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# Today's Marists

Society of Mary in the U.S.



# Today's Marists

Fall 2018 | Volume 4 | Issue 2

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Cover: *Mary and Elizabeth*, Dorothy Webster Hawksley (1884-1970), Private Collection.

The Maas Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images

We imagine the interaction between the young woman and the elder woman as a sharing of the great marvels they have experienced culminating in the mighty prayer of the Magnificat.



## *from the Provincial*

Fr. Paul Frechette, SM

# Justin Taylor's Province Retreat June 24-28, 2018

The annual province retreat was held at the Marianist Brothers' Bergamo center in Dayton, Ohio from June 24-28, 2018. The retreat was led by Justin Taylor, SM, who has just completed the biography of Jean-Claude Colin, the Founder of the Marists. A total of 48 Province members participated. Fr. Joe Kozar, SM, (Marianist) who teaches theology at Dayton University, preached the homilies at the retreat.

The retreat was filled with talks, reflections, and gatherings. Our memorial service, remembering those Marists who died during the past year, was held on the first evening. A Reconciliation service was held on the second evening. Three nearby diocesan priests came to assist with hearing our confessions. On the third night, Justin gave an optional evening talk entitled "Jean-Claude Colin as Founder." Our Jubilarians' Eucharistic celebration and banquet was held on the final evening to honor our confreres celebrating anniversaries of profession and ordination.

Attendees, as expressed through their evaluations, were quite pleased with Justin's presentations and his leading of the retreat. One person shared, "Justin was fantastic, the Marianist preacher was solid, and I thought that the spiritual nourishment was very good and stronger than past years." Another person said (about Justin) he was "Erudite and to the point." Attendees also spoke highly of Fr. Kozar in their evaluations.

### **Jean-Claude Colin as Founder**

Justin opened his talk with, "Perhaps many Marists find Jean-Claude Colin disappointing as a founding figure... he is not 'charismatic' in the usual way that term is frequently used...he is not immediately attractive, not someone

who spontaneously awakes devotion. He is NOT Marcellin Champagnat and can appear dull and uninspiring in comparison ..." This may be true, but he drew hundreds of Marists to the Society in those early years by the force of his profound and passionate vision of Mary in the Church for our times.

Justin continued, "The truth is that Jean-Claude Colin never tried to be exciting. ...we have to take very seriously the fact that he never claimed to be the founder of the Society of Mary. ...God and or Mary is its true founder. When the Society insisted on giving him the title of Father Founder, he acquiesced, but he always deprecated its application to himself." In 1830, four years after Courville's departure, the Marist priests of the two diocesan groups came together and elected Jean-Claude Colin as 'center of unity', or as he was also called, 'central superior.'

Justin added, "I believe that all this should not simply be attributed to Colin's humility ...rather, it mirrors his deep conviction of the supernatural origins and identity of the Society as the **Work of Mary.**"

### **Why was Colin chosen?**

Colin's greatness is evident in the fact that he took responsibility for the Society of Mary, a body that he had not initiated, believing he was only a provisional superior. As 'central superior' beginning in 1830, Colin was responsible for the whole Society of Mary which included the priests, sisters, brothers, and the Third Order. The Society of Mary survived and flourished thanks primarily to Colin.

Despite his reluctance, Colin grew into the role and became a capable administrator, a trusted leader, and

a spiritual guide. He commanded the respect of French bishops and the Roman Curia. Colin's guidance shaped the Catholic mission to Oceania and stabilized it in the face of many challenges. He also produced, slowly and laboriously, the Constitutions that expressed the rule that Mary wanted for her Society. We must seriously consider Jean Coste's opinion that the unifying factor in Colin's life was not the Society of Mary, but its rule.

### **'Hidden and Unknown'**

We are to be hidden not *from* the world but in this world, where God is hidden. Colin never tires of emphasizing that 'hidden and unknown' is the best way of acting in the modern world, where people are jealous of their autonomy and suspicious of religion. His ideas were aligned with the time as silence and obscurity were recommended to religious as the best way of doing good in a difficult environment.

