

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 18 Transcript

Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund (with Matt Meyers, Linda Zappacosta, Patti Gehred, and Gabby Bibeau)

00:00 - Matt Meyers

Here's the Society of Mary, here's the Laity, and here's the Marianist Sisters coming together to make sure that you have the funds to pay for your student debt. But even deeper than that, it's an affirmation that you're not just joining the Daughters of Mary, you're really joining the Marianist Family and we're all in this together. And I think that's just got to be a tremendous blessing for those considering religious life.

00:40 - Patti Gehred

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I'm Patti Gehred.

00:44 - Gabby Bibeau

And I'm Sr. Gabby Bibeau. In today's episode we have two Lay Marianists: Matt Myers and Linda Zappacosta, talking about their experience on the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund, which is a fund that helps raise money for young women who are interested in joining the Sisters, and it helps them alleviate their college debt so they can join. Patti, you interviewed Matt and Linda. What struck you as you interviewed them and talked to them?

01:19 - Patti Gehred

I really enjoyed this interview because basically they interviewed each other, which is always lovely to experience. But what I really noticed is the collaboration between Linda and Matt and then bringing in the entire Marianist Family to support this Vocation Fund. They tell the story how they were at a meeting, and Matt just brings up that Marianist Sisters have to pay off their student loan before they can be part of the FMI. And Linda Zappacosta picks up on this and with her experience starts contacting people saying, "Hey, can we do something about this?" And they created this much needed fund, and I think it's a beautiful example of collaboration within the Marianist Family. What did you think when you were listening, Sr. Gabby?

02:14 - Gabby Bibeau

Well, it was, [to be] honest, I've known about the fund for a while, but I didn't completely know the story of how it came about. So, it was very interesting and inspiring to listen to the story of how the fund came about. And as you'll hear, this was entirely a Lay-initiated project. This was not something that the Sisters thought of. This was something that Matt and Linda heard about, that college debt was an obstacle to some young women entering the Sisters, and they thought, "Well, we need to do something about this." And as they'll say, too, this is not a problem unique to the Sisters. Many smaller religious congregations like the Marianists Sisters, they're not large enough to help offset the debt of candidates coming into religious life, and so that has been an obstacle for some young women in the past, discerning a vocation with the Sisters. This fund was really created to help solve this issue.

03:30 – Patti Gehred

College debt is huge now. It isn't small. It isn't something you can work a part-time job and go to college. So, this is definitely the *signs of the times*, an honest look of where we are. And if we want more vocations, we want more young people joining religious life, this is something that really has to be looked at.

03:53 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah, I definitely agree. And when we think about, too, how expensive Catholic University education is nowadays - there are three Catholic Marianist universities in the United States, and we really attract vocations from those universities - it's the rare person who can pass through a Catholic college or university without taking out some student loans. And so that really intensifies the need for something like this. And I think, like you said too, it's a great example of collaboration and of really acting from the beautiful reality that we are a Marianist Family. Our futures are tied to each other, and we have to work together for the good of each of the branches and the interests of the flourishing of the Marianist Family into the future. And I think this is just one example of that that I think that our listeners will find very inspiring and very educational.

05:17 - Linda Zappacosta

Hi, I'm Linda Zappacosta. I'm a Lay Marianist. I live in Chester, Pennsylvania, and I've been a member of my local Marianist Lay Community, Maranatha. We've been meeting now for 47 years. And I'm also a member of the Visitation State Community which is a national MLC. Yeah, and we've been meeting for over 50 years.

05:39 - Matt Meyers

My name is Matt Meyers, and I'm a member of the Embers Marianist Lay Community. And we've been a community for about 12 years now.

05:50 - Linda Zappacosta

I met the Marianist Sisters, here in Chester, Pennsylvania, where I currently live. And it was like 1969. It was shortly after I graduated from high school. I was very involved with the Marianist Center, which the original facility was right here in Chester. And it was an adult education center at the time. And Marianist Sisters came through and did a vocation weekend. And I was very drawn to their spirit as well as their ministry. So, I thought, "Hmm, let me check out these Marianist Sisters." So, I visited the Sisters in Dayton, and then in San Antonio as well. And I discerned that I would like to check out the Marianist Sisters and join the Sisters in 1970. So, I was with Sisters from 1970 to '73. And that time I discerned that my call was in the Lay branch of the Marianist Family. So, I came back to Philly and few months later started Maranatha Lay Faith Community.

06:47 - Matt Meyers

Well, I've known the Marianist Sisters a little less time than Linda has. But I met them, really, at the University of Dayton. And I didn't have any of the Sisters for class or work with any of them directly until the first part of my fourth year, and that's when Sr. Nicole [Trahan] was

accompanying our community in formation, and she worked with us for about four months. And then when we finally committed as a community, she stayed with us a little bit longer, but then our community kind of dispersed and went all over the place.

