

SETTING THE MARIANIST TABLE: A METAPHOR FOR ALL THINGS MARIANIST

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Welcome: It is good that we are here. Peter's words to the Lord at the Transfiguration.

- **Metaphor:** from the Greek word which means to "transfer" or be a symbol of something else.
- **Charism:** from the Greek word meaning "gift" - the Church defines *charism* as a gift from the Holy Spirit, which is an experience of the Holy Spirit, giving us the grace to experience the goodness of God in ways that we can live out in our lives. In a special way, by taking Mary into our lives in this uniquely Marianist way, we are experiencing Jesus in His mother, we are experiencing committing our lives to her for her mission of bringing Jesus to others. That's what grace does, and what this gift of the charism is: so that we can live so closely in union with Jesus and Mary that we experience their love and we can then give that love to others through our individual gifts and talents. We use a lot of "words" to describe the Marianist charism: family spirit, hospitality, equality, a welcoming presence, unity and union, a singular devotion to Mary as our Mother. These are words of an experience – of grace received – which is meant to be shared with others.
- **What, then, is spirituality?** It is the particular manner in which we live out that charism. We recognize that Marianist spirituality has at its heart a particular consecration to Mary, so that devotion to her mission, in union with her, becomes part of our spirituality.
- **Why do we use the term "Marianist spirit"?** That's what people often sense when they first encounter a Marianist group: it's the spirit that emanates from them, it's an ambience that feels welcoming and inclusive, it's an atmosphere of congeniality, a welcoming presence, a way in which family and friends interact. [sidebar: for those of you MLP's who recently attended the wonderful Tecaboca

celebration, you can recall how that “spirit” pervaded the entire evening. Old friends, new friends; it was palpable].

We can say that “spirit” brings to the atmosphere what we feel because it is our Marianist spirituality being lived out.

- **What’s in a name?** Names are a symbol of a reality and are important clues to our identity: for example, Society of Mary, Marianists, Marianist Sisters, lay Marianists, Marianist Educational Associates, the Marianist Leadership Program, St. Mary’s University, etc. Our names have meaning, and we express that reality by the way in which we live.
- So what is **significant about the setting of a table?** Around a table people gather to be nurtured, to celebrate each other as family and friends, to share in spirited conversations, to feel the special bond of unity as brothers and sisters in the Family of God.

Here are some of the symbols we will use as we set the table – they are metaphors for who we say we are.

- **Notice the round table** – no head place, all are welcome, all share as equals. Next time you sit at a square or rectangle table, in class, in a meeting, in the café, when you join friends for pizza, mentally change it into a round table. See how this will change your interaction with others. Jesus, at His Last Supper, reclined with his followers around a table – the word reclined implies a sense of intimate friendship. The roundness of this table implies that each voice has equal importance; whatever each person brings to the table conversation is respected and honored. The corners of a square table don’t exist as barriers or separators.

Marianist spirituality is really so much about balance and transformation – just think about how a simple mental act of seeing a round table could make a huge difference in meetings! It could have a transforming effect!

Thinking about the roundness of a table is also a good way to remember to include everyone in a shared conversation – those inclined to dominate a conversation will become more sensitive to that tendency; those who feel shy will be encouraged to speak what is on their minds in the atmosphere of acceptance. Why? Because when you look around a round table, you see no corners, no obstacles, no symbols of separation or division. That’s a very Marianist way of thinking about the value of each person.

- **Now comes the table cloth** – it covers the utilitarian nature of the table, it dresses it up for a special occasion, it lightens and brightens the mood of the meal. I like to think, as metaphor, that the table cloth covers up the messiness of the daily use of the table, and lets us step back a little and see the tablecloth (or placemats) as preparing for a celebration. It sets a new mood as people approach the table for the meal. That’s very Marianist.

- **Placing flowers in the center of the table.** Flowers are a visible sign of God’s creative genius. Flowers are a traditional sign of welcome and hospitality. How often we take flowers to give to another person either in a special celebration or remembrance, or as a welcoming offer of beauty. Each time we greet one another, we are “placing flowers” at the center of that moment – and that is very Marianist. The wedding feast at Cana is a family celebration involving meal, wine, sharing, very central to our Marianist charism. I like to think that Mary brought a freshly picked bouquet of wild flowers for the bride’s table on that occasion. Next time you bring flowers to your Mom or sweetheart or loved one, think about how you are honoring the center of that special person’s moment.

- **Now come the candles.** Candles bring warmth, light, a special ambience to the event. The lighting of candles has a very Scriptural basis: an ancient tradition from our Judaic roots, carried forward as we light the altar candles before Mass or at other spiritual events. Almost every culture uses candles, and they translate into a variety of symbols for human gatherings. We use candles to remember those loved ones who are no longer with us. We use candles to comfort our spirits in moments of tragedy and sadness. We use candles when the electricity goes off!

