

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Episode 29 Transcript

What We Gave Them Lives On: Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

0:00 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

Life is not a straight line. You know, it has its detours and stops and curves. So, I would do that all over again because I learned a lot about myself and a lot about life. And I think I was able to bring that story to others because I was vocation director for a number of years. I was able to share my story with people, and I think it helped them to realize it's not just a straight line of simplicity, and it has its complexities.

0:30 – 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. You're probably recognizing that I am not Gabby Bibeau. Gabby has since moved on from NACMS to pursue doctoral studies, and within the past two months I have started as NACMS' Media Administrator overseeing all of our audio and video production including our website, social media accounts, newsletter, and all things tech for NACMS. I'm excited to be part of the team, and I'm looking forward to continuing to get my bearings in this new role.

1:19 – Mike Bennett

In today's episode, I'm excited to share with you a little bit of the story of Bro. Jesse O'Neill, who is currently serving as the Head of Education on the Provincial Council, living in St. Louis, Missouri, and has been a professed brother for over 25 years.

1:41 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

I'm Bro. Jesse O'Neill. I live right now in St. Louis, Missouri. I'm presently on the Provincial Council of the Marianist Province of the United States as the Assistant for Education for the past five years.

1:54 – Mike Bennett

What does the commitment of being on the Provincial Council look like?

1:59 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

The Provincial Council has a lot of things on its agenda. We're in a time in religious life where there's a lot of giftedness and joy for the future, but also a lot of challenges. So, there are tough decisions that need to be made in this time in history, and I think we do pretty well as a group in that we don't always, necessarily agree at the start of a conversation, but we can land at a place where everyone feels comfortable, and that's a good thing. So, we can almost finish each other's sentences now because we know each other so well. And then, we have two new people on the Council this year. We're starting a new term. We had our assembly a few weeks ago, and that assembly had an installation ceremony where we were able to install the new Provincial Council. So, the core five were reappointed for another three years, and then the two new council members joined us. So, we meet this coming week for our planning days to map out the year and years ahead.

3:08 – Mike Bennett

And what is your role on the Council?

3:10 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

I’m Assistant for Education, which is probably the largest umbrella of facets of all the Council members. So, I have the three universities, I have high schools, the Archives, NACMS, the Leadership Development office, the Association of Marianist Universities. So, there's a lot of pieces to it. So, when I started, I was like, “What the heck?!” It's a lot. But you know what? If you have really good people in place – because I'm not a micromanager. So, I trust people and the good work that they do.

3:50 – Mike Bennett

Tell me about your journey with the Marianists.

3:53 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

I met the Marianists as a direct result of my father's death. When I was in high school, he died very suddenly. My family was living in Florida at the time, and we moved up outside of Philadelphia in Chester, Pennsylvania, with my grandmother who lived down the street from this school that was run by the Marianists. And I wasn't saying this at the time, but I can look back and say that what attracted me to them was their joy. Like, they truly loved what they were doing, and I was attracted to that. And so, that became a long journey of discernment. And [I] went to college and was in contact, and then I became an aspirant the two years after college. But then I left at the end of the two years, and the way I described it to people is that I wanted to be at happy hour with the teachers and not at Mass with the Brothers when I was in my early twenties. When I got older, I realized you could do both and just balance things in life.

4:52 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

So, I left for five years, left with the intention of coming back, and then it ran full circle. And [I] came back, did the aspirancy again, and celebrated [my] 25-year jubilee a couple years ago. And I’d do all that over again. I don't see having left and coming back as a mistake by any means. Actually, life is not a straight line. You know, it has its detours and stops and curves. So, I would do that all over again because I learned a lot about myself and a lot about life. And I think I was able to bring that story to others because I was vocation director for a number of years. I was able to share my story with people, and I think it helped them to realize it's not just a straight line of simplicity, and it has its complexities.

5:40 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

When I got the phone call from Fr. Oscar [Vasquez, SM] to take this gig that I'm in now, I was presently at Mother Seton Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, where I was for 15 years. That was a place where it transformed my life because as much as you try to be the teacher, these young people taught me every day. They taught me about resilience, about fortitude, about perseverance, faith, so it was a hard place to leave. But I knew it was the right decision, and I still go back in and visit a lot.

6:18 – Mike Bennett

So, I don't know much about Mother Seton. Can you tell me just a little bit about the school?