Pat Bearsley, SM, another Marist now deceased, with a deep and prayerful relationship with Jean-Claude Colin, reminds us to meditate on the hymn in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings." For him, the phrase, *'he emptied himself'* aids us in understanding the 'hidden and unknown.' This is Jesus' *kenosis* – from the Greek word for emptying. Fr. Colin wants us to empty ourselves, so only Jesus, His Father and their Spirit work in and through us. This allows our egos, ambitions, sensitivities, self-seeking, and self-regard, to not obstruct God's grace but to open us to become channels of that grace.

continued on page 6

# Marists and the “Mysticism of Action”

by Ted Keating, SM

In 2017, the Marist General Chapter - a body that gathers every eight years with representative Marists from around the world - became intensely aware of our growing numeric fragility as a church institution like so many other religious congregations. The chapter was even more taken with the effects that secularizing individualism has had in tearing apart communities and Church congregations, even now in our missionary territories. The reports from the provinces and regions found our nations and cultures often spinning into fragmentation and polarization as secularism - the ideology that trumps all other approaches to life with radical individualism, materialism, consumerism, and even polarization - is spreading around the world.

It is no surprise that the Chapter members would be drawn back to our Marist origins and recall the fullness of our vocation as Jean-Claude Colin, our Founder, envisioned it. Religious orders under threat from surrounding culture or society have no choice but to re-found themselves by returning to their original meaning and purpose, or else quietly pass out of existence as other outside forces pull them apart. A group, however, cannot survive without clear lines about who they are, why they exist, and the living core of their mission. Diminishment in numbers does not necessarily have to fall into decline and decay. Many communities (and companies) find diminishment to be a Sabbath time, as they deeply reflect on mission, purpose, and spirit, while engaging in deep processes of change that keep the group rooted in its origins, but now better able to adapt itself to a very different era, society, and culture.

The great John Henry Cardinal Newman once said: “To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect.” In a rapidly changing world, a refusal to change is often a choice for death or at least growing rigidity. A group rooted in the Gospel lives out of the boundless hope of the awareness of the Holy Spirit present to us in Mary and sees God’s Providence as the energy for bringing about that change as hard and challenging as it may be. Hope creates a future when there is no future, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr. A God of Resurrections is always looking forward to newness of life amid darkness just as well as God’s sunrises and springs.

The General Chapter was drawn to the theme of “contemplation” as one of its areas of focus. *Today’s Marists* has concentrated on this theme for the year. The definition of



Mary by Henry Ossawa Tanner

contemplation has been made clear in Catholic spirituality: “What is basic is that it has to do with awareness of the presence of God apprehended (perceived) not by thought but by love” (*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*). More poetically, it has been described as a loving gaze into God as a form of quiet and wordless prayer. Saint Paul has his own graphic description of contemplation: “For us baptized with our faces unveiled, we are like mirrors reflecting more and more the glory of the Lord and being transformed by it. This is the work of the Spirit in us Who is the Lord.” (2 Cor 3:18)

*“True contemplation and solitude are not the absence of people, but the presence of God. To place our lives before the face of God, to surrender our lives to the movements of God, is to roam free in a space in which we have been given in the world of action.”*

– Madeleine Delbrel, Lay Foundress, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*



*“The words of St. Bernard, a model of contemplation and hard work, are a precious reminder to us today, used as we are to evaluating everything with the criterion of productivity and efficiency. He says that all too often, too much work and a frenetic life-style end by hardening the heart and causing the spirit to suffer.”* - Benedict XVI

For our Founder, through devotion to this type of prayer, we would gradually be formed by grace into Marists who “think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things” so that we become Mary to the Church and world. This type of contemplation transforms the heart, mind, and imagination enlivening our ability to discern God’s will; it fills our actions with the presence of God, thus freeing us from focusing on the needs of our own ego even when we are intensely serving others. This is a spiritual path over a lifetime that never ends, with the Spirit that overshadowed Mary always present to us at some level. In this light, we are able to understand our Founder when he urged that we should only be engaged in what God calls us to and not so much in what we think or plan ourselves, as if we could pull it off alone without God. Once asked what he understood God to want the Society to **do**, Colin spontaneously replied “nothing, nothing because then you would think that **you** are doing it.” In this context, planning, analyzing, and moving toward decisions are all infused with this self-emptying consciousness. The tendency to be secularized by highly rationalized and pragmatic approaches that rob us of our hearts and imaginations is diminished. We enter into true discernment more like our paradoxical Founder and less like secular corporations which have a very different vision and purpose.

