

Partners in Mission: Some Reflections on the Future of Mount Saint John

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I. Introduction

Thank you for your kind introduction.

When you are asked to give a talk, you ask yourself, “Why did the organizing committee ask me to speak?” The first thing that popped into my head was that maybe I am one of the few Marianists around that bundled hay for the cows on the Mount St. John farm, worked evenings after a full day of summer school at UD to scrape down and paint the cement block walls of the Marianist College building, spent time working in formation of young brothers on this property during the late '60s and early '70s—a time of tremendous cultural and ecclesial change—and I was around Dayton when we tore down two of the major buildings on this property. So I have some history.

But when I asked why, I was informed that I should reflect on the future of Mount St. John in light of the Strategic Plan of the Marianist Province of the United States—Vision 2020. Vision 2020 came out of a two-and-half year conversation by members of the Society of Mary and our partners in mission. The time that I spent on the Province's Strategic Planning Committee was one of the most difficult and yet most rewarding tasks I have taken up for my religious community. So I will focus on the Mount St. John campus and Vision 2020.

At my age I feel a sense of urgency about our Marianist mission and the task that we have ahead of us. I want to raise some important questions that we face—I want to do it in a spirit of dialogue and working together to discern our future. I want us to walk away from this day with a great sense of pride in the *Century of Witness* that Mount St.

John has been, and we must ask very important questions that will allow us to create together a *Future of Hope*.

II. The Marianist in the Greater Dayton Community

Before I start that reflection let me give a brief introduction to some of you who may not be familiar with the Society of Mary, the religious community within the Catholic Church that built this Mount St. John campus. Blessed William Chaminade, a priest in the dioceses of Bordeaux (France), was forced to minister in a hidden manner during the French Revolution because he remained faithful to the Holy Father and would not take the Oath of the Civil Constitution. He was exiled to Saragossa, Spain, during the last three years of the Revolution, and he pondered with other French clergy how the Catholic Church of France might be rebuilt after the Revolution. When he returned to Bordeaux in 1800 he founded a wide variety of lay Catholic communities that worked to live and deepen their faith. Out of this lay movement grew two communities of the vowed religious, namely the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and the Society of Mary. The lay and religious communities founded by Blessed Chaminade became a strong movement to rebuild the Catholic faith in southwestern France after the Revolution.

In 1850 a pioneering group of the Society of Mary found their way to Dayton, Ohio, and founded a Catholic school for boys on a farm that today has become the University of Dayton, a leading Catholic university in the United States. Marianist brothers and priests have ministered in several Catholic parishes and schools. In 1910 the programs of education and formation and the farm were moved to this campus, which was given the name of Mount St. John. Today we celebrate the centenary of this move. In the late '50s the Marianist Retreat House (now the Novitiate Building) started retreat programs for youth, married couples, and families. The secondary program that was on the campus of UD moved to the center city and became Chaminade High School. Today Chaminade-Julienne High School is a school of excellence and a major anchor of downtown Dayton. In the mid '60s the Bergamo Center was constructed with the mission of carrying on the renewal of Vatican II. The Society of Mary, as well as the

Daughters of Mary and lay communities, have made major contributions to the Church of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and to the Greater Dayton community.

III. Vision 2020: A Missionary Partnership for Southwest Ohio

Some Key Ideas in Vision 2020

Let me now move to Vision 2020 and provide a quick five-minute sketch of some of the key ideas of the strategic plan that might help us think about our Marianist presence in Southwest Ohio, and for thinking about the future of Mount St. John.

Vision 2020 calls the Society of Mary in the United States, in the words of Brother Joe, our Assistant Provincial—to focus our personnel and resources in key geographical regions within the mandate of the Province. Clearly, on almost all of the criteria, the greater Dayton-Cincinnati area is one of these areas of geographical focus. Now I hope all brothers in the crowd have caught the nuance in the pronouncements of our new leadership team—it is the Dayton-Cincinnati area that will be one of the Province’s geographical areas. This declaration is a new thinking about who we are in Southwest Ohio.

The purpose for this focus in each geographical region is twofold:

1. To build faith-filled religious communities in mission—which are communities of prayer and growth, unified apostolic teams, and continually attracting vocations.
2. To be partners in mission, with other communities and individuals, especially those of the Marianist Family. The mission we share is to educate and form faith-filled persons and communities that advance justice, reconciliation, and the integrity of creation within our society and our Church.

Let me focus on the second purpose—*partnership in mission*. A key strategy for becoming partners in mission is to promote a network of sponsored apostolic organizations and faith communities that work collaboratively at this mission.

Partnership in mission presents a challenge for the Marianist Family in the Greater Dayton-Cincinnati area. While it is a tremendous task in itself, we cannot be satisfied with just sponsoring an outstanding Catholic university in the Marianist tradition, an excellent urban Catholic high school in the Marianist tradition, sponsoring and sustaining the multiple resources of the Mount St. John campus, and partnering with lay communities in the Marianist tradition. We now want to ask ourselves how these assets and resources for the Church and the larger Society come together to have a greater impact for mission—greater impact for educating and forming persons and communities to advance justice, reconciliation, and the integrity of creation. We must build a collaborative network for mission. We need to ask with apostolic boldness and imagination “How does this *partnership for mission* make things different in the future?”