6:23 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

Sure. Back in the 1990s when the Archbishop of Baltimore closed many of the inner city Catholic schools, six religious congregations came together and said, “What can we do to respond to this reality?” So, ourselves, the Xaverian Brothers, the Daughters of Charity, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Franciscan Sisters... came together and formed this mosaic and said, “We’re going to start a school for students in the city of Baltimore recognizing their potential and their capacity for success.” And so, in 1992, the school began. Small class size, only 15 boys and 15 girls in sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade. And we work really hard at getting them into a Catholic or private high school, and we have somebody on the staff that works with them through high school and hopefully getting them into college.

7:30 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

I’m very sensitive to how we – for lack of a better word – “market” the mission of these schools. We have a program at four of our schools that used to be called the Marianist Urban Students Program, and about a year and a half ago, the director of our school – St. Mary’s here in St. Louis – I was meeting with him and the principal and president about the program. And he looked at me and said, “Bro. Jesse, have you ever thought about changing the name of the program?” And I said, “Talk to me.” And he said, “Marianist Urban Students Program... the use of the word *urban* is coded language for poor, black kid.” Long story short, during a long discernment process, we’ve renamed the program now EXCEL... which is an acronym for *excellence* in character, education, and leadership. And it speaks to the core values of the program, and it also speaks to – as I said earlier – about the potential and the capacity of these students. So, I’m really big on the marketing tools, the things that we put out in print, that we don’t come out and say, “We’re helping the poor kids.” [Instead] that were helping young women and men who have the capacity to thrive, period.

8:53 – Mike Bennett

As vocation director and at Mother Seton, do you see ways that that experience really helped you formulate or impacted your style of leadership?

9:02 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

For sure, for sure. I’m a believer that a successful person surrounds themselves with successful people in that if you have those people around you, and there is a level of trust between you, and that there’s a relationship. For me, Marianist leadership is all about relationship. If you have a relationship that’s healthy and honest – and I’m not talking about a kumbaya kind of a relationship where we always get along – but we can be honest with each other, even disagree with each other, but in a respectful way, and then good is going to come from that. So, that is how I was a vocation director, that’s how I led at Mother Seton when I would mentor teachers and work with the leadership team of the school, and it certainly plays itself out now in my role. Because it’s such a huge umbrella, I have a hard time sometimes just keeping hold of everything.

10:00 – Mike Bennett

If you had to put a couple key phrases or key terms to *Marianist Leadership* for you, would there be one or two?

10:07 – Bro. Jesse O’Neill, SM

Relationship... In one of our characteristics of Marianist education, adaptation to change comes to mind. I think as a Marianist leader, you have to adapt to circumstance, to the person, to the parent, and to the student that is in front of you at that moment. And we experienced that to the n'th degree through COVID. You know, talk about an opportunity to really embrace that characteristic! ... There are other things, too, but those are two important pieces. And the relationship part is what I said earlier. If you have a relationship that's built on mutual trust of gifts and talents, then people are going to respond to that. That's kind of like my deep philosophy.

10:59 – Mike Bennett

And what would be a hope you have for the Marianist Family?

11:05 – Bro. Jesse O'Neill, SM

My hope for the Marianist Family is that we would increase in our ways to collaborate. Last week with the Office of Sponsorship – that's an office within my Office of Education, and they're in the front line, if you will, with all of the high schools – and we met for three days and brainstormed. And one of the things I presented to them was looking at ways to MLC-NA [Marianist Lay Community of North America] could assist us in our work, because... as much as we say we're a *family*, and I think our intentions are good, but we can get siloed very easily into the Brothers doing their thing. And I think we're continuing to grow in that area, but I think there's more we can do to collaborate. That's my hope for the Marianist Family is that we look at creative ways to help each other, and I really feel very confident that going to happen.

12:05 – Mike Bennett

Before this recording, you were mentioning a little bit about the Mary's Lead program. I was curious if you could talk a little bit about what is Mary's Lead?

