

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Ep. 22 Transcript
Finding God in Photography (with Bro. John Lemker, SM, Patti Gehred, and Gabby Bibeau)

00:00 - Bro. John Lemker, SM

We have the Divine Artist, you know, painting the skies every day. That's one way to look at artists, too, or you know, they're painting. Well, you could say, "Well, God does it." He'd paint sunrises and sunsets. He paints all kinds of wonderful things and what a variety of - God's got more, more greens on his palate than we could ever dream of.

00:40 - Patti Gehred

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I think we have a really good interview to talk about today to Sr. Gabby.

00:49 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah. Regular listeners have probably noticed it's been a while since you've had a podcast from us. And that is because we have been very busy at work on a different media project, which is now completed. And that is a video about the General Chapter of 1981 that the [Marianist] Brothers had, where they finalized their Rule of Life. And so, we spent a lot of time working on that and that's finished and it's on YouTube, so I recommend you check it out, but we're excited to get back to the podcast. And our interview today is actually one that Patti and I recorded this summer with Bro. John Lemker. And yeah, Patti, I think it was your idea to interview Bro. John. So, could you talk a little bit about why you wanted to talk to him, what you were looking forward to, and sort of what this interview ends up being about with him?

01:55 - Patti Gehred

Sure, I've just always admired Bro. John Lemker's photography. And he's like, well regarded. He's won prizes nationally, for sure, of his photographs of nature. I've also enjoyed when he combines his knowledge of physics with the art of nature. And then his vocation as a religious Brother and just putting those three things together to me, I always find fascinating. And so, when Bro. John tells us how he was introduced to the Marianists and physics and photography, it just tells a beautiful story of intertwining faith and science and nature. So that's what I was looking forward to, and I believe he fulfilled my expectations. How about you, Gabby?

02:53 - Gabby Bibeau

Yes, I agree. I don't remember if in the interview he says what his age is, but he does say that he has 70 years of religious life under his belt. So, he's almost 90, I think... He's seen a lot in his life and has experienced a lot in his life, and so I was also looking forward to hearing him talking about how he met the Marianist Brothers and how he became a Brother. And just a little bit about how different life was back then. But yeah, I think when I first met him, I think it was at a photography show at the Gallery here at Mount St. John [Gallery St. John], him showing his photos. And I was just like, "Well, Brothers can be photographers? That's really interesting." I just didn't realize that. What you find, what he explains I think so well, is how much his photography is like an extension of his spirituality, of his prayer life. Because it's nature

photography. I mean, that's really what he does. It's nature photography. So, he has just some wonderful things to share about that.

04:22 - Patti Gehred

He takes photography of sunrises, sunsets, mountains, the biggest landscape, and then the smallest flower. And so, I think his photography helps us see with what maybe we can't travel to see or an opportunity to see more than our own eyes when we reflect on that. And then, when he puts his spirituality into it, it's just a prayer. It just feels like a prayer.

04:51 - Gabby Bibeau

Yeah. And I think, too, what he shows us in his photography is the importance of paying attention. And there's so many images that he has captured that are fleeting... [To] those listening, you'll hear in the interview him talking about Patti's favorite photo, which is of frost on a rose, which was only there for a short period of time, but he captured it. And I think his photography has made him have a heightened awareness of his surroundings and of appreciating the moment, and the photo is capturing a moment in time. So... it made me think a lot more about photography not only as an art form but also like a form of prayer.

05:47 - Patti Gehred

I absolutely agree, and I also think his love of science, that knowledge and inquisitiveness of God's creation just I think all comes together for a particular artist view when he takes his photographs.

06:07 - Gabby Bibeau

And I think this interview is also notable because this is the first interview we have done in person: Number one, in person since COVID. And number two, the very first interview in our new recording studio. So, during the pandemic, we turned a portion of the front of our office, kind of walled it in with glass and with some acoustic paneling and it's become a recording studio, which is going to be the set place of hopefully many future interviews to come, both video and audio. So, that was very exciting that Bro. John could be our first official guest in our new recording studio space.

07:05 - Patti Gehred

It was. And the name of our new recording studio is Bro. Lawrence J. Cada Recording Studio, which is so meaningful for all of us at NACMS, as he has been a Marianist scholar for many, many years, as many of you know, and was the first director of NACMS. So, we're so happy to share this with you and promise you many more in the future.

