

Aging with Mary

Marianists see Mary as the mother and religious educator of Jesus, mentor to the Apostles, and Mother of the Church--indeed, the sinless virgin and mother--and someone who also suffered the dark night. At least, that is what St. John Paul II suggested in one of his first encyclicals. Picture Mary at the foot of the cross. Try to square what she was witnessing then with the message of the angel at the annunciation over thirty years earlier: "Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." And again, "Great will be his dignity and he will be called the son of the most high!" Really? Joseph, the just man to whom she was betrothed, seems to have died years before Jesus began his public life. The last we hear of Joseph was when he and Mary tracked down the 12 year old Jesus in the Temple, where he was locked into animated conversation with the temple scholars. The last we hear of Mary (unless we go to the figurative Woman clothed with the Sun in the Book of Revelation) was at Pentecost when she, gathered in the upper room with the Apostles, prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit upon them, the same Spirit that had already transformed her life decades before.

We also know that she pondered things in her heart. And that pondering lasted for decades. If she was a teenager when she conceived, she was likely into her fifties when Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead. And she continued to live after that, for how long we do not know. But we do know that she outlived her son, by perhaps even 20 years. And during that long time, she remained deeply attached to him, and he to her. At the end of her life, Jesus took Mary, body and soul, to heaven with him. The dogma of the Assumption tells us that whatever our struggles in this life, the relationship between us and Jesus will be the power of

love that will finally bring us all home. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). That wonderful passage applies, I believe, to Mary more than anyone else.

In these reflections on the Marianists and aging, I want to say something first about the Marianists, how we are and how we think of ourselves. Then, I take a candid look at how religious experience and deal with getting older. Finally, I want to return to the relationship we hope to have with Jesus, Mary and our Blessed Founder, William Joseph Chaminade, as the shadows lengthen, and the evening of our lives draws near.

The Marianist Story

As a Marianist, I belong to a community of brothers. Some of the brothers become priests for the brothers. Most do not. When I entered the Marianists, I had no interest in the priesthood. At the high school I attended in Cleveland, the brothers outnumbered priests seven to one. The brothers were the best teachers. I wanted to be like them. It was only in the novitiate that it was suggested that I think about being a Marianist priest. In the Marianists, when a brother seeks ordination, all the brothers with whom he has lived the previous three years, and any other brothers who would know enough about him to comment on his candidacy, are consulted. Why? Because in our order the priests are ordained to serve first the brothers with whom they live, and then, with them, others through various ministries. As one of our priests often remarked, "I am a brother who happens to be ordained." Brothers are not there to serve the priests, except through the mutual responsibilities that characterize any group that aspires to be a real community. Our common life and the three vows, plus a special

vow that dedicates us to Mary, constitute our identity. That fourth vow we call stability. In essence, it commits us for life to make Jesus better known, to conceive him in our hearts and present him to the world as Mary herself did. No one knew Jesus better than she did, nor more generously offered him to the world; we think it wise to acknowledge that and follow her example.

Shortly after being ordained deacon, I remember talking with a group of Jesuit deacons, explaining to them that in our communities, the priest preaches to the people he lives with. One of the Jesuits, a little surprised, asked, “Really, you preach to the people you live with?! Isn’t that difficult?” I am not sure what I replied, but I can say that priests in Marianist communities seldom give long boring sermons or boast of their own virtues; they would be told by their brothers to shorten their homilies and get real.

Our founder, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, wanted priests and brothers to live together without privilege or rank. In fact, from the beginning of our society, brothers were sometimes appointed as directors in communities in which ordained brothers (priests) also lived. It took us nearly 50 years to convince Rome that our practice was legitimate. Rome didn't believe that priests should be subject to lay people. The 1981 revisions of our *Rule of Life* opened the door to brothers to serve as novice masters and provincials. Only one office is reserved to a priest, that of superior general, which, according to Canon Law, allows us certain benefits. All of our brothers have access to whatever level of education they desire and are capable of. Our brothers and ordained brothers live without privileging themselves in any ways. Perhaps there is a lesson in all this for the Church today.