Challenges Facing the Church

A way to address this question is to look at the challenges facing the churches of Southwest Ohio. While there are many ways one can describe these challenges, let me name a few that are particularly relevant to our work of being *partners in mission*.

First, we need to develop the faith of our young people. It is clear that a good number of our young people in our Church today have a desire to deepen their Catholic faith—they have shown a deeper interest in Catholic piety and practices. Yet many people believe that the Church has not done a good job of presenting the foundation of our faith to young people. Just as Father Chaminade insisted that formation in faith be clearly rooted in an understanding of the Creed, we must find creative ways for our young people to understand the Catholic faith—a faith embodied in a dynamic Church community. We also must pay attention to adult faith formation. We need to develop a dynamic adult spirituality that is centered on an experience of Jesus through word, sacrament, and community; that brings us to an adult conversion to discipleship; that allows us to receive and give the gifts of love to many—to form new bonds of communion; and finally that makes a sustained commitment to realize the common good for all, especially the poor and the marginalized.

Second, we need to develop lay leadership for the Church. Blessed Chaminade emphasized the importance of the lay vocation within the Church and for the vitality of Christianity. Laying the foundation of the lay vocation in the sacrament of Baptism was a major accomplishment of Vatican II. In the American Church, the aging of the clergy and religious has made this issue even more critical for the future of the Church. We need the laity to have a sense of empowerment that will allow them to work collaboratively with the bishops and the clergy to build the Body of Christ.

Third, we need to develop a sense of communion within the Church. Many observers have indicated that our American society has become an Argument Society. We throw partisan conclusion at one another—without taking time to listen, to understand, or to enter sincerely into dialogue. This trend also has affected our Church—we are slowly losing our capacity to converse on critical issues and, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, to find a common ground on which to build the unity of the Church and to be a witness to the world. We need to recover the capacity for dialogue that is open to the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, we need to develop a capacity for interreligious dialogue. Clearly the world events of the first decade of the twenty-first century have indicated that if we are to be peacemakers in our world, we must have the ability to understand and find common ground with other religious traditions. With this, it was difficult when we considered inner-religious dialogue with the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic traditions in the mid-to-late twentieth century; we now need to be more inclusive as we develop global interdependence in our economy, our climate, and our politics. If you think this is an issue just for the globally minded, I would like to remind you that Old North Dayton—a long bastion of ethnic Catholic parishes—is now seeing, through the good work of Catholic social services, an influx of Turkish speaking refugees from Russian—a community with strong Islamic traditions. How will we have the capacity to welcome these refugees into our community?

Fifth, we need to develop solidarity with the greater Dayton-Cincinnati area, especially the poor and the disadvantaged. The greater Dayton community, as well as Cincinnati, has become a hollowed-out community. The dynamics of urban sprawl have created center-city neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty that has strong

negative impact on children and families. Many of you have heard me talk about this issue in other settings. We have created major patterns of urban injustice. A major dilemma for us as a Church is that several generations of Catholics, because of their growing affluence that was partly fueled by good Catholic education, have moved to the suburbs faster than almost all other religious groups. We have become a suburban Church with a weak presence in the urban neighborhoods. Some major urban dioceses, in my judgment, have abandoned the center-city neighborhoods. It is not too late for us in the Dayton-Cincinnati area to do something different. But we must act with urgency.

In different settings I have suggested how the Marianist communities, lay and religious, can respond to these challenges. In a Marianist lecture at UD in 2009, I developed a scenario about how the Marianist Movement could be engaged in bringing a strong Catholic presence to rebuilding an urban neighborhood. In a talk that I will give to our younger brothers in formation next month, I will develop a scenario about a new model of Catholic educational presence in our urban neighborhoods—a Catholic-sponsored Charter School—with a wraparound religious education program, a full complement of services to promote family development, and an evangelizing outreach to the neighborhood. Today, I want to focus some thoughts on the Marianist entities of the Mount St. John campus.

IV. Mount St. John: Being a Partner in Mission

In this final section I will focus a few ideas on how the entities on the Mount St. John campus can be an integral part of our *partnership in mission*. These remarks are designed to stimulate and enrich a conversation.

Learning from the Past

When I think about the future I like to reflect on what we have learned from the past. I hope each of you have taken or will take an opportunity to view the display of the past 100 years of history of the Mount St. John property. Viewing this history of the Marianist presence at Mount St. John we can see a panorama of outstanding

accomplishments: buildings for houses of formation and religious communities, a farm for self-sufficiency, chapels for worship, a grotto for honoring Mary the Mother of God and Jesus, a center for renewal of the Church, a center for the deepening of the understanding of our Marianist spiritual and apostolic tradition, a center that provides a nature preserve and education for stewardship of creation, and an art studio gallery that opens us to the mysteries of beauty expressed in shape and form. This history offers some wonderful assets for us to build a future.