07:29 - Gabby Bibeau

Without further ado, here is our interview with Bro. John Lemker, and we hope you enjoy it.

07:42 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

I'm Bro. John Richard Lemker and this is concluding my 70th year as a Marianist. [I] made my first vows in 1951.

07:55 - Gabby Bibeau

How did you meet the Brothers, and how did you decide that you wanted to become a Brother?

08:03 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Well, I would go back to the [19]40s, and I was interested in becoming a priest. And I thought of that as a possibility. I talked to my pastor, and he suggested that “Oh, you're a little young,” he said to me. “Go down to Covenant Catholic,” and of course, Marianists taught there. So, that was at the beginning of the story. So, I spent two years there, and it was a very small school. So, we had four Brothers and one priest member and one Layperson who taught. There was one class in each year of the four years, so a 150 in the whole school. And I really liked how the Brothers related. So, by the end of my sophomore year, I was kind of ready to, “Yeah, let's get a closer look at this. Let's go.”

09:06 - Patti Gehred

What as such a young person how did you feel? What made you feel called to that vocation?

09:16 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

It was a feeling that maybe I can do the same thing. Because of that relationship, I thought that's a good way to live, just the way they treated the students and the kind of spirit that we had. And I said, “Well, I guess I would say today these guys kind of knew how to do it.” They're just related well and so that was the main thing - a life where I could be relating to younger people like this and like myself at the time, and said, “You can do a lot of good.” So, that was the motivation.

10:02 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

I would have been 16 when I came here to Mount St. John. And I was a junior in high school, so I spent two years as a postulant here, and then of course going to the Novitiate, I was 17. And took vows at 18 years old.

10:26 - Gabby Bibeau

So, did they have a high school here? Like, how did you finish high school as a postulant?

10:31 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Yes, they were accredited here and had all the kinds of courses that you would think of. Except we didn't have a chemistry lab, but we did have in the building there was a set up for physics which eventually became something I love very much. But otherwise, English, languages...

11:01 - Patti Gehred

When did you fall in love with physics? Who was your physic [teacher]? Was it here on this property or was it when you went to college? But when did you fall in love with physics?

11:15 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Well, I enjoyed the course we had in the Apostulate, and I thought, “Gee... understanding some things about our planet as well as how a lot of things work.” But I was also very interested in biology. And I had a summer school course, an intensive summer school course. We had six weeks and the Brothers who taught - there were two Brothers, and it was team-taught, and they were both very good. And I just learned a lot. “Boy, this is fascinating.” So, during the time of Novitiate, before we made our first vows - because right afterwards, we're going to go to UD [University of Dayton] and start studies - they asked each of us, “Do you have an idea of - is there something you're particularly interested in that you might like...” And while I said, “Yeah, the sciences. And I really like biology and physics.” And they said, “Oh, that's really good. That'll be great for our high schools,” which was ordinarily the way things were going. You would teach in high school. But it was a difficult decision because I really like them both.

12:37 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

And I'm so glad that I had that interest in both because of the photography later it was one thing. But just playing at, you know, seeing things and whatever it is, birds and animals and it was so fascinating. But there's something that kind of - so it was almost like flipping a coin. So, “I'll go physics.” In college, I was able to get a course in biology just out of interest, so that was really helpful, too.

13:12 - Patti Gehred

So, I'm really looking forward to talking to you about your photography. That's how I grew to know you, and I just know that photography and science and faith are all connected. And I just think your work displays that beautifully. So, when did you start? Did you always have an attraction to photography?

13:34 - Bro John Lemker, SM

Well, when I was real young there were times when [I'd think to myself] “Oh, I need to get a picture of that.” Well, we had a little brownie camera. Very occasionally I would ask my mom or dad, “Can I take a picture?” and then, [they'd say,] “Yeah, okay,” they'd give me the thing. And that was about it.