For eight years I served as the senior vice president and provost of the University of Dayton. During that same time, the president of the university, a brother, had a doctorate in systems engineering, and the other senior vice president, also a brother, had a doctorate in theoretical mathematics; I'm not good at math, even when it's practical! That same brother went on to a nine year distinguished presidency of another Marianist university. I, as a Marianist priest, was never even tempted to talk down to either of them or any other of my brothers, nor claim some clerical privilege. I have been blessed living with brothers who are artists, woodworkers, biologists, historians, philosophers and financial experts.

We also have within the Marianist family a religious order of sisters, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (FMI). I think that orders that have both male and female branches benefit from the interactions that take place in shared ministries and between men and women of the same spiritual family, especially in recent years. If brothers tend to be allergic to clericalism, most women religious are especially allergic to it, having experienced it so frequently. John XXIII noted as one of the signs of our times that of the rapidly changing roles of women. Changes in roles that women play in the Church have hardly played themselves out. Just as clericalizing brothers not the best way to elevate the brothers, clericalizing women religious is not the best way to elevate women religious. I am not making here a statement against the ordination of women; rather, I am making a statement against locating leadership in the Church exclusively with the ordained clergy.

Fr. William Joseph Chaminade (1761-1850)

Both Jesuits and Benedictines influenced William Joseph Chaminade, a diocesan priest and the founder of the Marianists. So did the trauma of the French Revolution. In the early 19th century, he went around forming small groups of lay people, dedicated to presenting Christ to the world after the example of Mary. While in Spain in exile, Chaminade, praying before the Marian shrine of our Lady of the Pillar, had some sort of vision of Mary. In that vision, he was given an intuition that he would found a unique religious order dedicated to Mary's Christ-centered mission. The local bishop wanted to make Chaminade a bishop; Chaminade refused, saying that if he were to have any title, it would be that of a "Missionary Apostolic." In short, he wanted to form lay communities for mission, not be tied up with administration. He wrote: "One of the surest means for re-establishing religion soon in France is that of missions, above all if they are done by missionaries who combine light and exactness with true zeal."

For Chaminade, Jesus was the center of the Christian faith--but that center was born of and formed by the Virgin Mary. He had a unique appreciation of the place of Mary in our life of faith: through baptism and faith, he wrote, "...we are, so to say, conceived of the Holy Spirit; but we must, like the Savior, be born of the Virgin Mary." No one knew Jesus better than Mary. Mary, with Joseph, raised Jesus, and as a Jewish mother in those times, taught her son how to pray. Chaminade was convinced that after the Holy Spirit, the most knowledgeable and holy spiritual director, the person who could best foster and form best the Christ-life in others, is Mary.

Jesus followed the commandments, including the fourth commandment that required every son or daughter to honor and love their parents. If Jesus loved Mary, so should we. In the

Marianist *Rule of Life* we read: "Moved by Jesus' love for his Mother, we dedicate ourselves to her so that the Holy Spirit, in whose action she cooperates with a mother's love, may form us more fully to the image of her Son." Chaminade called imitating Jesus' love for his Mother "filial piety." Thus, Marianist spirituality is Christo-centric, Marian-mentored, and radically apostolic: "Do whatever He tells you."

Getting Older

As a young brother in the Society of Mary, I sat in chapel next to an 80-year-old priest, Fr. Edwin Leimkuhler. In the 1950s, he was a national leader in creating theology courses adapted to college students. Until then, theology was taught only in seminaries. He also was instrumental in bringing Erma Bombeck, an undergraduate at the Marianist University of Dayton, into the Church. When I knew him, he was still active, and would always climb stairs two at a time, muttering repeatedly "never get old."

Despite Leimkuhler's warning, getting older can offer us opportunities for further growth. Writer George Eliot remarked that "it is never too late to be what you might have been." From the opposite direction, others have thought that we do not change as we get older; we just become more clearly ourselves. Filled with confident hope, we might say of aging what May Sarton wrote: "Old age is not an illness, it is a timeless ascent. As power diminishes, we grow toward the light." Or with Fr. Leimkuhler, we might say, with a smile, "I'll never make the mistake of turning 80 again."