Candles often cause something else to happen: have you ever noticed how the act of lighting candles can cause a momentary pause in conversation, or bring quietness to the event? When we light candles on a birthday or anniversary cake, suddenly all eyes are on the candles and we anticipate the singing to follow. This is a reminder of our need to have moments of quietness, to ponder, to reflect, to pray, to renew our faith. That’s a very Marianist thing to do.

- **Setting the table with the tools/utensils needed for the meal.** Marianists model family spirit and community in a unity of persons gathered together. The meal needs tools – knives, forks, spoons. As members of a community, we recognize that people bring a wide variety of skills, talents, ideas, ways of achieving goals and objectives. Each tool or utensil has a specific role, but none is more important than the other. The knife is as essential as the fork or spoon. Try

eating a creamy soup with your fork, or eating peas with your knife! Trying cutting brisket with your spoon! The tools or utensils make smoother the goal of the meal: to be nourished and nurtured. The tools and skills we bring to any human endeavor are designed to be interactive, to make the parts smooth out and facilitate the intended outcome. That's why the Marianist way is to value and honor everyone's contributions. It's why Blessed Chaminade wanted "unity without confusion."

Note: We've set out the knives and forks, all matching. However, we've set out four different patterns for the spoons; they don't match the set or each other. The reason? That's how we are as a people who welcome others to our table, each one unique, different, not matched sets. Yet see how beautifully these utensils blend together. They actually add variety. And, they get the job done!

- **Importance of the napkin.** Whether it be cloth or paper, the napkin helps us keep the messiness of life where it belongs, to wipe up spills, gather up fragments, clean up after self and others. The napkin serves as metaphor for how to serve others in a variety of ways. It's a metaphor for servant-leadership, which is basic to Marianist life. It's the reality of learning to be other-centered rather than self-centered. When we sit at table, it's usually the first thing we reach for.
- **I'm getting hungry – bring on the plates!** Dishes are the receptacles for the food we are about to receive. Dinner plates, salad bowls, serving bowls, platters, dessert dishes, cups and saucers: whatever table setting we use, the dishes remind us of the good things to come, they get our saliva juices rolling, they anticipate some really delicious food items. So often conversations begin around a particular food item. Dishes serve as a bridge to that camaraderie that happens at the table. A plate with a single slice of pizza next to a mug of cold beer is as important to human interaction as the most elegant meal at a luxury hotel. With dishes, we are served nutrition for our bodies as well as for our spirits. Next time a warm apple pie is served at your table, notice the smiles as forks dig into that luscious crust and fruit.

The hospitality around a meal and at table is so much a Marianist happening! Think about that next time the Brothers host an ice-cream party at Casa Maria Marianist Community, you are invited for chips & salsa at a Marianist event, you eat lunch with the brothers in the Meet the Brothers program.

Sometimes dishes get broken. Sometimes life gets messy and complicated. Sometimes that empty soup bowl reminds us of the many people around our world, in our own country, who don't have food to put on their dishes. Think about the kitchen cabinets that hold stacks of dishes, but the pantry and the refrigerator are near empty.

There is a very special "dish" that we see whenever we attend celebration of the Eucharist, Mass. When the priest holds up the paten before the Consecration, that paten, that dish, is a bridge that unites us to our Heavenly Father. On it is placed the food that will become the very Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus. Celebrating the Eucharist, that is very Marianist! We come together around the table of the Lord, we set the table with altar cloth, sometimes flowers, we light the candles, we put out the dishes (the paten and chalice), and the napkin (the purificator) is placed next to the chalice. It is the heavenly banquet, the meal we share with our God and with each other. It is the Supper of the Lamb.

- **Water glasses, pitcher of water, perhaps the wine glasses are set out.** What is the mystery of water? It has no color, shape, flavor, yet it is as essential to life as air and food. We use water to bathe and cleanse, to quench our thirst, to mix with other substances, to cook and bake, to keep flowers fresh, to water lawns and gardens. We pray for the life-giving rains in times of dryness. We like to "dance in the rain" when they finally come. Jesus spoke of the "living waters" He brings that truly quench our thirst. He asked the Canaanite woman at the well for a cup of water, having traveled far, but he used it as a means of beginning a conversation with her, of reaching out to her.

Our water glasses remind us of the individual gifts that those joining us at table bring with them. You can't wrap your fingers around the water itself, but you can wrap your fingers around the water glass, as a symbol of how you grab hold of that other person's specialness – and celebrate it with the raising of your glass. We use glasses, whether of water or wine or other beverage, raised in unison, to celebrate, to honor, to express our admiration. Marianists often use the raising of a glass and song to mark a special occasion at table. Ask a Marianist about a special song they sing at a celebratory event!

- Wine has long been an integral part of any meal. Wine is so full of symbolism that Marianists constantly remind us about the grape vines, the harvesting of grapes, the making of wine, the celebration of wine around special occasions, the joy of camaraderie and fellowship. Ask any Marianist about their celebration of "*Gaudeamus*" (*let us rejoice*) which is a celebration of life and unity.

