

*Sharing Our Marianist Stories* Ep. 20 Transcript

A Presidential Transition (with Tom Mengler, Winston Erevelles, and interviewed by Mike Bennett)

**00:02 - Tom Mengler**

Our role in life is to mentor and help others grow into the person that God wants us – me - to be.

**00:12 - Mike Bennett**

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a podcast produced by the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. I'm Mike Bennett, Media Administrator for NACMS. In early March 2024, I was privileged to interview Tom Mengler and Winston Erevelles. Tom is retiring this summer after serving as President of St. Mary's University for 12 years. Winston is currently a professor of Engineering and Dean Emeritus of the School of Science, Engineering and Technology and is the incoming President at St. Mary's University. During this interview, they mentioned the influence of three key documents which are available in the show notes for this episode. Those documents include the *Characteristics of Marianist Education*, *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*, and *Characteristics of Marianist Administration*. Without further ado, let's turn the floor over to Tom and Winston to introduce themselves.

**01:13 - Tom Mengler**

I'm Tom Mengler, President in my twelfth and last year - actually my last three months - as President of St. Mary's University.

**01:22 - Winston Erevelles**

I'm Winston Erevelles and I'm the incoming President of St. Mary's University, and I will begin my new role on the first of June.

**01:32 - Mike Bennett**

Thank you very much for sitting down, taking some time with me to share a little bit about your Marianist story, especially at this crucial juncture for St. Mary's University of a presidential transition. I am really excited and very curious to hear a little bit about your stories. And so, I think we can start with Winston for this first question: what was your first exposure to the Marianist Family or Marianist charism?

**01:58 - Winston Erevelles**

I would have to take us back to the Fall of 2008. I was living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, working at a private secular university, and the opportunity to serve as Dean of the School of Science, Engineering, and Technology came up. Up to that point, the only exposure I had to St. Mary's or the Marianists was voting on an engineering accreditation decision for St. Mary's, which essentially meant I had no direct knowledge of the institution. So, it was through the

process of interviewing for the role of Dean of S.E.T., as we call the school, that I started running into professed Marianists, the Marianist charism, St. Mary's University, something called a Marianist Educational Associate that I had no clue what that construct meant. But I would say between the Fall of 2008 and then early 2009, I started getting a lot of face-time with the Marianists, and of course, here I am 15 years later.

**03:11 - Mike Bennett**

Thanks. Tom, how about you?

**03:13 - Tom Mengler**

My first exposure, actually, to St. Mary's and therefore its mission as a Marianist university was when the then-Law School Dean, Charles Cantú, invited me to serve on a panel. And I think it was probably 2004 [or] 2005. I don't really have a sense, but it was fairly early in the years in which I was Dean of the Law School at the University of St. Thomas. It was a new Law School. We were serious about our Catholic identity and being mission-centric. Not all Catholic Law Schools, I would say, are like that. So, I was invited down to talk on the panel [about] what it means for a Law School to say that it's Catholic. You know, Charles Cantú was the Dean on the panel as well, and he, I'm sure, talked about Marianist stuff. I could put it in those terms, but I had no idea what that meant and really only knew the Catholic part.

**04:12 – Tom Mengler**

And it's like with Winston through the interview process; I came to get to know the Marianists and the Marianist charism through the materials that you typically get sent, including the *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*. And one of my funnier stories is [about] Fr. Marty Solma who, as you know, was Provincial for a number of years. We still have a running argument about how many times, how many copies he gave me of the *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*. I'd say it was like three or four, he thinks it was only two. Really, the very first significant introduction was from Bro. Tom Giardino, who was then and is again the Executive Director of AMU (Association of Marianist Universities).

**04:58 - Winston Erevelles**

[There were] two faculty members, probably now long-retired from the University of Dayton, Bob Mott and Bob Wolfe. They're both manufacturing guys, and I'm a manufacturing engineer. So, over the years, I knew that there was this thing called the University of Dayton. And because I was a young faculty member getting started, I asked him, "What is it that keeps the two of you around, and how's it that you've spent so many years at this particular university?" And I think that's the first time I heard the word *community* from them. And they had both mentioned that they were in the Engineering Technology Department, and they would talk about the community. That's the University. And much like Tom, they sent me both electronic and hard copies of the *Characteristics of Marianist Universities*. But I think one of the things that jumped out at me

even early on was something that was aligned to the effect of the Marianists being a discipleship of equals. Now, I had my early education from the Society of the Divine Word, all the way back in Bombay, India, and it's a missionary order. But there definitely was in this discipleship of equals something that felt really, really compelling. And you read about these things, and then you say, "Okay, so now I've read the theory, how's this actually practiced on a campus?"

