

## ***Sharpening Blunt Intentions:*** **Reflections on the Stewardship of Marianist Boards**

Good evening and welcome.

This is a very historic meeting: a gathering of the stewards of all the major Marianist ministries in the United States, Ireland and Puerto Rico. Thank you for being part of this event.

The New York poet, Marie Ponsot, now in her 86<sup>th</sup> year, gives us an image in which to ground our reflections this evening. She says in her poem, *Take Time, Take Place* in her 1998 collection called “Springing”:

All choices are losses – except  
for true remembrance which sharpens  
blunt intentions into acts...

If nothing else this evening, I would like to remember a tradition which hopefully for our time will sharpen a few of our blunt intentions into action. I would like to do two things this evening: paint a large canvas in broad strokes of what Blessed Chaminade intended to be *The Marianist Project*, and then suggest from that tradition some ideas about the role of Boards in regard to this Marianist project for our time.

I begin these reflections recalling the historic time which framed the Marianist project: a time when everything was falling apart. It is difficult to imagine such an experience, but let's try. If we closed the doors of this large room and convinced you that: the government had collapsed; that the pastors and lay ministers of the Church had been identified and were being summarily executed; that the school systems had been minimized and were now government-controlled; and that most of your circle of friends had been shipped

off to another country. What would you do? Would you leave, too, if you had the chance? Would you decide to stay? Where would you begin to rebuild?

Father Joseph Lackner describes this time and the challenges that faced Blessed William Joseph in this way:

In the midst of the terror of revolution, the destruction of Christian culture, the ever present possibility of martyrdom, exile, emigration, divisions among social classes, a populace lacking education and formation in faith, the repeated collapse of cherished endeavors, and the loneliness of his final years ... Chaminade remained a man of "apostolic imagination and daring." (*In Mission with Mary*, paragraph 7)

I would like to reflect with you for a few minutes about that *apostolic imagination* – the ability to picture in the midst of ruin, a new Church, and *daring* – the power to act on your vision.

Blessed William Joseph's diagnosis of the evil which provoked the revolution in France was that "the Church of France did not have at its disposal the institutions which the modern societies, partly foreign to Christianity, required." (Verrier, *Chaminade Miscellany*, pg. 19)

So the challenge for Chaminade was most basically: How do we rebuild institutions that have collapsed either through direct persecution or sustained irrelevance? Today's answers might be to strategize a marketing campaign, to organize a capital campaign to fund the marketing efforts, hire a staff, do a strategic plan, and begin rebuilding as the money comes in.

But William Joseph Chaminade, a man steeped in the mystery of the Incarnation and the French school of spirituality, understood a different truth which guided his vision and his project. That truth was that institutions are most fundamentally groups of people who espouse and live certain attitudes and values. The bricks and the mortar only structure the living and working of the group, they do not define the group.

So begin with the group: “and they will build it!” Transform the attitudes and values and you transform the group; and better yet, bring passion and apostolic daring to the group and you have formed a group of group transformers able to transform other groups. The more attitudes, beliefs and values are assimilated and become good habits, the more the group or institution achieves its goal. Attitudes, beliefs and values become good habits when we consciously and clearly live and teach them.

So the essential task, for Chaminade, was to reform and refocus groups. If you do that well, the groups (and consequently the institutions) will thrive and grow and multiply. Chaminade understood that the mission of an institution was to create a particular culture within them. If we create or influence the culture, the culture and the institution will thrive and grow and multiply.

Before everything else, Blessed Chaminade’s goal was to reconstruct Christian communities – communities in which an “intensity might blossom (Verrier, op.cit., pg. 22).” What he meant by intensity was that the relationships in the group would be deeply faith-based. And these deeply faith-based groups then were even more importantly to present to the surrounding community a mass of Catholics.

This “mass of Catholics” were to be a group so faith-based and “on fire” that they would attract. Chaminade felt that what would convince was not the faith of individuals, but it was the faith as practiced and witnessed by masses of believers. Christianity would convert not by what was preached, but by what was lived (Verrier, op.cit, pg. 22). The best way for a person to be a Christian is to be part of a Christian community. We teach the world that Christianity is possible by being a *spectacle* of it.

And lest you think that Chaminade’s project was to provide pious little prayer groups, it was not. It was to provide the world with a mass of people so

convinced by what they live that the world would be transformed. In defending his lay communities to disparagers in 1824, he wrote:

Why, may I ask, is not the general state of things at the present time the same as it was heretofore? Why must everyday conditions be met with vaster, and more improved, modern methods than years ago? Who does not see that since the Revolution, a new fulcrum must be found for the lever that moves the modern world? (Quoted in *Blessed William, Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Marianist Family*, Vincent Gizard, SM, pg. 68-69)

I take great delight in imagining this short, elderly French priest, William Joseph Chaminade, applying great force to a crow bar on which is wedged with a fulcrum a huge globe and challenging his followers to “help me push here: because we are about to move the world toward God!” That fulcrum was and is the power of community to create and transform Catholic Christian culture.

