Part Six: Always Our Children in a School with a Marian Face

"Colinian[1] spirituality and pedagogy inspire us to work together in fulfilling the Marist heritage and urge us to build a Marian Church – a servant church, a church that meets each person where he/she is and welcomes them in the name of Christ."[2]

I want to continue where I left off in *Part Five: Always Our Children in a School with a Marian Face*. We have students who disclose they are homosexual, wrestling with their sexual orientation[3], or have questions about gender. We do not want these children and their parents to live feeling isolated and under the shadow of fear and rejection while at Marist. That only adds to the mental and emotional stress these students experience for other reasons.[4]

The CDC, for example, reports that LGBTQ+ teens in America are suffering from mental health issues at a much higher incidence rate than any other population. In 2021, 75.7% of students identifying with this population reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless.[5] The Marist school counselors' experience with our students reflects these national trends. They confirm that LGBTQ+ students are the most marginalized and need additional support beyond what Marist currently offers.

In response to this cry for help, Marist will not turn a deaf ear. Marist wants these students and their parents to be comforted by knowing Marist will create a learning environment where their children feel welcomed, respected, and safe.

That can happen in three ways. First, these students and their families can take comfort in knowing that Marist's *Anti-Discrimination Policy* will be enforced and that we will continue to seek to live our diversity statement more completely. The school administration crafted the former with input from our students. Both have made a difference in our school community and are reviewed regularly with students, faculty, and administrators to ensure all understand the expectations of being a member of our community.

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[1] Fr. Colin, founder of the Society of Mary

[2] *Standards and Expectations of a Marist Education, U.S. Province School, and Sponsored Schools*, "Sustaining the Marist Mission in the School," page 6.

[3] The Catholic Church teaches that homosexual inclination or orientation is itself not sinful. Homosexual acts are considered sinful because they are not ordered toward procreation. In addition, the expression of sexual love is intended to be expressed only in the context of the sacrament of Marriage, which God created to be between a man and a woman. For that reason, the Church does not have the right to change what God intends. There are many heterosexual men and women, as well as those who are homosexual, who struggle with the Church's teaching about being chaste in relationships outside of marriage. For the Church's position on homosexuality, go to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church," #2357, 2358, 2359.

[4] "Now, I fully realize that Robert E. Crimo is exceptional and so I don't intend to extrapolate from him to all young people, but evidence has been piling up for some time that youths, especially boys and young men, are suffering badly in our society. To give just one example, Derek Thompson's article in the *Atlantic*, from April of this year, reveals that from 2009 to 2021, "feelings of sadness and hopelessness" among American teenagers rose, astonishingly, from 26% to 44%. And the increase in depression was consistent across all major categories: male, female, black, white, LGBTQ+, etc. In Thompson's words, "Since 2009, sadness and hopelessness have increased for every race; for straight teens and gay teens; for teens who say they've never had sex and for those who say they've had sex with males and/or females; for students in each year of high school; for teens in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Houston, we have a problem." Barron, Robert, *Gun Violence and the Deep Sadness of Our Teens.* Go to https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/barron/gun-violence-and-the-deep-sadness-of-our-teens/.

[5] https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/04/american-teens-sadness-depression-anxiety/629524/

Secondly, parents are encouraged to seek advice from our counseling and campus ministry offices and take advantage of other resources. Those include parent support groups, Cameron's Collection through our library, and various articles as well as statements from Church leaders, all of which we can make available.

Thirdly, these students are also encouraged to have conversations with our counselors, campus ministers, or trusted faculty and staff and to pray while balancing their experience with the teachings of the Church. That can happen individually, of course, but there is a benefit, too, for them to engage with other students wrestling with similar issues and their friends. Jesus sent his disciples two by two (Mark 6:7), thereby emphasizing the critical role that a community provides.

