponsored Schools, Standard 1, #203: "This mission [of the Church] says no to prestige, power and ambition."