

## Marketing the Marianist Project

Thank you for the kind invitation to be with you. [Thank you for the Consortium, role in Catholic Marianist Education, and influence on the educational works of our Districts] This topic was a real challenge for me and it really stretched me to think about what we call the Mission in new categories.

My musings led me to three areas that I would like to reflect with you this evening.

1. Jesus as the PR director for God; Jesus as the face of God to the world and the mission entrusted to Jesus.
2. A brief overview of the Marianist project, Chaminade's deep insight into marketing, with some particular comments about the shadow of that charism and their effects on marketing.
3. What are a few of the essentials of what we might call *Marianist branding*?

### Jesus as the PR Director for God

With all due respect to the Irish persons present, I am going to ask you to forget the image of the saintly Bishop of that island holding aloft a three leaf clover, attempting to explain to the Druid priests the theology of the Trinity.

Imagine instead a celestial corporate board room at which God in God's three-personed self sits. For the sake of our imagination, we will call them the Creator, the Word and the Spirit. [I offer apologies to fans of William Young's marvelous novel, *The Shack*; we're going to use a board room instead of a shack!] While the Creator certainly seems to be presiding as the CEO and the Spirit is deeply involved in the conversation, it is the Word who is presenting ideas for the *Redemption of the World Marketing Campaign*.

Let's listen in for a few moments:

**Creator:** These humans who I love so deeply just aren't getting this redemption business; we need a new approach, something fresh that speaks more directly to their experience. I want them to know how much I care and the message just isn't getting through with these prophet-types.

**Word:** (excitedly) How about if I have a prophet tell them: God (that's their word for Us) has the hairs on each of your heads numbered...and We know how many there are!

**Spirit:** No, not dramatic enough

**Word:** They are of more value than many sparrows!

**Spirit:** Forget the bird thing, they won't get it!

**Word:** How about I send them some stories - they always like stories - about, an old man (they seem to always perceive *you* that way) accepting back a prodigal son in a warm embrace and a party?

**Creator:** Ok, I think you're getting warm there, but they have to be listening!

**Word:** How about a story about searching for a lost sheep and another party when You find it?

**Creator:** You're kind of stuck on this party theme aren't you?

[The Creator pauses here thoughtfully, suggests a coffee break or whatever the celestial equivalent of that is. When they resume the Creator, looking directly at the Word says:]

What about if you go and become one of them?

**Word:** Who me?

**Creator:** Yes, you! You seem to understand their language so well and their hearts. Yes, yes. What if we package ourselves in one of them: someone who can show them what we are like and how much we love them.

**Word:** But, but they suffer and die. Surely we aren't going to ask me to be that much a part of them?

**Creator:** I think they won't understand unless it happens that way.

**Spirit:** It's an awful risk; you know how dense they are. They just might not get beyond the packaging. Couldn't we just try the story idea first!

**Creator** (musing distractedly now): Imagine the scrolls that will read:

*Only begotten Son of God dies for the world!*

And so from the celestial board rooms of our imagination, we begin to see that who we know as Jesus of Nazareth is most fundamentally the public face of the ineffable, awesome, unknowable Triune God. This was a marketing campaign like no other in the history of the universe. Jesus, Word of the Trinity literally spent his life telling the stories and more importantly, showing us how much God really loves each of us.

Was it a successful marketing campaign? Well, the branding that was accomplished to assure us, even after Jesus of Nazareth's departure, has been pretty potent. Look at the Disciples on the way to Emmaus. In their darkness and confusion, they told their stories to a Stranger. *And in the breaking of the bread, they knew him.* Pretty amazing branding!

Branding most fundamentally causes recognition of the product and its services. The brand of Jesus of Nazareth still recognizable in what we call the sacraments continues to teach, to tell the story, and to lead people deeper into the mysterious relationship with God. Pretty great advertising from the Triune God!

### **The Marianist Project**

In another time of darkness and confusion like Emmaus, William Joseph Chaminade would ponder the depths of this initial marketing campaign that God was about and see in it the possibility to once again transform his world. Chaminade, weighed down somewhat by 1800 years of Christian tradition, would call this reality the *Incarnation*. What Chaminade was about was the effort to revitalize a new marketing campaign to speak to a new generation of the love, mystery and care of God.

I will leave to the theologians among you the task of fleshing out (pun intended!) the meaning of the word Incarnation. The key piece, I believe, of Chaminade's insight into Incarnation was that he understood the marketing of God to be about *relationships*: the

relationship of Jesus of Nazareth to the Triune God, the relationship of Jesus to Mary, and, if the later developments of the Jesus' ad campaign are to be believed, the relationship of each of us to one another. Insights, however, are just that, until they are translated into understandable, marketable pieces that are understood by the audiences that they are meant to influence.

