

The Establishment of the Society of Mary (Marianists) in the United States of America: 1849-1862

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I. Introduction

The Society of Mary (Marianists), founded in Bordeaux, France, by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, set down roots in the United States in the final year of the Founder's life. Father Leo Meyer, an Alsatian Marianist formed by Blessed Chaminade himself, was the missionary chosen by the Superior General to implant the Society in American soil. This essay treats the establishment of the Society of Mary in the United States from 1849 to 1862, Meyer's years in America. It draws from the work of Father John G. Graves, S.M., author of *Father Leo Meyer's 13 Years at Nazareth* as well as Christopher J. Kauffman's *Education and Transformation: Marianist Ministries in America since 1849*. While other ministries are mentioned, special attention is paid to "Nazareth," the piece of land which would become the University of Dayton. An attempt is made to highlight how themes treated in the course such as immigration, anti-Catholicism, and lay trusteeism are present in this particular history. The paper is also written with the Marianist Family in mind, in hopes that it may serve as a short introduction for those interested in our American beginnings.

The first three sections of the paper are introductory and aim to provide the reader with an understanding of the Society of Mary, the vocation of Father Leo Meyer, and the call to serve in the United States. The subsequent three sections, which constitute the core of the essay, track the implantation (1849-1854) and development (1856-1862) of the Society of Mary in the United States and explain why the year 1855 was a decisive turning point between the two periods. The final section is more exploratory and personal in nature and represents the author's reflection on this history to glean insights for the present and future.

II. Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Society of Mary

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was born in Perigueux, France, in 1761 into a devout Catholic family. His life would be marked by faith, a missionary devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and continual, courageous adaptation to dramatic and threatening circumstances. He was already a priest working in the tranquil seminary setting of Mussidan when the French Revolution

sent shockwaves throughout the country. After refusing to take the oath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1791, he donned disguises in order to bring Christ to the faithful of Bordeaux through the Sacraments. In 1797, because of a bureaucratic mistake, Chaminade was forced to leave France and so emigrated, “to Zaragoza, Spain, where he lived for three years.”¹ Much of this time was spent praying before Our Lady of the Pillar, before whom he received an inspiration concerning the renewal of the Church in France.

When he returned to France, Chaminade received the title of Missionary Apostolic and quickly gathered people from various social classes and walks of life to form a Marian sodality. Their intention was to live Christianity with the same apostolic boldness of the early Church. “Contacts between the United States and the first Marianists in France began as early as 1816.”² Louis William DuBourg, the bishop of New Orleans and a classmate of Chaminade, came to Bordeaux and attended a sodality meeting in 1816. That same year, as a spiritual guide of the soon to be beatified Venerable Adele de Batz de Trenquelleon, Chaminade collaborated in the creation of a women’s religious congregation, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. A year later in 1817, he founded the Society of Mary. Chaminade longed for the Marianist religious family—comprised of laity, sisters, brothers, and priests—to become a spectacle of a people of saints and an evangelizing leaven in France and beyond.

The Society of Mary is distinctive because of its “mixed composition” of brothers and priests who live and labor together as equals. Within the Marianist Family, it is common to speak of the brothers and priests together as “the brothers,” which the reader will recognize below. In addition to the evangelical counsels, members profess a fourth vow of stability to seal a permanent alliance with

¹ “Bl. William Joseph Chaminade,” The Holy See, accessed May 9, 2018.

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20000903_bl-chaminade_en.html.

² Christopher J. Kauffman, *Education and Transformation: Marianist Ministries in America since 1849* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 47.

Mary. They promise to be her sons and missionaries and to form in faith “a multitude of brothers for her first-born Son.”³ After its foundation, the Society of Mary quickly expanded in France and established itself in Switzerland in 1839. In the Society’s original Constitutions, written by Chaminade with the help of others, it reads, “*quodcumque dixerit, facite*. Such is its maxim; the Society follows this as if the order that Mary gave to the servants at Cana were addressed by the august Virgin to each of its members, ‘Do all that He will tell you.’”⁴ Open to all means of evangelization, in addition to work with the sodality, the brothers and priests initiated educational ministries.

