The Marist Way of Promoting Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue – Part I

The education of youth by the Society of Mary belongs to the very core of its mission. Marist founder, Jean-Claude Colin, made that clear on several occasions. He once said, "The Society is called to teaching, and we must try to prepare for it." Father Gunn, S.M., in a letter of January 6, 1901, reflected the founder's thinking when he wrote in response to a question by Bishop Keiley, Bishop of Savannah from 1900-1922,[1] asking if the Marists would be willing "to undertake such a work in this city." Father Gunn replied that "one of the chief reasons for our being in Atlanta at all was to teach no less than to preach, that your predecessor understood that a college would be started and conducted by us, as soon as we could possibly manage." The new school, Marist College, opened its doors on Wednesday, October 2, 1901.

From its beginning, Marist College, now Marist School,[2] did not limit its admissions to Catholics. "It is for the boys of Atlanta," said Fr. Gunn, "irrespective of religious restrictions. It was built by Catholics; it will have Catholic teachers, but the doors will never be closed against a good boy who wants to study." In 1976, the Marist Fathers and Brothers set a policy of reserving 25% of the student population for those other than Catholic. Without their support, a Marist education would have been doomed from the start.

Most Catholic schools in the United States may include non-Catholics to compensate for the lack of Catholics needed to keep their doors open. Marist has consciously decided to reserve about 25% of its students and their families who are other than Catholic. I suppose you can say that we are following in the footsteps of Fr. Gunn.

Fr. Gunn seemed unperturbed about the ratio of Catholics to non-Catholics. That there might be more Protestant than Catholic students did not deter Fr. Gunn's enthusiasm for a Catholic school for boys in Atlanta. Fr. Gunn's attitude is remarkable, given the prevalent anti-Catholic prejudice at that time. Notice the lack of fear and shunning a Catholic "fortress" mentality.

From its beginning, Marist tilted toward what today we call inclusivity and diversity. That would be expanded when Marist was one of the first Catholic schools to desegregate in 1967. Female students were admitted in 1976, and, more recently, Muslim students.

Also, note that the school's Catholic identity was front and center. Again, quoting Fr. Gunn, "It was built by Catholics; it will have Catholic teachers, but the doors will never be closed against a good boy who wants to study." The school's Catholic identity was a given and not threatened by the presence of Protestant and Jewish students.

If you think such an inclusive understanding of Catholic education is unique to the Marists, consider that a significant portion of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools in this country is at around 20%, depending on the location[3].

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[1] Atlanta became a Diocese in 1956 and an Archdiocese in 1962.
[2] The name was changed when Marist moved to its present campus.
[3] According to the National Catholic Educational Association, approximately 83% of students enrolled at Catholic-based schools are Catholic as of 2021. https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/upload/Catholic-Schools-FACT-Sheet-2016.pdf.

According to Dr. Thomas Groome,[4] professor of theology and religious education at Boston College, "There are 500 Catholic schools in Pakistan and the country's finest educational system. But 90% of our students are Muslim; 90% of the faculty are also Muslim. Yet we're giving their students a different education than the traditional Muslim schools." He went on to say that a Catholic education "teaches a different epistemology, a different way of knowing, of looking at data and making decisions and judgments about it, etc."[5]

A Catholic education means that the world will be a better place by inching it closer to what God desires for all human beings, which is captured in the Hebrew word, *shalom*. That word expresses what God wants for all humanity: justice, peace, love, compassion, freedom, the fullness of life for all, and the integrity of creation. The presence of these characteristics will be found where God reigns. That is God's vision for the flourishing of humanity. Those who have had a Catholic education cannot insulate themselves and the world from its positive influence.

Pope Francis echoed those sentiments in his 2014 Address to the Participants in the Plenary Session of the Congregation for Catholic Education (For Educational Institutions)[6],

> "Jesus began to preach the Good News in the 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' a crossroads for people of different races, cultures, and religions. In some ways, this context is similar to today's world. The profound changes that have led to the ever-spreading multicultural societies require those who work in schools and universities to become involved in the educational programs of exchange and dialogue, with a bold and innovative fidelity able to bring together the Catholic identity to meet the different 'souls' existing in a multicultural society. I think with appreciation of the contribution that religious institutions and other ecclesial institutes offer through the foundation and management of Catholic schools in contexts strongly marked by cultural and religious pluralism."

Being intentional about teaching Christians other than Catholics and even students from different religions makes Marist unique as a Catholic school. That uniqueness is rooted in the Marist charism. In the following reflection, we will look more closely at the Church's relationship with other Christian churches, ecclesial communities, and religions. We will see that this emphasis on religious inclusivity and diversity is critical to a Marist Catholic education. It is necessary to form faith-filled, global-ready servant leaders who must be prepared to navigate an increasingly religiously diverse world and secular society to which our Lord has called them to evangelize in the spirit of Mary.

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[4] Dr. Thomas H. Groome was born in County Kildare, Ireland. Professor Groome holds the equivalent of an M.Div. from St. Patrick's Seminary in Carlow, Ireland, an M.A. from Fordham University, and a doctoral degree in religious education from Union Theological Seminary/Columbia University. He is recognized as one of the leading religious educators of our time and has lectured widely throughout the world. His writings have been translated into many languages. (https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/stm/faculty/faculty-directory/thomas-h-groome.html.)

[5] "What Makes Catholic Education Catholic," Dr. Thomas H. Groome, podcast, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNmP9HhvOPc&t=112s.

[6] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140213_congregazione-educazione-cattolica.html.