But as so often happens when a group looks deeply into its past, we discover that this theme of contemplation is nothing new for us as Marists. Our Constitutions say: *“The spiritual life is nourished by contemplation of the Word of God. This heightens awareness of the presence of the risen Jesus in the everyday life and work of Marists. His presence inspires them to make of their lives an unceasing prayer.”* (Constitutions 118) The General Chapter itself reminds us: *“Contemplation as the energy source, the mystical heart of Marist mission, is intimately linked with our identity as Marist religious. To form a communion for mission, we need to deepen the contemplative dimension of our lives. With Jesus at the center we can, like Mary, be missionaries of hope.”* (2017 General Chapter, 30)

Therefore, this is not exactly new territory for us. We have a Founder whom we have often seen as a mystic, not because of visions or unusual phenomena, but because he seemed often to be coming from a deeper connection with God, Mary, and the Church; he often seemed to be in some profound contact with

*“Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way.*

*What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything.*

*It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.*

*Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”*

– Pedro Arrupe, SJ, Former Jesuit General (1907 – 1991)

the ways of God that would often surprise his listeners. Another great Founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, summarized it well when he said: “There are very few people who realize what God would make of them if they abandon themselves into His hands, and let themselves be formed by His grace.” The former Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, writes about a “mysticism of action” that finds service and ministry as a continuing contemplation of God’s presence in grace all around us, including these “signs of our times” that without firm hope can appear dark and fearful. We pass them through our profound sense of hope and trust in God, and they shimmer as the mystery of the face of God.



## DONOR THOUGHTS

# Why I Support the Marists

by Frank Slattery

When I entered my teens, I was conflicted with issues like questioning authority and an inadequate self-image. These issues peaked the year after my father's unexpected death. This is when I realized that drastic changes had to be made to defer the downward spiral of my negative life experiences.

An acquaintance informed me of his intentions to enter St. Mary's Manor, a Marist preparatory seminary in Pennel, Pennsylvania. Possibly divine providence led me to follow his lead in September of 1955. Reflecting back to that time indicates my motivation was imperfect, yet the spiritual development, sense of right and wrong, and the education I received from those dedicated Marists during my five years of attendance changed the direction of my life. After leaving St. Mary's I finished my college education at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia.

I have been married to my best friend, Joanne, for 55 years. Together we have raised two beautiful children, Frank and Donna Marie, and have been involved in the lives of three wonderful grandchildren, Amber, Tyler, and Olivia. I have had the opportunity to share many of the spiritual and moral values learned from the Marists with these God-given blessings.

My professional career as a certified public accountant has been very rewarding from a work perspective and financially adequate. Professionally, I was able to provide many volunteer hours to several non-profit organizations especially two alternative schools for socially-maladjusted teens and young adults suffering from alcohol and drug abuse.

I was recently reunited with three of my former St. Mary's classmates in Washington, DC and enjoyed sharing many memorable experiences from our five youthful years together. Those memories of the Marists who taught and guided us through our spiritual development reminded each of us of what it means to be a Marist — *to think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things.*

While we may not be able to understand thoroughly the role Divine providence plays in the choices we make, we can be confident that Jesus and Mary do. I was blessed with the opportunity to attend a Marist preparatory school at a particularly troubled time in my life and can look back and recognize it as one of the most beneficial choices of my life. It is surely a piece of my history nudged gently with a divine touch. The solid base of Catholic discipleship rooted in the images of Mary that I received at St. Mary's Manor is the reason I am grateful to be able to support the Marists with, first my prayers, and also, my monetary contributions.

Province Retreat, continued from page 3

## Who Was Mary for Jean-Claude Colin?

Jean-Claude Colin regarded the Virgin Mary as his mother just as every Catholic does and many Christians do. This was a relationship that was real for Colin. During one retreat talk Justin asked, "Do we think of Mary as a real person? Do we relate to her in any way as our Founder did?"

