

Laity live Marianist Spirituality at St. Mary's High School

Marianists stress devotion to Mary and discipleship of equals

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The spirit of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Society of Mary, is alive and well at St. Mary's High School, where five members of the school community took their vows as Lay Marianists at a Jan. 20 Mass celebrating the feast day of the Marianists' founder.

The new Lay Marianists are teachers JoAnn Mattson, Valerie Todd and Kris Ranciglio; Brian Koenen, husband of Amie Koenen of the campus ministry department; and Lynn Barnett, St. Mary's alumna, president of the board of directors at St. Mary's and father of two alumni. They joined 14 other laypeople connected to St. Mary's dedicated to living lives of Marianist spirituality.

"Marianist spirituality was born out of the faith of Blessed Chaminade," explained Father Mitchell Doyen, president of St. Mary's High School, the all-male archdiocesan high school in South St. Louis. Blessed Chaminade founded the Marianists after the upheavals of the French Revolution. "He believed the only way to re-Christianize Europe was through communities of lay faithful devoted to Mary. This is carried through at St. Mary's. The faculty and staff model that commitment to shared faith and devotion to Mary, and this builds up the faith of the students and helps them grow into strong committed adult Christian men."

Another aspect of Marianist spirituality is the discipleship of equals, said Kevin Hacker, St. Mary's principal and a Lay Marianist. Both men and women can be Lay Marianists.

"In the Society of Mary, everyone is an equal -- priests, brothers, laypeople -- in working in the mission of Catholic education. And Marianists always use the term 'family of Mary.' When our students see us becoming Lay Marianists, they see we are members of the family of Mary and we are taking additional steps as Lay Marianists and committing ourselves even more deeply to that mission," Hacker said.

Becoming a Lay Marianist requires two years of formation and ongoing formation after taking vows, Father Doyen said. "It's a significant commitment."

St. Mary's is an archdiocesan high school in the Marianist tradition and is affiliated with the U.S. Province of the Society of Mary.

The Lay Marianist program began at St. Mary's in 2001, when Marianist Father Richard O'Shaughnessy invited the school's lay community to become part of the Marianists. Father O'Shaughnessy was the last vowed Marianist religious on the staff of St. Mary's. Now in his 90s, he lives in retirement at St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

"I think he hoped to have a legacy here of people carrying on the spirituality of the Marianists and the devotion to the Blessed Mother," said Jay McGillick, dean of religion and social studies at St. Mary's. McGillick and his wife, Patricia, joined in formation with other faculty members and wives. The first group of Lay Marianists took their vows in 2002.

"Essentially we are a small faith community that comes together once a month and prays together and studies," said McGillick. He was drawn to the program by his own devotion to Mary, his desire to be in a small faith community, his high regard for Father O'Shaughnessy and for the Marianists' discipleship of equals.

Marianist Spirituality is important to the students as well, McGillick said. "Everyone on staff here works very hard to promote the Marianist spirituality and identity. We have visitors from the Marianists who come and talk to the students, and we have students who are part of Marianist LIFE (Living in Faith Education). They meet in their own small faith community. The school spirit, in terms of charisms and characteristics of Marianist education, are pretty well articulated here," McGillick said.

Lynn Barnett, one of the five new Lay Marianists, graduated from St. Mary's in 1966. He is the first St. Mary's alumnus to become a Lay Marianist. Barnett said his early exposure to the Society of Mary was "a great experience."

"I was an only child of a poor family. My folks worked nights. My family was St. Mary's. As soon as I walked in the door, I knew I was part of something. And some of the brothers were so humble and so full of grace, and some were veterans from the war who dedicated their lives to their faith. They were great

role models. They had such an impact on me. We came in as boys, and, when we left, we were prepared to face anything the world had to give us. They taught us to be men of honor and integrity."

Barnett added, "The brothers have been such a positive influence on my life, and now maybe I can be a positive influence on somebody's life."