I will soon turn 76, but am still teaching and enjoying good health. Unless I am blessed with a sudden death, I think I will have a difficult time with that transition. I might start

mumbling "never get old!" I need the prayers of our founder, Blessed Chaminade, who remained undaunted by the repeated challenges he faced. Approaching the age of sixty, he founded the Marianists. Imagine founding such a demanding mission at that age. Most of us would already be thinking seriously of retiring. Unusual in the 19th century, he lived a long life, much of it apostolically vibrant. He was one determined man: "I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time, it grows broader and deeper and after a while it overflow the obstruction and flows along again. This is how I am going to work." Despite his determination, he suffered the "founders' disease." The last five years of his life were bitter. He was rejected by the first administration to succeed him; for a while they locked him in a room, even prevented him from seeing his confessor. Dark night for sure.

Nonetheless, Chaminade still labored vigorously into his mid-eighties. One of the benefits of religious life is that we can work for as long as our health permits. And when the time comes to begin cutting back on our activities, we can do so, gradually and gracefully. But not all of us are cut from the same cloth. We have some brothers who fight tooth and nail to avoid going to one of our retirement communities. Some resent not being allowed to drive anymore. After many years of vibrant and fruitful apostolic ministry, some feel, diminished energy, not that useful. The difficult transition as one ages from doing to being becomes inescapable. But I also see some brothers who make the transition willingly and gracefully.

Getting old is not for the faint of heart. Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) didn't like it. In his 80s, in a letter to a friend, he wrote: "I speak with difficulty: I can hardly walk,

never without the chance of tripping up; I with great difficulty go up and down stairs--I read with discomfort. I cannot write except very slowly--and I am deaf." His mind did not work as quickly as before, but, he explained, "except in failure of memory, and continual little mistakes in the use of words, and confusion in the use of names, I am not conscious that my mind is weaker than it was." However, "like other old men, I am so much the creature of hours, rooms and of routine generally, that to go from home is almost like tearing off my skin, and I suffer from it afterwards."

But for all these inescapable effects of aging, our hearts can remain apostolic, our prayers focused on the mission and our desires rooted in the Gospel. Shortly before her death, Dorothy Day made this entry in her diary: "No matter how old I get..., no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks what with heart murmurs, heart failures, emphysema perhaps, arthritis in feet and knees, with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my hearts can still leap for joy as I read and assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart."

The Eyes of Faith

I am old enough now to have accompanied some of our brothers in the last years, weeks and even days of their lives. Some, as they weaken and face their death, put it all in the hands of God, are peaceful and grateful. Other brothers, also exemplary religious, suffer doubts, become anxious and afraid. Some plunge into a dark hole of loneliness. Some worry that their lives were not as virtuous as they should have been, that their actions were laced with ego, that their passion for the mission was as much for the praise of others as it was for building God's

kingdom. Some wonder whether they are truly forgiven, or even have doubts as to whether there is a next life.

Someone once quipped that during the first half of our lives we struggle with the sixth commandment (thou shall not commit adultery) and the second half with the fifth (thou shall not kill). One is reminded of Luke's parable of the younger brother who went off and lived wildly, and the older brother who resented him. Harboring resentments, however, is like letting someone live rent-free in your head.

Such struggles and doubts are not as unusual as some people might think. We shouldn't airbrush the process of aging. Learning how to let go is not easy.

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It is in the midst of such struggles that we need to see with the eyes of faith, even if those eyes see through a glass only darkly (1 Co. 13:12). We sing, don't we, that we live by faith and not by sight? As Marianists age, they should be moved by the example of Mary about whom, from the cross, Jesus said to the beloved disciple and to all of us, "Behold your mother." It makes all the more sense, then, to look to Mary as we make our own way through this life. If we keep our eyes focused on her, she will direct our gaze repeatedly to Jesus, for He remained the center of her long life. As least, this is how I, as one aging Marianist, see it.

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