**06:27 - Mike Bennett**

I'm glad you've shared a little bit about the formational elements you had coming into St. Mary's, especially because it sounds like each of you had some maybe tangential connection with the Marianist Family, but that was the real first immersion, is what I'm hearing. The charism is something that's so vital to the work that we do, especially within Marianist institutions, and there's also a lot to juggle within the administrative roles that you have been in. And so, I'm curious if you could share a little bit more about what that felt like to come into those professional roles and be learning about the charism at the same time? Were there important practices for you that helped you learn and be submerged in the charism?

**07:18 - Tom Mengler**

That's an interesting question. I would say that there was not a moment, not a particular - I think you used the word *practice*, but Winston already mentioned the word *community*. And I have often said if you just randomly picked 25 students wandering around the campus and say, "Tell me the word that most characterizes your experience at St. Mary's," I think they would all say *community*. Virtually all of them would say community. So, I think it is an immersion into the culture and certainly for me. I came from Minnesota. San Antonio is a very different part of the United States, even different again from other places in Texas. I lived in Austin off and on for a number of years, and my wife's from Houston. I taught at SMU [for] one year. There's a community aspect to San Antonio that is deep and embedded in the culture, and then there's another level up for St. Mary's. That's how I would characterize it. You learn about what it is to be part of a Marianist community, to be at a Marianist university by being around the people who've been here, and you live it.

**08:39 - Winston Erevelles**

I'm picking up on something Tom said. I spent the first 10 years of my academic career in Flint, Michigan, and then ten in Pittsburgh, PA, both at small, private, secular institutions. And at the second place, I had some time under my belt as Dean. And so, when I moved to St. Mary's, I was thinking to myself, "Okay, what do I know and what do I not know?" And one thing about me that is consistent is I'm usually wrong more often than I'm right. So, I think to myself, I've spent time in Flint, Michigan. I know a little something about working with an inner-city community. I've spent time in Pittsburgh. I know a little something about working with our first-generation tool and dye steel, glass, that community. So maybe if I say "A + B" and move to Texas, I will be able to get "C."

### **09:32 - Winston Erevelles**

Well, that's where I found out that it's possible to be wrong not once, but twice because culturally, San Antonio - and the fact that we are [a] Hispanic-serving institution, the population that we're privileged to serve – [has a] very different need set. That was one thing. The second thing that I ran into very quickly was you just pick it up from everybody around you. And it could be from peers, it could be from folks not in the area that you directly work in. You start watching the interactions between different people. You start seeing that sense of community being brought to life. For me when I interviewed, I kept asking myself, “Everybody's so nice. Are they always this nice, or is this something that gets rolled out for people who are interviewing?” [Being asked] “Can I help you move stuff into the office?” was not a, you know, *It's out there, and, if you need it, you'll ask.* I was scolded [during] week one. I was scolded by Paul Uhlig because he had offered to help me move books into my office. And me, I'm sitting there thinking to myself, I have a reasonably okay back. I have a dolly. I can move things into my office. And as I was walking up to the office dragging a cart with boxes of books on it, Paul stops me, and he goes, “Did I or did I not tell you that I would help you with your books?” And I'm going, “Okay, so these folks, it's not just the spoken word. It is a genuine warmth. You know, the action is behind it.”

### **11:02 - Winston Erevelles**

And in those early days, too, I was asked to pen as a new community member my thoughts on the whole dialogue between faith and reason and how it applies to S.T.E.M. disciplines. And I was watching a bunch of people, for example, engineering senior projects, and we had Rafael Moras - Dr. Moras - in engineering bringing in people from Philosophy, Ethics, and Theology to talk to the students. So, I was getting to see Bob O'Connor spending time hanging out with senior Design students, and to me, this was bringing to life *Ex corde Ecclesiae* at that time, saying, “Okay, so how is this really practiced at a faith-based institution, a Catholic one, a Marianist one?” So, a lot of, I think, immersion, a lot of observation, a lot of dialogue. When you write something, you've got to really think about it before you hit pen to paper. And for me it was just watching abstraction being brought to life by those around me.