13:54 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

And then one time my dad took me - we were on a rural trip down into Kentucky to a place called High Bridge. It was a wooden structure terrifically high and at that time it was the highest bridge over a navigable stream in the world and in Kentucky. So, I remember going down with Dad, and by that time we had a little different camera. So, some distance where I took a picture of this, and you could walk across this bridge. But the bridge railing was only about three feet high. And I started to walk out there with my dad and just said, “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.” Because he just kind of sauntered out, you know. And I was scared stiff, and I had acrophobia. I couldn't possibly... So, I said, “Dad, I can't. I can't go.” And he said, “It's alright. It's okay.” So, we walked back. But from a distance, I did get a picture of the bridge. And so that was kind of fun. Never thought a whole lot about it, frankly, after that until I think it was... 1969 or 1970,

and I had been teaching. And I got the National Science Foundation grant to study out west in the summer. And I had three successive summers, like seven or eight weeks each time, and in an all-day learning experience and weekend, maybe doing some field trips of things to learn some geology so I could teach a new course in high school. And I had a borrowed camera that someone gave me and later said, "Oh, just keep it." Okay, so I was mainly interested in and focused on the geologic aspect of things.

16:06 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Well, when I started teaching using those, I set up a night for parents of students. And so, they could get into some of the things that their students were learning. So, a number of parents came, and I showed these. The main interest for the parent wasn't in the geology. They were seeing other things there. [I] said, "Yeah, well, maybe I would pay more attention to some of these other aspects." And so, I started doing that, and the rest is you know the rest of the years were spent then predominantly on things other than geological. Well, they're there automatically in many, many instances. So, then it really got serious. And at the time of my Silver Jubilee, I got permission to ask for - because my parents wanted to do something special - I may have a camera and a wide-angle lens to go with. So that's how it all began.

17:18 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

And then a couple of years later, people were encouraging me, and I thought some of this might be published. So, you see our club calendar in those days would solicit pictures, and they would have 2- or 300,000 photographs, and then they'd make their yearly calendar of 50 photos. And so, I sent them two samples that I had, and they used one of them and that was the, "Reeds and Reflection" one. Then I was flooded. I got more than 100 letters from around the country about that photograph and people asking for prints and things. And then the one company - it was a biological supply company - they had seen this and asked if they could use it. And they gave me a real nice stipend for it as a wrap-around cover for their catalog.

18:23 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

So, this kind of put my name out there in interest, you know, and then was published in other places since. And it remains one of my favorites, not just because of that is just very interesting and the story behind how I got it. So, I've photographed sometimes when I'm looking for something very specific or rather specific, and then you have to be ready though for all the surprises. And sometimes they turn out to be better than what you went for, because I went to photograph Halley's Comet that morning. And I didn't see it because it was fogged over. And I had traveled two hours, getting up at 2:30 in the morning to get to a spot because it was pretty close. Halley's Comet was supposed to be close to the horizon, and I thought "Gee, all this waste of time." I was really discouraged, got in the car and started home, and almost fell asleep. And said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I got to get off the road and take a nap." And I pulled off the road, and it just happened to be there were some canoes there, there's a little lake here and you rent a canoe. I wasn't ready to rent a canoe, so I fell asleep. And when I woke up, I was so groggy that I [said] "I can't drive yet. Better get a walk around." Which I did, and then I walked around this little lake. There are those reeds.

20:03 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

It was the best photograph of my life, and it turns out that that isn't what I went for at all. Somebody told me down, "Photograph some reeds and you, yeah. Go fly a kite, you know." Ever since that, I've just been or captivated by the beauty and the intrigue of creation. And in coming more and more to realize what we've talked about a little bit, the connectedness of everything and how important that is to realize and to appreciate its contribution to contemplation. And [it's] another whole aspect of silence when you're just there... it's just truly awesome. I've learned to appreciate. "Well, just stand in awe."

21:01 - Gabby Bibeau

What's been your favorite place that you've photographed? Because I know you've been to a lot of places.

21:07 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

That's a tough one. That can change from year to year. I guess the one that I visited most - partly because of its accessibility, but mostly because of the beauty and just the awesomeness of it - is the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in the autumn. The autumn colors, the lakes, the kinds of reflections in the lakes. So, in some very, very interesting and different things. Other things I've learned, like there was a white pine forest up there in this one area, and it was it was clear cut. I don't know when, but many, many years ago. And so, the stumps that were left, I remember the first time, [there was] this one white pine stump. And then out of it there's - and I can't remember the species of trees, but there's a different species of tree growing out of the old stump because, you know, debris had gathered there and I guess a bird dropped the seed in there from this other plant that grew up. And right away I was thinking of "Jesse," you know "shoot shall sprout, from..." So unusual and wow.

