

Musings on Marianist Catholic Higher Education in Light of Father Fleming's *A New Fulcrum*

by Thomas Giardino, SM

I have just finished, in my role as executive director of the Association of Marianist Universities, a round of visiting the campuses of all three Marianist universities: Chaminade University of Honolulu, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, and the University of Dayton. During the visits I have spoken with students, faculty and staff members, and administrators. In these conversations I have passed out a lot of copies of Father David Fleming's *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today*. Why did I do this? Because I think it will serve as a wonderful resource and stimulus for the kind of conversations we need today in order to develop and advance the mission and identity of Marianist and Catholic higher education.

In light of these experiences, I am happy to share some of my observations and questions that have arisen for me while reading the three chapters that particularly relate to higher education: chapter 7, "What Makes University Education 'Marianist'?"; chapter 8, "Marianist University Education, Probing an Identity"; and chapter 9, "Note on Education for Truth and Values in 'Postmodern' Times."

+ Father Fleming says that Marianists take a positive approach to our societal context (p.143). Maybe it always was the case, but it is not easy to do in Catholic higher education today. The societal pressures on students and parents, who subsequently put pressures on educational institutions, are manifold in terms of "getting a job after spending so much money" on a university education. And the federal government and the news media have taken up the cry, which ratchets up the tension.

This makes our perspective on education—"we teach to educate"—(p.143) filled with challenges. We will need to get beyond these good words to good actions that are persuasive to all these publics for what Fleming says later on: "Our educational focus is before all else on the good person, on holistic human development" as a priority value. Obviously, getting a job is a worthwhile goal—as all those faculty and staff members would admit in terms of their own jobs—but the societal context has changed. The recent annual freshman survey (2014) from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles reports that 82% of the first-year students chose "being very well off financially" as very important or essential. What is interesting is that only 44% of such students chose that goal in 1974. In 1974 65% said that "developing a meaning philosophy of life" was very important or essential, whereas in 2014 only 45% chose that option. So, how do we relate in a positive way to this societal context? What is the "new fulcrum" in this case?

+ In chapter 8, Father Fleming says that “Like Chaminade, we are ‘charmed’ by the truth of the Incarnation of God in human life.” What a statement! This sounds like something Pope Francis would say...or better, this is the effect his actions have on many of us. We might have a challenge in discussing Chaminade’s incarnational theology as central to Marianist spirituality with many in the university community. Yet, I suspect that if we acted more like Francis, we would not need multisyllabic words to elicit understanding, an understanding from the heart and soul.

And Fleming says that education is a key field of struggle for the “soul of the contemporary world.” Marianist educators, imbued with an incarnational spirituality, take the world seriously: history matters. The world of our students and colleagues matter. “This happens only when the teacher’s heart is full of God and in sympathy through charity with the hearts of his pupils” (Constitutions of 1839, #260).

+ All of the above seems critical to me and in concert with what Father Fleming says throughout his book. But I have heard at our universities more than once: “This is a university, not a parish.” Our tradition confirms this perspective: “the Society takes the highest interest in the good running of its schools and the perfection of its methods” (Constitutions of 1839, #266). Our contemporary elaboration of the tradition in the *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* affirms this when it states that “Marianist universities provide an excellent education” (#22).

The challenge, of course, is to define “excellence” in postmodern times, especially a definition that the campus minister, the research physicist, the dean of students, the operations management professor, and the career center staff person could agree upon. Fleming engages one dimension of this challenge in his chapter on education for “Truth and Values in Postmodern Times.” I look forward to dialogue on this chapter in the academy. Despite the take that Marianists tend toward “chronic niceness,” it is possible in the academic realm to use “excellent” and “Marianist” in the same sentence.

+ Father Fleming’s first chapter, “Faith and the Role of Mary, Central Axes of the Marianist Tradition,” provides the basis for a significant test in an “inclusive and global” university community, which he believes is consonant with our educational tradition. Integrating a mission that not only posits “faith convictions noncoercively but also robustly, professedly, and unapologetically” (p.154) is the challenge that all faith-based universities are facing today.

According to a recent study from the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities,¹ the first senior mission officer was appointed in 1980. Since then there are more than 139, most of whom were appointed in the past decade. More than 70% are members of their university’s

¹ “Mission matters: The Mission Leader: An Innovation Strategy in Catholic Higher Education,” pp. 10-11 in *A Mission Officer Handbook: Advancing Catholic Identity and University Mission*, vol 1, ACCU, 2014.

founding religious community, as they are at our Marianist universities. But the trend is, in the second generation, mission leaders recently appointed are increasingly under the age of forty and are lay persons. Leading mission integration is the primary focus of mission officers. These are dynamics for the conversations that Marianist educators need to have as we search for “a new fulcrum” in Marianist higher education today for tomorrow.