### **12:04 - Tom Mengler**

Sr. Laura [Leming, FMI], some years ago, part of the Board of Trustees meeting went around the room, and I think maybe it was a Catholic Marianist Identity Trustee Committee meeting. And she said, “You know, would everybody talk about a Marianist moment?” And to Winston's point that you learn about this community through the generosity, the generous spirit of others, there's [an] incredible man who is probably our head gardener landscaper. He actually works all over the campus, but he works in front of St. Louis Hall, where my office is. He's out there at 7:00 in the morning or so when I'm there, and he's always thanking me for hiring him - which I had nothing to do with - thanking me for his raise - which I had only globally something to do with.

But I have what I call [the] President's Excellence Awards. Every Fall, I give one to [an] hourly worker, one to a salary staff member, and then one to a faculty member. And it comes with a cash award. Luis was one of the first hourly workers, and the next weekend on a Saturday, I happen to be coming into the office for whatever reason, there he is planting flowers. I said, "Luis, isn't this your day off?" He said, "Oh yeah, but I thought that the front part of St. Louis Hall really needed a redo on flowers. So, I went out and bought some." And I found out later that he bought them with his own money. Those are the moments that I think really underscore and touch me.

### **13:43 - Mike Bennett**

I'm curious how you each see the particular impact of Marianist universities within the context of higher education, maybe even more specifically within Catholic education.

### **13:58 - Tom Mengler**

Catholic higher education going forward is in for some challenging years. It's already there. You've seen here and there, Catholic universities and colleges around the country use the word *holistic*, and I think that word describes us all. By that, I mean the 220 or so Catholic universities and colleges around the country. That doesn't therefore distinguish us to say that we're all about the whole person. It's not just book learning and skills training; it's values. Our mission statement at St. Mary's is the formation of people in faith and educating leaders for the common good. That, itself, also doesn't quite pick it out. I do think that the Marianists believe we discern how God is calling us. We come closer to God through our relationships, through community. The importance of gathering young people together with their peers, but [also] with older mentors, teachers, staff members is vital to their growth. And that's the insight that I think Marianist education brings to Catholic higher education, that you have to remember that gathering people together in meaningful ways is part of how we grow to love God, and therefore to love our neighbor.

### **15:27 - Winston Erevelles**

To me, I think of the word *grounding* when I think of Catholic higher-ed, and specifically what we do at St. Mary's and the Marianist Universities. Keeping God and your faith at the core, being able to, as a university, support not just the Catholic faith tradition on campus, but also being tolerant and welcoming of others. And Tom and I saw this with an alumnus in New Delhi. This is a gentleman of the Hindu faith tradition and absolutely loved his time at St. Mary's, loved everything about the place, loved how the university embraced him, how the community embraced him. And then, I would say on my second-to-last day in Chennai, we set up a meeting between the parents of a young man who is a second-semester freshman at the university. And I'm sitting here going, "How's it that I get connected to the one guy from Chennai, India, who's studying business at St. Mary's as an undergrad?" And so, I was more curious than anything else, and wouldn't you know it, they had two other family members who graduated from St. Mary's.

**16:37 – Winston Erevelles**

So, for me, I think there's this grounding in faith, that really broader education, regardless of discipline that allows you or makes you think about how your discipline relates to the planet, not in just a very narrow context in, I would say, a much more thoughtful way. And then, to me, if I look at those five characteristics, to me it's almost like the "Owner's Manual." This is how you're supposed to be living. These are things that are important to the community. These are things that you want to think about so that you as an individual are not just constantly, shall we say, drawing from the ATM of life, but also renewing and refilling that well that you drew from. And I think Marianist universities, while being open to the challenges of the times, while being open to so many different possibilities, also hold on to that timeless truth that grounds us all.

**17:32 - Mike Bennett**

I'm curious how you've seen the Marianist charism impact your approach to leadership and your work at St. Mary's.

**17:40 - Tom Mengler**

Before I became President, I had been Dean at actually two other institutions for a total of 19 years, and I was thinking, "Well, maybe you just can't teach old dogs new tricks." So, I do think I brought a set of values, behaviors, expectations for myself and for my colleagues that I would say I really didn't change. But I found coming to St. Mary's - where you referenced, Winston, the *Characteristics of Marianist Universities* - we had some silos at St. Mary's when I arrived, maybe a lot of silos, and this is the kind of place that should be all about collaboration, and I think we are much more collaborative university at every level. That's entirely consistent with being Marianist. You can't be 17 different communities. You have to be *one* community. We're all taking care of each other. The *Characteristics* talk about integrated quality education, so the integrated part of it at every level is key. The quality part, I came with the expectation that we should strive to be excellent and always assessing just the ethic of thinking about how to improve what you did this week or this year or this month, how this event, how your class can be improved. I think that's at the heart of quite frankly Marianist education as well.