07:23 - Matt Meyers

And it's really after my time at the University of Dayton that I've gotten to know the Sisters better. I've had the chance to work with Sr. Laura [Leming] on the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund. I've had the chance to work with Sr. Leanne [Jablonski] on the Adèle Social Justice Project, and now Gabby's joined the Adèle Social Justice Project as well. And then, just recently, working with Sr. Nicole on a project with the racial justice team of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. It's only been a few years, but I've really, really enjoyed getting to know the Marianist Sisters more. When I was at the University of Dayton, I obviously knew a lot of the Brothers, but just hadn't met the Sisters yet.

08:02 - Linda Zappacosta

Back in July of 2013, there was a meeting at the University of Dayton, and it was near the MLCNA, the Marianist Lay Communities in North America - it was called the Marianist Lay Network of North America at the time - So, they invited Lay folks from around the country to come and have this meeting for strategic planning. So, the leadership of MLNNA at the time invited this group to come together from around the country and a focus on strategic planning, for the future of the Marianist Lay Network. So, during that meeting, Matt Meyers expressed a concern or a need or an issue.

08:43 – Matt Meyers

We came to that meeting, and we were just discussing really the future of Marianist Family, how the Lay branch is going to need to play a more pivotal role to carry the charism forward. And one of the things that I'd become aware of - really because of friends that we're discerning religious life - is the disparity between a young man wanting to join the Society of Mary and a young woman wanting to join the Daughters of Mary. And for the young men that are interested, they could go and say to the Society of Mary, "Hey, I'm interested. I'd like to become an aspirant. But I have this student loan debt. Is that okay?" And the Society of Mary, being as large as it is and having the resources that it does, was fine with that. They could afford to slowly pay down the student debt while the person discerned religious life.

09:35 – Matt Meyers

On the other hand, if a young woman was interested in the Daughters of Mary, she couldn't just join. She actually had to pay down her student debt before she is able to enter those initial stages of discernment, of living with the Sisters in the novitiate year. And that just seemed like an inequity to me. Here we are, the Marianist Family, a discipleship of equals, and yet there's an imbalance of opportunity for people wanting to explore their vocation. So, I had just mentioned this as a, "I'm aware of this. I don't have any plans. I don't know what to do with this. But here's one place where it really looks like we're going to have to start thinking differently or doing things differently." I just put it out there, and I didn't think anything was going to come of it. I

have this tendency to extrovert, to just share thoughts in my head. And over in the corner, there's this woman, Linda, that I've really never met before, is just taking notes on this and it's spinning in her, in her head of "What can we do about this issue?" So, with that I want Linda to tell the rest of the story.

10:43 - Linda Zappacosta

So, when Matt expressed that need, it ignited like a spark within me that quickly grew into a flame of action. I knew immediately that I needed to act on this along with others. So, after the meeting was over, I went up to Carol Weiss, who was part of that meeting. She's a Lay woman, who lives up in New York. So, I said, "You know, how about what Matt said? You know, that there's this need with the Sisters that that student debt might prevent a Sister from moving forward in her choice of joining the Marianist Sisters. I'm kind of like thinking I would like to do something about that." And I said, "Would you join me in that?" She said, "Yes." So, then I just kind of went home and then I thought, "If this is going to go any further, I need to reach out to the Sisters." So, I contacted the Provincial Sister, Sr. Evangeline [Escobar], and I kind of ran this idea by her about the possibility to form a committee to address this issue. So, she said "Yes." Well, then I thought, "It'll be also good to have the Brothers involved, too."

11:43 - Linda Zappacosta

So, I contacted the Provincial of the Brothers, and he gave the okay for Bro. Joe Markel, who was treasurer at the time, to join our little team. So, we had our first initial conversation in October of 2013. So just a few months after Matt had raised the initial need, this germinating little bud of a flower coming to fruition in response to the need. So, then we kind of brainstormed other folks who would bring skills of fundraising, kinds of efforts in marketing and development into the mix. And then, on December 9th, I think that was the first time we had our official, first, full committee meeting, and Matt was a part of that meeting. So, it was Matt Myers, Anthony Fucci - who was Director of the Cape May Point Retreat House at the time, because he was really good in development and marketing as well. He had a lot of business savvy that he brought to his to his position there as Director of the Retreat House - and then Mike Wasno, who was I think chair-elect of MLNNA at the time. So, he also had a lot of business savvy and lot of skills with technology. So, we had this nice group of folks.

12:55 - Linda Zappacosta

And then actually that meeting, that very first meeting, we said, "Well what should we call ourselves?" And Bro. Joe Markel said, "Well, why don't we call ourselves the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund?" And we're like, "Yeah." Because that says it, says who you are in the title, and we all said "Yeah. That's it. We're the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund." And then the Sister's Provincial Council had decided that Sr. Laura Leming might be best suited to continue to be the Sister's representative on the committee. So, Laura joined us by the end of the year. So, by the end of the year, we had Sr. Laura on the team as well.

13:33 - Matt Meyers

I think there's a little bit of history that's really important about why the fund is needed. And part of that history, without going into too much detail, is that when young men and women were interested in joining religious life or pursuing their vocation as a vowed religious, 40/50 years ago, they would join at a young age. They would join at 18 years old. Since that time of 40 and 50 years ago, really, young adults that are discerning their vocation or thinking about religious life, they're not engaging that question until after their experiences of college. And so, they're coming into their vocation and religious life with a heavy amount of debt. I mean, upwards of \$30,000 at this point is the average. And so, the Society of Mary, again, is able to take that on a little bit easier because of how big they are. But many of the smaller religious orders and many of the women religious orders are disproportionately unable to do that because they're paying for higher healthcare costs, because the debt is so high that young women are coming in with.