But when the world is falling apart, it is difficult to know where to begin, even if you have the vision of a grand project. Blessed Chaminade began with the formation of lay communities. To these lay communities and shortly after to his religious orders, he entrusted first and forever the mission of education. He made practical this mission of Christian education first through the ministry of schools. And in later years many other ministries were added, all of which have to fall under this mission of educating in faith, or they are not Marianist.

Chaminade felt that the French Church would be rebuilt through education. But he spoke not about conducting excellent academic institutions, but of creating in his schools an educational culture, a Christian milieu that would extend far beyond the work of the school. “The kind of education Chaminade envisioned was to be realized through the kind of presence the teacher created in the classroom.” (Lackner thesis, pg. 49 quoting Vincent Vasey.)

In communities lay and religious, in schools, in all ministries that Marianists engaged, the task was and is to create among the group a milieu, an atmosphere that would sustain faith and attract by its witness.

So much for the large canvas of the Marianist project. There are certainly lots of folks in this room who can fill in the details of this Marianist panorama for you better than I. You are the stewards of that project in whatever institution you find yourselves. How do we translate this grand tradition into workable, faith-inspired strategic planning for today?

Let's begin in true Star Wars fashion on the dark side. The dark side of the Marianist charism, I believe, has always been dependence on osmosis. There was little urgency to articulate what we were about because "you could just pick it up." Marianist osmosis is often heard in phrases like: "Hang around with us and you'll pick it up" ("it" being what this Marianist thing is all about!). "Once they visit our campus, they will sign up." "It's hard to explain, you just have to come and experience it."

The challenges of our culture and our Church no longer permit us the leisure of relying on osmosis alone. If we leave aside the question of revolution, our cultural times echo revolutionary France's more than we often admit. The Catholic subculture, largely ethnic in the United States, which flourished from the early 1800s to the mid-1960s, has ended. Many Catholic "cultural identifiers" have faded. Catholic identity and dare I say Marianist identity has to be very intentional (or not at all).

The dialogue between faith and culture has to be seen and heard in all that we do in mission and must drive that mission. William Portier, of the University of Dayton, in speaking earlier this month at the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities meeting in Washington, D.C., said: "The key challenge facing the contemporary Church is how to do the formation work that the subculture

once did.” What he is asking is how do we rebuild a Church and form its members to be evangelizers and formators in faith? In a different scenario of cultural ruin, Blessed Chaminade faced the same question. The broad canvas that I tried to sketch for you previously attempted to show how he answered that question.

It is now our critical task to answer the question in our particular circumstances and institutions, and more precisely to look at the particular stewardship that Marianist Boards are called to in the answering of those questions.

I would like to touch briefly on just three areas that I feel are essential to the stewardship of Boards in regard to mission.

1. Boards are about making sure that the institution gets people’s attention. Through the agency of administration and communications people, the mission of the institution has to be visible, identifiable and attractive. Chaminade challenged his earliest communities and institutions to be *spectacles*. In English the words spectacle has taken on a slightly negative or embarrassing connotation. But the French word meant a *grand sight*. Can your community or institution look at itself and say that we are a “grand sight” of faith and ministry for people to see? If you are not seeing it, no one else either!

Marianist institutions and communities can no longer rely on osmosis to transmit either mission or the institutional culture. There needs to be intentional consciousness on the part of the Board to articulate and re-articulate the mission. This does not mean writing more documents, although looking at what you say to the public about yourselves is an important piece of this. What it does mean quite practically is increasing awareness about the implications of decisions that are made in your community or your institution.

I offer two examples of decisions from my recent experience in the Province. A Marianist university decides to purchase a 49-acre tract of land adjoining the campus. Enthusiasm is high for the possibilities of development, expansion, and renewal of the universities facilities and offerings. But the challenge to the Board is to reflect on how this purchase will change the culture of the university. How will expansion and development affect the community and its mission for the future? What needs to be put forth for the board to guide the development that is planned?

A Marianist retreat center decides to purchase new, more ergonomic chapel chairs – a long overdue capital improvement, I might add! How will these chairs and their arrangement in the chapel affect the liturgical style and prayer life of the communities that gather at the retreat house for prayer? What will change? Prayer and liturgy are key faith components of the mission and someone must be shepherding the asking of important, mission-centered questions. I believe that Boards are important centers for this kind of reflection.

2. Boards have to be about creating and re-creating the Marianist Catholic cultures of the community and institution: whether that institution is a school, a retreat house, a parish, or a sponsored program. What will make it Marianist and Catholic is the identifiable culture that is created. The Board must shepherd the community in learning and rearticulating the identifiable pieces of a Marianist culture.