Some Assets

The first asset is boldness and adaptability. If you review the correspondence around the formation of the Mount St. John property you see a community of men who were able to see a bold image of a viable future of greater mission realization; with full awareness of the problems and barriers they faced, they could creatively adapt to make it happen. As a community they were both "dreamers" and "doers."

The second asset is the importance given to formation in faith. In the houses of formation there was and is a deepening of our faith lives through study, through extended periods of prayer, and through participation in the liturgy of the Church. The retreat house and Bergamo Center have extended this practice of formation in faith by a wide variety of programs that reach out to all facets of the Church and the larger community.

The third asset is simplicity and stewardship. If you lived here in the early years, up through the late 1960s, you had a profound sense of what it meant to live a simple, even austere life. Simplicity had its challenges, but there was a joy that came from fraternity around a common task. The farm indicated that the Mount was going to strive to be good stewards of the land. This tradition of stewardship has continued in many ways over the years.

The fourth asset is closeness to the earth and the dignity of work. Again in the Benedictine tradition this property was organized around "*ora et labora*." Closeness to the earth was cultivated by the farm and the need to care for such a large property. Many of us learned what it was to work at hard manual labor. Often we had the

opportunity to see how work could provide opportunities to participate in God's creative work.

The fifth asset was a contemplative spirit. Many of us learned the skills of being open and receptive to the gifts of God, the ability to see beauty in God's nature, and the wonderful gifts of participating in the arts. We learned that in silence—in quieting our lives—we found new pathways to the experience of God.

Some Responses for Mount St. John

I believe each of these assets provides an opportunity for Mount St. John to provide a valuable gift to the Marianist Movement in the greater Dayton-Cincinnati area.

Have we thought boldly enough about how the resources of Mount St. John's campus can provide a more dynamic center for formation in faith? As a member of the Provincial Chapter I often realize how we are captivated and restrained by our financial models. Keeping within our budget is necessary, but we should not let it constrain our imagination. Father Marty, I am not recommending irresponsible behavior. But can we free our imagination to think of new partnerships? A few examples:

1. Is it possible to partner with UD and our sponsored high schools to create a low-cost approach to high school retreats? In partnership, could an old fashion bunkhouse with a small kitchen be built that would provide an ample setting for a young person's retreat? Is there a way to use retreats to foster a hunger for a deeper understanding of our Catholic faith?
2. In collaboration with the University, perhaps through its Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, could a dynamic program of adult faith formation be developed that would help deepen the faith of our Church as a community of communities and energize adult leaders for new roles within the Church?
3. How can Mount St. John be a force for developing lay leadership for the Church? Can we develop a support network and a professional learning community for lay

pastoral ministers that allow them to develop their competence and a spirituality that allow them to be in ministry for the long haul?

4. We need a deepening of the contemplative spirit within our Church and in our Marianist Family. Could we use the beauty of the property, its resources of art and nature, to provide a place and resources for developing the contemplative spirit within our Church and the Marianist Family of the greater Dayton-Cincinnati area?
5. If by the grace of the Holy Spirit, a larger numbers of adults began to take seriously making the Marianist charism and the Marianist spirituality a central part of their Christian life, would we be ready to respond with appropriate formation?

In an age of consumerism it is important for the Church to have a place to imagine alternative Christian lifestyles. In a time when urban communities are reinventing themselves, the Church needs people who can bring new models of urban living to neighborhoods.

1. Have we thought boldly enough about how we can extend the message of simplicity and stewardship out to the greater Dayton-Cincinnati community?
2. Can the skills that help rebuild the prairie on this property be partners in helping urban neighborhoods convert the many open spaces into urban parks and forest that provide a sense of well-being and contact with the beauty of nature for urban dwellers?
3. There is a new tradition for agriculture coming to our poorer urban neighborhood. Could every one of our urban Catholic schools have an urban garden supported by resources from the Mount? How can we support the movement among some of our younger Marianist communities to work with sustainable urban agriculture? How can we combine our many resources of the Marianist Family to make this project of urban agriculture a success?

4. I know some of our artists are asking how they can take their work out into our urban Catholic schools. Here again is an opportunity to make connections. In addition to working with our urban Catholic schools, we have opportunities to build connections with the greater Dayton community. How about a Marianist artist show in some of the new display spaces that are opening up in downtown Dayton and in the Oregon District?

V. Conclusion

I am sure that there are many more ideas that we could generate about the future of the Mount St. John property. The deeper question for us is how the entities of the Mount St. John campus can work in partnership for mission with the wider Marianist Movement within the Greater Dayton-Cincinnati area. We need to continue this conversation as we move into the future. Today we are celebrating a *century of witness*. With a continued conversation of dialogue and discernment on how we can be partners in mission—we can create a *future of hope*.