Jesus often used the symbol of the grape vine as how we are to live as brothers and sisters in the Lord, for “he is the vine, we are the branches” and we must go out and bear good fruit. Wine is the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands, as we hear each time the chalice is elevated at Mass.

So, next time you enjoy or pour a glass of wine, think about its symbolism. And think about the way wine figures into the most Marianist event recalled: the wedding feast at Cana. Mary, the good Jewish and forward-thinking woman, sees the challenge of the evening: the wine has run out. She very simply tells her Son what she has noticed. Then she very simply tells the wine stewards what to do: **Do whatever He tells you.** Jesus comes over, the earthenware jars are filled with water, and the miracle at Cana happens. Mary’s five little words – see how they become the challenge to us today. As members of the Marianist family, that is what we are called to be and to do – to follow the Lord of our lives.

- **Now the bread.** Whenever we pray the Our Father, we ask “give us this day our daily bread.” Bread is a sustainer of life, it is a symbol of our unity, of our membership in God’s family. Bread is essential in many good meals. Even our beloved pizza has bread as its foundation. We receive and share. Jesus chose bread as the means by which we would be fed with his Body and Blood. It is the living bread as essential as the living waters. A loaf of bread is meant to be shared, by its very nature. Often it is sliced, or in the form of rolls, ready to be passed around those at our table. It’s held in a receptacle (a platter, dish, or basket) that is symbolic of how we are to offer and share. We reach out to pass or to receive the bread. Our hands and hearts are not kept at our sides. Passing the bread is an active form of speech.
- **Salt and pepper, spices to ratchet up our enjoyment.** Spices bring out the flavors in food. Jesus told us we are to be the salt of the earth. We are to bring flavor to the life of those with whom we interact. We are to celebrate the way in which others bring out the flavors of the human person in the setting of a community, of family spirit, of any shared project.

There is something else that spices bring to the table: many times people, often students and visitors, sense something warm and wonderful about our Marianist gatherings. They don’t always know from the beginning that it is our association with Mary that puts the spices in our lives. They first sense hospitality, a family spirit, a sense of welcome. It’s when the light bulb in their mind lights up that they realize by our very name, Marianists – for Mary – being Marian-centered – that is what we do for each other. We bring a special flavor, we bring out a special flavor from others, and

share it abundantly. The salt and pepper shakers, the cinnamon and cloves, the salsa spices, get passed around the table very quickly. That is exactly what Mary did with her life: she always brought others to her Son, Jesus. She held out her newborn to the shepherds and the Magi. She kept him safe in exile in Egypt. She brought him to the temple to be consecrated to God. She helped him grow in wisdom and grace. She joined, quietly, in his mission of proclaiming the kingdom. She brought the waiters at Cana to her Son for instructions. She was there with his apostles and disciples. She was “the first disciple.” She accepted us as her sons and daughters at the foot of the cross and again at Pentecost. She is the very heart of our Marianist world.

- **So, what’s with the dinner bell?** Many times, a dinner bell chimes to alert people that the meal is ready. Sometimes the dinner bell is someone’s voice calling out, “come and get it.” The bell is a summons to the feast. Notice at Mass, we frequently have bells ringing to announce the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, and often bells are rung at the moment of the Consecration, summoning us to be aware of the coming of the Lord under the form of bread and wine. We are invited to come to the feast, the Supper of the Lamb.

Now that the table is set, what comes next? We have set the table, we have offered a blessing prayer, we have shared the meal, we have broken bread together, we have raised our glasses in celebration.

Now there are other tables to be set. Each time we come together, let us set the table – the Marianist table – whether it be with our family, special friends, in the pizza parlor or at the Mexican restaurant, enjoying a cold beer with our study buddies, enjoying popcorn at the movies, having a late-night snack.

Keep the table round in your mind

Remember the table cloth that covers and invites

Don’t forget the flowers of remembrance and celebration

*Get those candles glowing – be bearers of the light in the darkness-
nourish your dreams and the dreams of others*

If you break a dish, grab another one

Use your tools to be of service to others

Use your napkin to clean up the messiness of the moment

Lift your glasses high with joy and respectfulness

Spice up the life of others

Love one another

Go out and set other tables.

A final thought: As Christians and Marianists, we are called by our baptismal consecration and by our Marianist involvement to participate in the love of Jesus for His mother Mary. She is our mother who sends out an invitation to her children to “do whatever He tells you,” inviting us to participate in her mission of bringing Jesus to others. Blessed William Joseph Chaminade reminds us that “we are all missionaries” called to participate in Mary’s special mission. My Marianist friend in California, Bro. John Samaha, S.M., likes to remind us that “We are the lengthened shadow of Chaminade.” Let us live this in all the tables we set!