Several efforts have already been made in this regard in terms of documents: *The Characteristics of Marianist Education*, *The Characteristics of Marianist Universities*, the excellent binder produced by Brother John Habjan called *The Gift of Marianist Education*. And there are efforts afoot regarding articulating the Marianist and Catholic identifiers for retreat houses and parishes in the Province.

I will not repeat here the similar characteristics that these excellent documents and efforts have articulated. I will just add two of my own that I think are important to the development of a Marianist culture:

(1) It is important to develop good habits. Bernard Lee, SM, has recast what Marianists call “the system of virtues,” as “habits for the journey.” Boards need to look at their communities and ask: What good habits happen in our day- to-day life here? What good habits are developed here when there is conflict and disagreement? What good habits happen in this community when the community gathers to pray? What good habits are evidenced when difficult decisions have to be made?

A Board or any other group in the institution needs to become aware of and develop more deeply its Marianist and Catholic habits for daily life, conflict resolution, prayer, and decision-making. These habits will inform all the other identifiers in the culture that make the culture Marianist.

(2) Our former superior general, David Fleming, articulated an intuition that he had regarding Marianist culture. He stated that Marianists are about building a Marian style of Church. “Central to Chaminade’s courageous and creative spirit was Mary. (*In Mission with Mary*, par. 8)” From contemplation on the mystery of Mary, a style of being Church, of being Catholic Christians in community, emerges that is different than and complementary to the so-called Petrine/hierarchical model.

A Marian style of Church gathers and sends for mission in a collaborative, egalitarian way. It would be a wonderful challenge for Boards to look at the culture of their communities and institutions and ask how is it that we arrive at decisions. How are dissident and marginal voices treated in discerning directions for the future? How diverse is the group that we

gather to make decisions? Is there an intentional Marian component to our prayer, liturgy, and identifiable Catholic character? This kind of conversation and these kinds of questions will give an identifiable aura to the culture of the institution. Marianist boards and institutions should be able to say that when we speak about the dialogue between faith and culture, that conversation happens in a Marian context.

3. And the third important element of Board stewardship of Marianist culture that is often neglected is to be about seeking and embracing new ways of doing things. This is critically important in the context of the collapse of the Catholic subculture. How is it that the faith is transmitted in our community or in our institution? During the first year of the Province of the United States, our vocation director came in around budget time with a new idea. The money being spent on advertising in Catholic newspapers and periodicals would be better spent, he said, in investing in a Web site that would be managed by the youngest members of the Province.

He asked me how many young people did I think read the weekly Catholic paper as opposed to how many were *online* every evening. I could see his subtle point. And that budget shift and investment in the Web site has been quite successful. In some ways we have to trust the instincts and intuitions of the young to guide some of this. Given the gift of faith and respectful of the tradition they have inherited, they, nevertheless, will provide some exciting new opportunities for faith development.

Boards must create an atmosphere where the means to conduct what Chaminade called the *nova bella* (*new ways of doing things*) can happen. Almost 35 years ago a group of faculty members at our school in Baltimore sat down with the Assistant Provincial and said we need a new kind of retreat program that

doesn't center on individual spirituality, but rather on families. We need a place where the family can develop their faith together. And born from a casual conversation and a dilapidated old orphanage in Cape May, New Jersey, was the Marianist Family program and later retreat center. Boards are called to listen to the people in the community and the institutions and to how the Spirit is leading in new ways.

At our recent General Chapter in Rome this past summer, we prayed:

Blessed Chaminade, our Good Father,  
we stand before you in thankfulness and need.  
help us to be signs of hope in our world,  
a spectacle to the nations, as we live together with others in the Marianist Family, a People of Saints, who present Christ in every look and gesture, missionaries of Mary, whose actions are both bold and watchful...  
Ground us in your apostolic imagination:  
to see richness in diversity and the face of Christ in every person;  
to treasure our international character,  
and all the generations, classes and races that comprise our communities;  
to venture beyond the closed circle of our experience to new inventive ways;  
to picture a Church with a Marian face,  
to believe all things possible with our God of unbounded grace...  
we pray this of you, as you stand with Mary in praise of our one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever and ever. Amen

Amen.

What a grand vision we have been given! You have been called to be stewards of that great tradition. But sometimes stewards of great traditions can be museum keepers. Yours is not a call to tend museums, but a call to be leaders in translating the Marianist culture into our times and your institutions. I invite you to join again ever more deeply this blessed man, Chaminade, who had the

vision and apostolic imagination to call us to join him in pushing on that fulcrum, and passionately and with deep faith moving the world toward Christ.

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February 15, 2007