**19:13 Tom Mengler**

Among the things that I'm most proud of is as I leave St. Mary's, we have a really strong leadership team, and I think that's part and parcel of the collaboration that has existed, the openness. When we're talking about decisions, I think the culture is, "What are your thoughts before we make a decision?" And a process both of mentoring others but also empowering people to be able to become better leaders, and I couldn't describe the Marianist charism any better than that, that our role in life is to mentor and help others grow into the person that God wants us, me, to be.

### **19:55 – Winston Erevelles**

Some of who you are - you have your early formation, you have your parents, you have mentors along the way. And then, you start pulling together the pieces that you most admire from so many people. And some things have stayed constant for me. The sense that at the end of the day, we are all here for some length of time, whether it's on the planet, whether it's in a certain role. I used to kid around and tell people that the nameplate on my door should say "For rent" because that's really, you know, what we are. I think what I've really enjoyed – Number one, the openness of the conversations, people being able to get into a meeting room - for the most part. I'm not going to say that 100% of us do it, but for the most part, I'd say people are open. And for you to be open, it means getting into a room and being vulnerable. You're sharing things, sharing your perspectives, just saying, "What can I bring to the table to help you?" A lot of collegiality, and - oh gosh, at some point, somebody brought to the table *Characteristics of Marianist Administration*. Sometimes you pick something up, and you read it and you go, "Yep, been there, done that. Doing it. Makes sense." And then something jumps out at you, and you go, "Whoa. This is neat."

### **21:17 – Winston Erevelles**

There's a line in there from Father Chaminade about "Best superior is one whose superiority is least sensed," or something along those lines. That basically says, "Yep, number one, you're servant leader. But number two, you're not walking around browbeating or issuing an edict." And it's not [an] *I'm going there, and you guys follow*. It's a *we're going to go there. We're going to consult eventually, of course. Someone's going to have to make a decision*. But there's a lot of consultation so that no one feels, "I was left out. My input wasn't considered." People's input is important. You take that into consideration, yet they know that their input or their handprints have been part of the process, and that's the only way you're truly going to engage. I think it's that kind of collaboration that allows the community to move forward, and at the end of the day, it's not about any of us. It's about the students who go to school here. It's about the faculty and staff members who choose to come here and show up for work. It's about that community. So, when you're talking about serving as a leader, really, if you were to take the triangle or the pyramid or whatever the construct you want and say, "Where does the leader belong?" [The leader belongs] At the bottom of the dogpile. And then, you're supporting all of the layers as that.

### **22:35 - Mike Bennett**

Before we hear Tom and Winston's responses to our concluding question, I'd like to offer a word of thanks to you, our listeners, for listening to this episode and for your engagement with the North American Center for Marianist Studies. Make sure to subscribe to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories* wherever you listen to podcasts and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube @thisisnacms. Now to wrap up this episode, we return with our final question. We know the Marianist Founders corresponded through letter writing. So, if you were going to write

a letter to anyone, dead or alive, and be guaranteed a response, who would you write to, and what would be the topic?

**23:23 - Winston Erevelles**

I would write to Mother Teresa from the Missionaries of Charity from the standpoint of how does one person move a mountain, and how does one person take on what appears to be a pretty tough insurmountable problem and have the discipline, the intestinal fortitude, the grit to keep going even sometimes when you don't really see a whole lot of progress made? And having been to that convent in Calcutta after her passing to just see the impact that that one life makes. And yeah, sure, I would love to write to her saying, "What keeps you going on days when you don't think you have the strength?"

**24:11 - Tom Mengler**

Well, I'm from Chicago originally, so I'll say, in a somewhat flippant matter, Michael Jordan. How about Michael Jordan?

**24:19 - Winston Erevelles**

Nice.

**24:22 - Tom Mengler**

But I think I would, given my transition about to happen, I think I'll write to Jesus Christ and say, "So what am I supposed to do next?" and see what he says. That would be the easy way to discern what I'm next supposed to do with my life. But I was thinking of Mary, of course, too. She might know better. She might know me a little bit better, actually, having spent 12 years at one of her institutions.

**24:50 - Mike Bennett**

Very profound. Well, thanks to each of you. I really appreciate you sharing your stories. And I was making notes here, and there's so many more things that I would love to pick your brain about.

**25:00 - Tom Mengler**

Thank you. Mike, I had fun.

**25:03 - Winston Erevelles**

Mike, thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure.

**25:06 - Mike Bennett**

Sure. My pleasure.