12:12 – Bro. Jesse O'Neill, SM

Yeah, so you know we have lots of Marianist leaders in our schools. The majority of them are lay people, and... it's a one-year program that really deepens our school leaders' understanding of not only what it means to be a principal, what it means to be a president, or what it means to be in some mid-level leadership role, but how do you lead in a Marianist way. What are the skills, what are the behaviors that make you in the eyes of others, in the way you operate, in what people perceive, they see you as a Catholic and Marianist leader. So, we have the inaugural cohort of the program that began in February of 2020. It's composed of a monthly, online engagement and then a mid-year retreat, more monthly engagements, and then a closing retreat. So, we were able to do that. We had 12 participants in cohort one, 16 in cohort two, and then our dream always – without COVID having interfered – was to have one cohort end when another cohort began, and they would be together. And that finally happened this past June [with] the end of cohort two, the start of cohort three.

13:40 – Bro. Jesse O'Neill, SM

Dr. Savio Franco, who's the director of our Leadership Development Program under my office, he's the brainchild of this. I ride on his coattail, you know. He developed the program, he organizes the program, gives great thought and energy to it, and I think it really has impacted our leaders. Now, we have more mid-level folks that come. One of the inherent challenges of all of this though – and we talked about this a lot at our Office of Sponsorship meetings – the days

when somebody was at a school and they're there until they retire are over. We get a fair amount of turnover. So, somebody who went through cohort one, people [who are] committed educators, and now they've left. And sometimes, it's because of family circumstances or money or whatever. And so, we talked about how we can't allow that to deter us or discourage us. It's a reality of our world today, and we just have to keep at it and keep inviting and keep forming. Because our belief – I said to them at our meetings – has to be that even though they go off somewhere, that we have to believe that what we gave them lives on wherever they are and whatever they're doing. That, I think, helps keep us sane.

15:02 – Mike Bennett

Well at least you're empowering people to take the charism into the world, right?

15:07 – Bro. Jesse O'Neill, SM

Exactly!

15:08 – Mike Bennett

Don't hit that stop button yet! Before we ask Bro. Jesse our final question, I would just like to offer a word of thanks to Bro. Jesse for sharing his Marianist story with us, and a word of thanks to you, our listener, for listening to this episode of Sharing Our Marianist Stories, and for your continued support of the North American Center for Marianist Studies. Make sure to follow us wherever you listen to podcasts so that you'll be notified when we have future episodes released and follow us on our social media accounts @ThisIsNACMS on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube so that you have access to our ongoing, educational, and formational content focused on our Marianist Family, history, and charism. And now, to wrap up this episode of Sharing Our Marianist Story [*sic*], we return with our final question.

16:02 – Mike Bennett

So, we know the founders communicated a lot through letters. So, if you were going to write a letter to someone, dead or alive, knowing you were guaranteed a response, who would you write to and what would be the topic?

16:20 – Bro. Jesse O'Neill, SM

Could be anybody? ... Wow, that's a great question. There [are] just some, like, Marianist heroes that I have, both living and deceased, but there are some that are still alive that I just respect immensely. And I hope they know that, because I've told them in so many words over the years. But Fr. Pat Tonry, who is now at our healthcare center in Cupertino, when I talked about what attracted me years ago when I was in high school was the joy. Well, he is emblematic, and I have such utter respect and love for him. I lived with him all the years that I worked at Mother Seton, I lived at our parish out in Eldersburg, Maryland. It's like an hour outside the city, a long commute. St. Joseph's was the parish we had, and he has since left there, and he was the pastor for the initial years that I was there... Needless to say, the parishioners just loved [him]. And there's this one real quick [story]. One moment, when he was giving a homily and he's standing in the front, and he says, "I challenge any person in this church right now, if you believe that Jesus would be for the death penalty to come up right now and stand next to me." And you could hear a pin drop. And I'm looking around, and no one moved, and he continued in his homily. When we got home, I said to him, "What would you have done?" He said, "I would have

crapped myself!” That provocative kind of delivery where he just really touched people's heart, both on the altar and more importantly off the altar.

Keywords & Timestamps

Word	1st Mention	2nd Mention	3rd Mention
Covid-19	10:33	13:28	
Discernment	4:28		
Marianist Education	3:11		
Marianist EXCEL (formerly Marianist Urban Students Program)	7:41		
Marianist Family	11:02		
Marianist Leadership	9:02	10:04	13:02
Mary’s Lead Program	12:08		
MLC-NA	11:31		
Mother Seton Academy	5:48	6:23	8:55
Pat Tonry, SM	16:48		
Provincial Council	1:47	1:57	
Religious Life	2:06		