Blessed Chaminade endeavoured to shape France’s future by opening a teacher-training school at Saint Remy, though these efforts were suppressed after the 1830 Revolution. The final years of Chaminade’s life were filled with severe trials, including distrust, exclusion, rejection and mistreatment from his own spiritual sons. One of these men, Father Georges Caillet, helped orchestrate Chaminade’s removal from power and replaced him as Superior General in 1845. Chaminade died on January 22, 1850. The mission of the Society which he founded could be distilled to three words: witness, form and transform. Its members, as sons and missionaries of Mary, are to bear witness to Christ through Gospel life in community, to educate and form apostles, and to contribute to a transformation of society so that the world may reflect God’s kingdom.

III. Father Leo Meyer, S.M.

Born in Alsace in 1800, Leo Meyer became one of Chaminade’s “favorite disciples.”⁵ His parents harbored priests during the Revolution, perhaps planting the seeds of his priestly vocation.

³ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Rule of Life” (Religious constitutions, Rome, 1983), article 6.

⁴ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Constitutions of the Society of Mary” (Religious constitutions, Bordeaux, 1839), article 6.

⁵ John G. Graves, *Father Leo Meyer’s 13 Years at Nazareth* (Dayton, Ohio: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 1997), 1.

After entrance into the seminary, propelled by youthful zeal or an indistinct inkling for his later call to religious life, Meyer abandoned the seminary to join a Trappist monastery without telling his parents. Eventually he returned to the seminary and in 1823 was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Strasbourg. Meyer maintained a reverence for Trappist life, was affiliated with some monasteries and later as Provincial superior in the United States seemed at times to operate with a Trappist ideal of religious life in mind. On June 2, 1827, while serving as hospital chaplain in Strasbourg, a local person regarded as a mystic approached him and said, “I came to carry out a commission on the part of the Blessed Virgin. She told me that you should remain faithful to her and that in two months you shall be relieved of your position as chaplain so that you can follow your vocation. Finally she [i.e., the Blessed Virgin] told me that you will be obliged to cross the seas.”⁶

Meyer intended to join the Society of Jesus, but on the way to their novitiate in Fribourg, Switzerland, he spent some time at a Marianist community in Saint Remy where his brother was a student. He was so impressed by the religious life he witnessed there that he joined the Society of Mary instead and completed his novitiate in Bordeaux where he forged a close relationship with the Founder. In 1833, Meyer became novice master at Courtefontaine and ten years later was named novice master at Ebersmunster, which at that time was the largest establishment in the Society of Mary. Given that he was entrusted with these important responsibilities and fulfilled them successfully, Meyer must have manifested a certain zeal and talents for mission.

One of the most interesting moments in Meyer’s vocational journey took place on July 11, 1848. It proved to be a spiritual touchstone for him, a grace to which he would return when faced with obstacles on the other side of the Atlantic. This experience was his encounter with Elizabeth Eppinger (1814-1867), the “mystic of Niederbronn,” known today as Venerable Mother Alphonse Marie. She had predicted Meyer’s arrival thirty minutes in advance, foretold the revolution of 1848

⁶ Kauffman, 49.

and the imminent death of Blessed Chaminade, admonished Meyer for neglecting his meditations on the Lord's Passion, and intuited that divisions in the Society of Mary stemmed from the Founder's predilection for one of his disciples.

Meyer recounts their conversation, "She began speaking of the immense and extraordinary designs that God had for the Society of Mary, which was destined to contribute to the conversion of a great number of souls—that not only did the Lord consent to a mission in America, but also to other countries of the world."⁷ She referred to the conflict then unfolding between Chaminade and Father Caillet stating that, "the Lord wishes that the Superior General [i.e., Caillet] obey him, and he ought to take care, moreover [not] to treat him harshly as he has done."⁸ Meyer, as a devoted spiritual son of the Founder, sided with Chaminade in this conflict and some wonder whether his very devotion to the Founder later motivated Caillet to send him away to the United States. Nevertheless, if Meyer's account is reliable, then it is remarkable for two reasons. First of all, there would have been no way for Eppinger to know much of what she shared. Secondly, the difficult final years of Chaminade's life and the powerplays of Caillet would not be sufficiently understood even by Marianists until the twentieth century. Eppinger's sanctity has since been confirmed. On January 26, 2018, Pope Francis approved a miracle which paves the way for her beatification.⁹ Moved deeply by his encounter, Meyer wrote to the General Administration, "As a result of this, I am begging you to send me to America, as Moses of old sent Joshua and Caleb into the Promised Land to investigate the country."¹⁰ He was ready for mission in America.