14:44 – Matt Meyers

So, with the high cost of college education, many candidates have to delay their formation process in order to work and pay off their debt. In some cases, this can be four, five, six, seven years. And during that time, they maybe may lose interest or become frustrated, because while they're paying off their religious debt, they're also paying for just their regular expenses in the world. As we all know, coming out of college these days, you're not exactly earning a huge salary. Our committee is really only interested in paying down educational debt. We're not taking on credit card debt or other debt-related things. We're really focused on helping young women that have educational debt so that they can enter and begin formation with the Daughters of Mary, with the Marianist Sisters, basically from when the time that a woman enters the Novitiate. So, it's not like, "Oh, you have \$40,000 worth of debt? Here's a \$40,000 check. We're just going to pay that off right away." Maybe, Linda, you could talk about how many years of formation it really takes for a woman to become fully vowed in the Daughters of Mary and that piece where we pay it down gradually.

15:59 - Linda Zappacosta

So, in the first year is this Pre-Novitiate. They can work during that year. If they have educational debt during that year, they are asked to continue their monthly payments and pay down their student debt. After they become Novices at the end of the year, then they are unable to work any longer, and then the Sisters would begin the monthly payment. So, the first monthly payment of the drawdown of the student debt begins with the Novitiate. Then the Novitiate is two years long, and then they would take first vows. The payment of the debt would continue up until final vows which could be anytime between like five and eight years.

16:38 – Linda Zappacosta

[I] just want to add a word about collaboration, because I really feel that the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund is an example of collaboration in practice. Because from the get-go, I mean, it was a Lay initiative, but from the get-go we involved of course the Sisters and the Brothers in the discussion about how to move forward with this. So, it's real collaboration of the three branches

of the Marianist Family in United States, and I love that about it, too. I can't imagine this fund being in existence without the three branches participating and having a voice.

17:12 – Linda Zappacosta

It's just been wonderful, plus the number of people that have come through these seven years with their various expertise and development of fundraising, like Jenee Gonzalez. What Matt has brought to the fore in his research and marketing and this the education that he received and how he brings those skills to the fore. But the base for all of us, I think, is rooted in the love of the Marianist Sisters and a wish that no woman be denied advancement in religious life due to student debt, and that's the heart of it.

17:45 – Matt Meyers

And I'll just build on that, Linda. I also think it's, as Laity, we really see the Daughters of Mary as a gift to the Marianist Family. The same is true for the Society of Mary the Brothers and Priests, they're gift. And we want to see that for future generations. And that means in this moment coming together to make that a possibility, because there's some obstacles in the way that are really making it difficult for women to pursue this kind of vocation. But I totally agree with you. What better group to come together than Marianist Family and really try and live out Chaminade and Adèle, and Marie-Thérèse's original vision?

18:32 - Matt Meyers

The Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund is really a continuation of Adèle's work from 200 years ago. Back in the day, Adèle became aware of some young men that wanted to pursue their education so that they could become priests, and they didn't have the funds necessary to pay for it. Adèle stepped in and she says, "We're going to help these young men." And she did so by raising pigs and then selling the pigs to support the men in seminary who had no means of paying for it. So, in a way, the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund isn't something new. It's actually a contemporary vision of what Adèle had back then which is, "We really are a Family, and we can help each other out with financial resources and other means so that people can pursue their vocation and their calling."

19:28 - Linda Zappacosta

I just want to add as well, when Matt was talking about the broad reach of folks who have responded to our appeal request, that Marianist institutions such as universities have also jumped in a big way, which has been wonderful to see and speaks highly of the relationship of the Sisters with these institutions as well. It's been wonderful to see all of the response and a ready response. And again, it's rooted in relationship with the Sisters and the unique value that we see in the Sister's contribution not only to our Marianist Family but to our church and our world. So, we want to continue to honor that and support that.

20:12 - Matt Meyers

I think one of the real gifts and the graces of the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund is that it's an affirmation not only of a young woman's desire or intent to discern religious life with the

Marianist Sisters. But it's also an affirmation that there's this deeper, broader Family that's also really interested in you and wanting you to succeed. And so here is the Society of Mary, here's the Laity, and here's the Marianist Sisters coming together to make sure that you have the funds to pay for your student debt. But even deeper than that, it's an affirmation that you're not just joining the Daughters of Mary. You're really joining the Marianist Family, and we're all in this together. And I think that's just got to be a tremendous blessing for those considering religious life that they're joining something much bigger than just the Daughters of Mary right now.

21:19 - Gabby Bibeau

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. We hope that you enjoyed what you heard and learned something, too.

21:28 - Patti Gehred

If you want to learn more about the Marianist Sisters Vocation Fund or make a donation, we will have information on our podcast notes. So go to www.nacms.org under programming, click “podcast” and we will have the information for you to find with a simple click. Thank you for listening.