Meeting as a group, led by trained counselors and supportive faculty, can ease the sense of isolation and the fear of rejection that would otherwise not be available. The central tasks that such a group would address include LGBTQ+ students understanding their own experience, sharing this experience with others in a safe place, building community, navigating peer and family relationships, and advocating for respect and acceptance in the public sphere. Most importantly, Marist wants to bring them closer to Christ, whom they may feel has abandoned them, given the pain that has been thrust upon them. For these reasons, Marist has established a group to better minister to the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

What I outlined above is consistent with the vision of Church given voice in 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 generated 22,000 reports. Quoting from the introductory letter composed by Most Reverend Daniel E. Flores, STD, Chair on the Committee of Doctrine, "The document that follows is an attempt to synthesize and contextualize the common joys, hopes, and wounds called forth with the help of the Holy Spirit in the unfolding of the Synod. The National Synthesis simply tries faithfully to express what emerged from the consultations."[6]

Related to our purposes here, a common theme that emerged from these consultations discussed the need for the Church to lead with compassion. The synodal consultations mentioned several areas where there exists a tension between how to walk people who struggle with the Church's teaching while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church. "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."[7]

That, by the way, is what Fr. Colin, founder of the Society of Mary, had in mind when he spoke about the need for a Church with a Marian Face. Fr. Craig Larkin, S.M., put it this way, "A Marian Church is a Church that makes a choice for compassion over competition; an option for relationship over dogmatism; for humility over power; for service over dominance. It is a Church that pushes its boundaries to include all, rather than one which defines boundaries to contain the chosen."[8]

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[6] https://www.usccb.org/resources/us-national-synthesis-2021-2023-synod

[7] *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.

[8] https://www.acertainway.info/life-from-within/life-force/a-marian-church/. Many Catholic adults disagree with the Church's teachings on divorce and remarriage, chastity outside of marriage, contraception, the ordination of women, the orthodoxy of the Second Vatican Council, immigration, the just war theory, homosexuality, transgender ideology, married priests, the environment, climate change, the real presence in the Eucharist, and Pope Francis himself. Rejecting the orthodoxy of the Second Vatican Council and the real presence in the Eucharist moves one

Among the many groups identified in the synodal consultations as integral to the Church being a more welcoming community, LGBTQ+ persons and their families were explicitly mentioned. "Many who identify as LGBTQ+ believe Church teachings condemn them. There is "an urgent need for guidance," as [one parish] begged, "We believe we are approaching a real crisis in how to minister to the LGBTQ+ community, some of whom are members of our own families. We need help, support, and clarity." Often, families "feel torn between remaining in the Church and supporting their loved ones. Becoming a more welcoming Church requires ongoing discernment of the whole Church on how best to accompany LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters."[9]

These concerns demonstrate the complexities involved and the need to factor them into how Marist School responds pastorally to LGBTQ+ students, their parents, and the wider Marist Fam. They also point to the need to provide a safe space where these students and their friends can engage in these conversations, guided by our counselors and faculty.

Marist sees the need to reach out to these students and their parents in fidelity to the Marist charism that compels us to give special attention and pastoral care to the most vulnerable. There will be struggles with Church teaching, but that should not lead to LGBTQ+ students believing that the Church and Marist School hate them. Marist seeks to walk a delicate line between being faithful to Church teaching and pastoral in its ministry lest failure doing that will result in these students and their parents believing themselves unworthy and forever lost to being embraced by God's love and mercy.

> "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father. What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray." In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost." (Mt. 18:10-14)

The Society of Mary regards educating youth as a work of Mary. This work includes teaching our students to have empathy (compassion) for all students who struggle in various ways.[10] That is an important lesson for them to learn while at Marist. The mother of Jesus expects this lesson to be taught in her school. This is what Fr. Colin meant when he envisioned the Church and a Marist school with a Marian face.

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away from Catholicism and into Protestantism. A Marian Church pushes its boundaries to include all rather than defining boundaries to contain the chosen. Rather than say, this is what the Church teaches, take it or leave it. A Marian Church says this is what the Church teaches, let's talk about it. That is what we are doing with LGBTQ+ students. They are young and patience is the order of the day.

[9] *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*, page 8. https://www.usccb.org/resources/us-national-synthesis-2021-2023-synod

[10] In an article I wrote under the heading, "The Marist Way of Understanding Social Justice," I touched on the important place that empathy (compassion) has in the life of a Christian and in a Marist education. Go to *Part Five – "Be Compassionate as Your Heavenly Father is Compassionate," Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.* When applied in a school setting, it includes speaking the truth in love. That is precisely what Marist School is doing here.