22:40 - Patti Gehred

My favorite of yours is the Rose with the Frost that you took in November, I think, and then by the end of the day it was gone.

22:50 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Oh, just two hours later. Yeah, it was the hoar frost where, in the morning, there's this temperature drop shortly before sunrise, and just enough to be at the freezing point. And then, [it would] go below freezing in the 30s. Frost speckles grew on the rose. And I remembered that the day before, I had seen this rose, and I had marveled at "It's so late in the year and the roses are still blooming here. This is really something!" It was right along the path near the Grotto [at Mount St. John]. Well, when I woke up that morning and looked outside and I saw a frost on something right outside the door in on some of the bushes. "Yeah. Boy, that's really interesting... the rose! I wonder if there's frost on the rose." So, I dashed out because it was just a short distance. And by George, there's that rose, "Oh my." So, needless to say I ran back, got the camera and set things up and got close-ups and tried different angles and everything. And then, about two hours later, it warmed up and of course it melted. And then, the rose wilted because of that. It had just been stressed too much. It was gone.

24:17 - Patti Gehred

And you also... did some programming where you added Psalms to your photos.

24:24 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Yes, it's become an important part of my work with teaching Scripture. And I did some retreat work. I found it real helpful. Like to begin the day, so well, you begin things with prayer, of course. So, I would put a selection of slides with a psalm, for example, and then after each stanza of the psalm, perhaps change to a new photograph and to line them up pretty well. Well, like the *Benedicite*, "Bless the Lord, all your great works of the Lord, and sun and rain bless the [Lord]." Well, you can find photographs of those and so maybe with a pause. And I wouldn't do that for each individual little one. But, you know, 15 slides, and people really appreciated that. And I found it a prayerful thing to prepare.

25:33 - Patti Gehred

Well, I think in our notes we'll talk about the Gallery at Mount St. John so people understand because, you know... we know that we have listeners in Australia. So, we want people to know about the Gallery at Mount St. John. That's pretty much what you do. You have showings of your work there, here in Dayton. OH.

25:52 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

Yes, yeah. Gallery St. John's been [around since]... 31 or 32 years ago. Bro. Joe Barrish got it started and it's grown ever since. And we have it as the mission statement for the Gallery that it's an educational adventure. We're hopeful that it's really helpful to other people to see a kind of creativity that might be a little different from what they've experienced. We experience that in our differences. We are so different, basically, all five of us who show [our work] ordinarily. We just do different things, but they're all expressions of... There's creativity in God's blessings, and so we try to best we can promote that. And people learn in different ways. And it's not just by books. There is that. It's so very important. I mean, I love reading. I love books. I read a lot of books. But there are other ways that a whole being is touched that you can't get from books.

27:20 – Bro. John Lemker, SM

And that's what artists are all about. So, I think we need that aspect of life to look at things that are really works of art. And again, that's staining. It all comes the same way. We have the Divine Artist, you know, painting the skies every day. And that's one way to look at artists, too, you know. They're painting. Well, you could say, "Well, God does it. He'd paint sunrises and sunsets. He paints all kinds of wonderful things, and what a variety." God's got more greens on his palate than we could ever dream of.

28:11 - Patti Gehred

Well, thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed our interview with Bro. John Lemker. We'd also like to mention that the art gallery is still open a couple of days a week on the Mount St. John property. Bro. John always has some photography there and still has unique shows as well

as other Marianist artists. If you haven't had a chance to check this space out, it is really worth your time.

28:38 - Gabby Bibeau

And we've included on our web page - on the page where we posted this podcast and on the show notes for this podcast - a link to the Gallery website. So, we recommend that you click on that and check it out and learn a little bit more about Bro. John's work and other Marianist artists on that website.

29:00 - Patti Gehred

If you want to learn more about NACMS or hear our other podcasts, go to www.nacms.org and check out our programming and lots of very interesting podcasts.