## A Marist Re-set?

"The status quo is not working," a message delivered by superior generals at recent general chapters. During the retreat Justin stated that there is an alternative to deciding to die as a Society through diminishment in numbers, and it involves what he would call a 'Marist re-set,' a different way of thinking about ourselves and our calling. The 2017 general chapter hints at this as it states: "As Mary pondered the Word, so we are being called to a life of contemplation, centered on the Eucharist, bearing fruit in service in the Church and beyond." Our superior general, John Larsen, during a recent visit to the Solomon Islands wrote: "The days of the lonely missionary building up the Kingdom of God in 'splendid isolation' are giving way to more prayerful communities of several Marists responding to the specific needs of the local church, ... especially the poor." Larsen wrote that he was delighted with the faith and apostolic zeal he witnessed in the communities he visited.

Justin referred to the **Declaration on the Mission of the Society of Mary Today of the 2017 general chapter**. There is a perspective of the Society of Mary in terms of contemplation, community, mission, and the connection among all three. **This idea is not new.** The Council of the Society (CS) 2005 called Marists to renewal by rededicating ourselves to the 'three circles': Holiness and spirituality, Communion and community, and Mission and apostolic works. A Preamble of that document states: '**Vitality arises where the three circles overlap.**' The 'three circles' cannot be looked at individually but rather as interconnected and integrated components that continually enrich and give life to one another.



# Father Colin and a Daily Marist's Prayer Diet

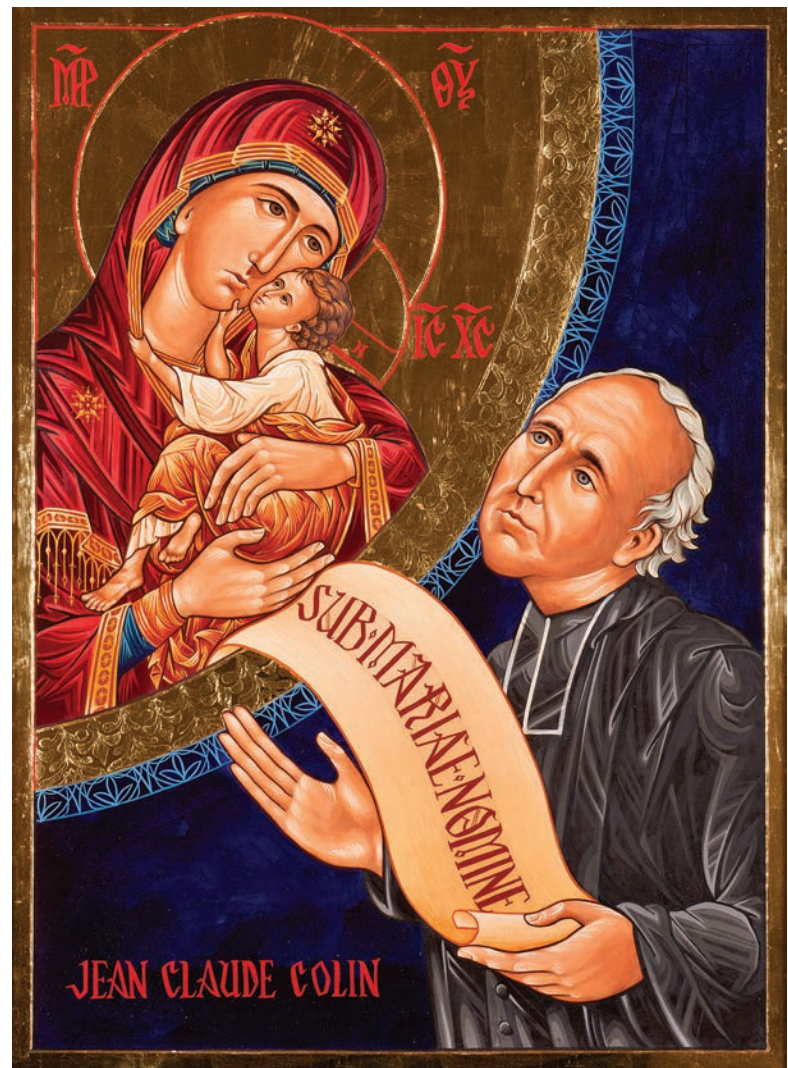
by Tom Ellerman, SM

Venerable Jean-Claude Colin was a man of prayer, and he wanted the Marists to be people of prayer. He thought that the important emphasis of a Marist's day ought to be "to develop the spirit of piety and strengthen more and more the truly interior life." (*Constitutions* 1872, No. 37)

