

Re-Giving the Gift

The Marianist charism is a gift freely given to us, and that gift brings with it the job of living it out and passing it on. All of us who have been touched by the Marianist spirit in any way understand the idea of it being a gift; the task part seems to pose more of a problem. For those who live near a Marianist school or institution, have contact with other lay Marianists, or have frequent exposure to Marianist sponsored gatherings, the challenge is to come out of our comfort zone (being with those who think like Marianists do) and invite in those who may be different from us in age, economic and educational status, cultural background and perhaps even religious belief. Not the preferred way of living – when it's so much easier just to associate with those warm fuzzy folks who think like we do.

Those who have been “hooked” by the charism but who live at a great distance from anything or anyone Marianist, must struggle to keep the gift fresh and growing, sometimes alone, a daunting task for anyone. We often become frustrated as the gift sits only in our heart, slowly growing cold. But what are we to do if there are no other Marianists to help and support? Everyone would agree that we need others to help spread the charism, right?

But now consider this. Imagine a place in the U.S. where the closest supermarket, dry cleaner, etc., is 20 miles away and your nearest neighbor lives one-fourth mile down the road. Imagine that some of the local roads are unpaved and that an American Indian reservation with its own beliefs and culture takes up 11 miles of the surrounding countryside. Imagine the only Marianist you really know is your brother, who left home when he was a teenager and returned only for short visits. The little you learned about the Marianist charism, you learned through an online course. Now imagine a woman who – undaunted by all of these challenges – started a community of women and is leading them into Marianist life. Meet Marceta Reilly.

Marceta is an amazing woman. With a Ph.D. in education, she started out as a teacher and went on to become superintendent of schools. When she retired from that, she began work as an educational consultant/coach for the University of Kansas. She holds Sacred Singing Circles for her grandchildren and is active in her parish, but she wanted more so she founded “Harvest Women,” a group whose purpose is to harvest the wonderful feminine spiritual energy that often lies fallow because it is unrecognized. Since distance is an issue, the group “meets” on the phone once a month for prayer, faith sharing and a discussion of the book they are reading.

Intrigued by her online course, Marceta began to include a discussion from one of the “Things Marianist” in every phone call. Slowly but surely, the group began to take on a Marianist flavor which culminated in inviting two lay Marianists from New Jersey – Chris Suriano and Joanne McCracken – to give a retreat. Chris and Joanne have worked for many years at the Marianist Family Center in Cape May Point, N.J., and offer an annual women’s retreat in the Marianist tradition. The retreat was a huge success and generated even more interest in Marianist spirituality and identity.

Against unlikely odds, one woman has taken on the task of re-gifting the gift and made it look easy. The founders would have been proud. Can we do any less?