If we had to capture Chaminade's incarnational insight about relationships into a few marketing phrases, they might be: ***Watch the spectacle: Look at what we do and the way we do this Christianity thing...and you might just want to join us.*** This was a marketing campaign that had to rely on very little external props and advertising. After all, there was a war going on in France, folks in distinguishable religious garb or sporting crosses would be arrested and killed, and the church in many parts of the country was collaborating in its own downfall with the government. So, Chaminade trusted that the internal formation and the passion of his communities was so very strong that folks would see a different kind of teaching, a different kind of community, a different kind of parish and the spectacle of that difference would, as they say make all the difference. Chaminade, like the Creator CEO in our imaginary celestial board room, understood the key insight that the marketer in his/her own self, was the most important marketing agent. Jesus was/is the face of God. We are the face of Jesus, for better and worse, for our time and place.

Because we are all both transformers and prisoners of the culture in which we live and love, almost every insight and charism has a shadow side. It is difficult to talk about shadows because if we see them clearly, they are no longer shadows! But I would dare say that we Marianists are discovering some pieces of our shadow that have had an appreciable influence on marketing of the Marianist project. Some of the pieces of that shadow are:

- We inherited what has been dubbed “the French School of Spirituality,” that school of spirituality in which Blessed Chaminade spent most of his life. It stresses interiority and hidden-ness in God. Spiritual writings of the day and Father Chaminade's own writings look to “transforming the inner person” in prayer and meditation so that action then is motivated or energized from this

interior relationship with God. The male religious of the family have a long history of calling ourselves (from the French of our original Rule) the “little Society offering our humble service” to the Church. While that in itself is not bad, it does cause us as a group to be suspicious of individual (or even corporate) excellence. Accolades which cause an individual to stand out from the “humble efforts” of the group make us uncomfortable. We do excellent work, but we are very uncomfortable with labels like excellent and extraordinary.

- We have inherited models of Marian devotion that emphasize Mary’s humility and docility with God’s plan. We are moving in our consciousness and prayer toward different models of Marian piety: woman of the Magnificat, woman of faith and courage and so forth. But this construction of the Marian anima over almost two hundred years, at least in the hearts of male religious in the family, has created a shadow that disdains being noticed or even being known even in what we do or accomplish.
- Finally because we have deeply inculcated Chaminade’s idea of “being a spectacle,” we have in the past spent very little time articulating who we are and what we are about. We have relied greatly on osmosis: come and be with us and you’ll understand what we are about.” Good and effective in itself, but difficult to advertise.

There are probably other points that you could make regarding the Marianist shadow, but I’ll leave that to your imagination. We do excellent and extraordinary work, we are deeply committed to Mary, and when pushed, we can articulate who we are and what we are about. We’re just difficult to manage and categorize when we’re involved in the marketing “thing.” But let’s try.

### **Marianist Branding**

I would like to share with you five of the hallmarks of what we might call *Marianist branding*:

1. Marianists act always for the sake of developing relationship.

Confident that God has acted first to establish relationship with us, Marianists seek to influence others to relationship with God. We teach in order to form relationships with students, fellow staff members, and families. We run parishes in order to develop a community of relationships in the parish, and so forth. The goal of those relationships is primarily to bring the person or group to a deeper knowledge and experience of God and to a deeper knowledge and experience of community. Marianists do not engage in work only for the sake of accomplishing that work; they work in order to relate to fellow workers. Their work is excellent and professional but excellence and professionalism are by-products of the relationships formed in that work. [eg. Our Province Communications Department, FOL and Alive magazine and this aspect of branding.]

2. Marianist Gospel relationships are always inclusive.

Blessed Chaminade cautioned his early teachers that they must always act like the Good shepherd, “never rejecting as bad what is not entirely good.” The Marianist Project is to transform society, and no class of persons is to be excluded from the possibility of relationship.

3. Mary is the archetype of all Marianist attempts to form relationship.

What God found in Mary of Nazareth, the willingness to birth Jesus into the world, is what Marianists stake their project on. All Christian relationship is to *market* Christ to our world by the example of their lives and the quality of their community. Church is most basically Marian when the community attempts to birth Jesus for our time and place. Marianist community is always Marian in its most foundational dynamics.

4. The Marianist notion of the *discipleship of equals* helps to remind the Church of alternative structures and governance models.

There are several, perhaps more than several, ways to “do Church.” Marianists focus Church through the lens of Mary and a “Marian Church” has characteristics around structure, governance, and decision-making that are different ways of “doing business.” Leadership among a community of equals again is a different but complementary modality of community to others in the broad spectrum of Church. [Communications Department: Provincial Stephen Glodek]

5. The beautiful and the artistic is an aspect of how we form community.

Perhaps because of our primary focus on the relational aspects of the Incarnation, Marianists spend energy not only on what we do, but how we do it. And the how of Marianist doing always includes the beautiful and the artistic both out of love and respect for God's created world and because art and beauty are a dim reflection of the Artist of all creation and God's care for us.

### **Conclusion**

So if the Marianist Project in the Church is to transform the world toward God in Christ community by community, then that project is always branded with relationship, inclusivity, Marian ingenuity, a discipleship of equals and a great sensitivity to beauty and art.

I leave it to the experts present among us in the workshops to develop for you techniques and styles of doing that. Thank you.

Stephen Glodek, SM