It is not surprising that Fr. Colin had much to say about prayer in his writings, his occasional comments, and in his correspondence. He did not develop a method of prayer nor were his writings about prayer in any way systematic. Everything Colin had to say about prayer would be too much for an article like this one. While he wrote about daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and occasional prayer, along with the kinds and methods of prayer, this article will focus on Marist daily prayer. Almost four hours of daily prayer were prescribed for the Marists. Like all humans, Marists have only twenty-four hours in their day. The *Constitutions* allow for seven hours of sleep. The average Marist ministerial workday is eight hours, and with four hours for prayer, only five hours are left for bodily, social, and intellectual needs. It should come as no surprise that Marists are busy people, but a good portion of their day is out of the public view.

Daily, Marists are called to various kinds of prayer – community and solitary, vocal and mental, liturgical and popular, examination of conscience, and spiritual reading, both biblical and non-biblical. Like the French dinner table there are a few daily staples, but there is also a well-balanced variety of fresh spiritual food. Although the individual Marist may prefer one type of spiritual food over another, like a French "Bonne Mère" Mary bids us put a little bit of everything on our plate and to eat everything. Let us look at the variety in the Marist daily spiritual diet. There are the two daily staples of the Mass and the "Liturgy of the Hours" (the Divine Office). Then there are the times of prayer when the unexpected happens – meditation (lectio divina), spiritual reading, the three consciousness examinations (morning, noon, and night), and the private visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament. Marists check in with Mary (their Mother and leader) at least four times a day – three "Hail Marys" and the ancient "Sub Tuum" prayer, morning and night; Marian antiphon at Lauds and Compline; and meditation on the mysteries of Mary in the recitation of the Holy Rosary.

Marist life is a life of faith. Without faith, it makes no sense. Without prayer, there can be no faith. In the Gospels Jesus implies that we should apply the wisdom we have about earthly things to our spiritual lives. Today we are conscientious more than ever about our physical diets. We try to avoid harmful foods and beverages and to consume healthy ones. We should apply this same good sense to our spiritual lives. Jean-Claude



Colin realized that the health of Marist communities depends upon prayer. In number 423 of the *Constitutions* he says, "since Marists are obliged by a special bond to an eminent love of their Society, seeing it as a ship lighted by the Star of the Sea that will steer them by a sure course to God through life's many reefs and squalls, it is their duty to turn with assiduous prayer to God the Father, source of every perfect gift, imploring him, through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ and the intercession of blessed Mary, of Saint Joseph and of Saint Michael the Archangel to govern it, increase it, defend it from all error, and keep it in peace, simplicity, and fervor of spirit."

Prayers can be found on the Marist website:  
[www.societyofmaryusa.org/resources/index.html#prayers](http://www.societyofmaryusa.org/resources/index.html#prayers)



# Marist Educators Conference in Atlanta, Georgia — June 17-20, 2018

by Bill Rowland, SM

After a two-year hiatus, the Marist provinces in North America, along with their schools owned or sponsored by the Society of Mary, agreed to restart the Marist Educators Conference. Last year, the conference was hosted by Notre Dame Preparatory School and Marist Academy in Pontiac, Michigan. This year's conference, hosted by Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia, began on June 17 and concluded on June 20. The conference was held at the St. Ignatius Retreat House in Atlanta. Forty-two representatives from the Marist schools in the United States and Mexico attended along with guests from Marist schools in New Zealand and Thailand.



The goal of the conference was to prepare the lay faculty, staff, and administrators to share in and carry on the Marist charism and philosophy of education given the fact there are fewer Marist Fathers and Brothers in our schools. To that end, the conference was intended to assist lay faculty, staff members, and administrators at our Marist schools to be knowledgeable and conversant about the Society of Mary and the philosophy of Marist Education.

This year's participants were treated to several presentations by New Zealand Marist priest Justin Taylor, SM. A well-respected biblical scholar, theologian, and professor, Fr. Taylor has written several books and numerous articles. He recently completed a 1,100-page biography of the Marist founder, Venerable Jean-Claude Colin. This made him an ideal presenter to speak about history, mission, and spirituality of the Society of Mary.

Father Jim Strasz, SM, a teacher at Notre Dame Preparatory School and Marist Academy in Michigan, spoke to the group about the "Marist Virtues and Marist Education" and "The Elements in Marist Education Today."

Mr. Michael Coveny, the Director of the Marist Laity at Marist School, spoke to the group about promoting and forming a Marist Laity.

Father Frank Bird, SM, from New Zealand, spoke to the participants about a new school that he is director of in Thailand sponsored by the Marist Asia Foundation. The school teaches 200 Burmese migrant children on the Thai-Burma border. The project responds to the needs of the migrants through Education, Health, and Migrant programs. It is a new venture by the Society of Mary and represents the Society's willingness to adapt its mission in education to meet the needs of the migrant and refugee crises which have reached global proportions. The



TOP: Participants from 3 nations

BOTTOM: Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

RIGHT: Justin Taylor, SM

more established schools in North America were asked to lend whatever assistance they could.

As part of the conference, the participants visited Marist School where they received a tour of the campus led by two Marist students. They reconvened at the chapel where Fr. Tom Ellerman, SM, an alumnus from the Class of 1958, regaled them with recollections from his time at the school when it was located in downtown Atlanta and known as Marist College.

From there, the group attended Mass at what is now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was there, adjacent to the church, that Marist College began in 1901. Mr. Richard Reynolds, a Marist alumnus from the Class of 1952 and Marist School's historian, spoke about his recollections from when he





attended Marist College. He continued his reminiscing at the historic Mary Mac's Restaurant where the group was treated to an authentic Southern luncheon.

The day ended with a visit to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change and, coincidentally, an experience of the Atlanta traffic gridlock on the return trip.

The last day included an opportunity for the entire group to speak with each other, ask questions, share experiences, and encourage each other in their efforts to assume a greater responsibility for promoting the Marist mission in education. The decision was made for the next conference to be hosted by Notre Dame des Victoires in San Francisco.

Perhaps Stephen Pangori, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Notre Dame Preparatory School and Marist Academy, summarized best the feelings of the group about the conference when he wrote, "I wanted to take a minute to thank you for the wonderful experience I had at this year's conference. The talks given by Fathers Taylor and Strasz provided me with a deeper understanding of the Marists, your history, and educational philosophy. I am certain that this knowledge will help guide me as I move into my new role as our Board Chair. I also appreciated getting to know all of the teachers and administrators who attended the conference. I was overwhelmed at times and very proud of the love and commitment that all of them showed for our students and our mission."

# MARIST COLLEGE HAS GONE **SOLAR**

by Phil Isacco and Ted Keating, SM

*"All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents."* – Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*

The next time you drive down tree-lined Varnum Street in northeast Washington, DC, you will surely notice a new addition on the roof of Marist College. With the help of New Columbia Solar, 123 new SunPower solar panels were installed on both the main building and the chapel. The beautiful chapel at the north end of Marist College was a perfect spot to install solar panels due to its east-west orientation. The southern roof façade of the chapel has direct, unobstructed exposure to the sun throughout the day. The western side of the main building also has a large array of panels for additional solar power production.



We will derive a variety of direct and indirect benefits resulting from the installation of our new solar array. The new panels should produce enough direct electricity to meet 77% of the total electrical need of Marist College on an annual basis. During several days, it will produce more energy than needed and will sell the unused energy back to the local utility. Of course, we are still connected to the grid for days when we need power.

In addition to the production of electricity, our solar array will also accrue SRECs (Solar Renewable Energy Credits) based on the total power output from our panels each year. Recently, the government of the District of Columbia set ambitious goals for producing new solar energy. In order to meet these goals, the District is directly subsidizing solar production via these SRECs. The sale of SRECs will produce enough cash flow within 19 years to pay for the cost of the installation of the new solar energy array on Marist College.

While our financial savings will be significant, the potential impact on our environment is staggering. Over the next 25 years, the power produced from our panels will directly negate the emission of 790 metric tons of carbon dioxide, a primary driver of climate change. This is equivalent to planting 43,801 mature trees or recycling 1,357,800 pounds of garbage. Put another way, the environmental savings would be commensurate to pulling 4,125,960 driving miles off the road or saving 194,472 gallons of gasoline. We are proud to have found a project that can produce such dramatic economic benefits while also helping to protect and conserve our environment for years to come. In our own little corner of the world, we are happy to hear and respond to Pope Francis' call.

# “I was in prison and

## In My Prison Ministry There Are No Criminals

by Tony O'Connor, SM

I have not been more passionate about any other ministry in my many years working in five countries than my walking with unaccompanied minors (11-17 years old) from Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and now Nicaragua. I am surprised what swirls up from deep within me and only recently have I gained a clue to what it is and why.

In Peru, I was in part time prison ministry, but my preference and passion does not come from that. Rather, it comes from another lived experience. In the bad old days when I was young, I spent five years of high school in a boarding institution and my eight years of seminary training far away from the crazy world. For me quite frankly, it was awful!! I don't know how I survived! It must have been God's grace!

Those past experiences draw me to these kids who like little birds in a cage yearn to be free. They are great kids too, boys and girls. The drought-victim Guatemalans are small, short, and stumpy. Most of them are indigenous and bilingual, Spanish and their own dialect. They are mainly from the countryside and are very religious. There is nothing more moving

than to see 20 or 30 of them kneel before the table on which I have celebrated Mass and pray aloud all together in their own dialect, devoted, heads bent, oblivious to anything around them, and of course unembarrassed and without shame.

The Hondurans are taller and more sophisticated, mainly city kids, both girls and boys. The Salvadorans, equally as tall, are a little quieter, perhaps more reserved because of the gang wars and violence of their country. They are very proud of their martyr Archbishop Oscar Romero, “San Romero” as they call him, canonized by Pope Francis on October 14, 2018. The Nicaraguans, those few that escape their homeland, say that the “government wants to recruit them to fight against the people.”

In Texas there are many refuge centers for minors. Technically they are detention centers where they are processed to then join their sponsors further north, (usually family members). The process is rather rigorous, taking six weeks to two months for those who are lucky. In the Diocese of Brownsville there are more than 12 such centers. I have access to most of them although Casa Padre (the Father's House) with 1,300 boys is one of the closer ones. The other centers have 300 to 500 kids.

Working at the centers, we concentrate on Masses and more so the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confessions for these kids are like a Rite of Passage. In captivity (although treated very well) they have time to reflect on their lives as they await the new life they hope to lead further north. These confessions are heart felt and profound. You can see the kids heaving a sigh as they walk out on a lighter step. They don't speak of the arduous and often violent trip they have made over thousands of miles, but rather their failures in family back home, their need of God at this moment, and a hope in their hearts that they will get to live a new life. It is awesome to witness the depth of these kids and their utter sincerity and faith in God.

Our Parish, San Felipe de Jesús has become itself a center of refuge for some of these kids. Almost daily some 30 to 60 are bussed from one center or another for Mass in the morning, afternoon visits, and for a breath of fresh air and a change of scenery. They are carefully supervised. One escaped last year - the kid had so much adrenaline in him as he shot for the door that I swear the door of the church opened on its own!

After the morning Mass or during the afternoon visit, we give the kids some food, different from the food at the center, including a Coke which is coveted and enjoyed immensely. They also receive a simple wooden cross as a memento of their first visit to San Felipe and a rosary both of which are very valued.

On a Sunday, with a Mass full of people, the community deeply loves having the kids there. They are applauded while the choir sings and “welcomes the stranger.” The parish, although poor, always seems to have the wherewithal for food, the Coke, and the cash to buy crosses and rosary beads. What we lack is capital to give each a Catholic paperback bible or a Catholic New Testament. Something they would so dearly love to have.

So, this is a very special sort of prison ministry. A **prison ministry without criminals**. Their only so-called crime is for being minors, wanting a better future for themselves, and wanting to help their families. They don't dwell on their month's journey up through Mexico. However, one kid with a heavy heart spoke of a companion who died of dehydration on the way. Another, who praised the refuge center's attention of the unaccompanied minors, said he was chased by alligators as he crossed a river swamp in Tampico (Mexico), and he had all his clothes ripped off him by members of Las Zettas gang just outside of Reynosa. However, in the center he feels safe. Here in San Felipe de Jesús they feel that way too.