IV. The Call to the United States

⁷ Kauffman, 50.

⁸ Kauffman, 50.

⁹ "Current State of the Beatification Process," Divine Redeemer Sisters, accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.divine-redeemer-sisters.org/who-we-are/mother-alphonse-marie/current-state-of-the-beatification-process>.

¹⁰ Graves, 12.

Because of the need for brothers in France, the nascent Society was unable to respond positively to the first three requests for Marianists in the United States. The first came in 1839 from Reverend Richard-Bole in Arkansas, the second in 1846 from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and the third in 1848 from Bishop John Timon of Buffalo, New York. The definitive call came in 1848 from Cincinnati.

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States is inextricably linked with the reality of immigration. Between 1820 and 1920, thirty-four million immigrants came to the United States, forty percent of which were Catholics.¹¹ Marianist beginnings in America are connected specifically with service to German immigrants. Many Germans, with larger families and some financial resources, settled in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee, forming the “German triangle.” In 1834, Holy Trinity, the first German parish in the diocese, was established in Cincinnati. During a trip to Europe in 1848, Holy Trinity’s pastor Father Clement Hammer became acquainted with Marianists in Alsace and enlisted the help of Father Francis X. Weninger, S.J. to recruit brothers to teach at his parochial school.¹² On April 28, 1849, the Society of Mary answered this call when Caillet, then Superior General, sent a letter of obedience to Father Meyer. In it he wrote:

Everything leads us to believe that the Lord is calling the Society of Mary to spread through the New World the benefits of Christian education and the knowledge and love of Mary.... It is upon you, my dear son, that I cast my eyes for the important post of superior. Your devotedness to the Society of Mary, the zeal with which you offered yourself for a mission which will not be lacking in privations and trials—everything leads me to hope that I shall not have to regret the confidence that I place in you for the future of the Society in the New World, since we must lay a firm foundation for our work there and prepare hearts full of filial piety to Mary.¹³

¹¹ John P. Cush, “Immigration” PowerPoint (material prepared and presented for the TO1004 course at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Spring 2018).

¹² Kauffman, 53.

¹³ Graves, 13.

This letter represents the conception of Marianist life in the United States.

A month later at the age of forty-nine, Meyer sailed from Le Havre with Brother Charles Schultz. They spent almost forty days at sea and arrived in New York on a most appropriate date to begin ministry in America: July 4. They stayed with the Redemptorists on East Third Street at what today is Holy Redeemer before departing for Cincinnati where they arrived on July 16. Meyer, Schultz and the first Marianists who would soon join them in the United States were all Alsatians. They were therefore fluent in both French and German but did not necessarily know English well or at all. Crossing the Atlantic, they carried with them not only luggage but also religious zeal, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a particular understanding of religious life and education, and a desire to serve German immigrants to fortify their faith in the so-called New World.

V. Planting the Seed of the Society of Mary in American Soil: 1849-1854

From 1849 to 1854, Meyer and the first Marianist missionaries in the United States planted the seed of the Society of Mary in American soil. During this time, a new cohort of brothers arrived from France almost every year, the Founder passed away in Bordeaux, “Nazareth” was purchased in Dayton, a mission commenced in San Antonio, the first Americans joined the Society and the first Marianist was laid to rest in American soil.¹⁴ It was also a time marked by tensions since Meyer’s leadership style was not universally acclaimed.

Before continuing the narration of this particular Marianist story, it is important to consider the broader context in which it unfolded. The experience of American Catholics in the United States was affected by factors such as lay trusteeism, education, and anti-Catholicism. According to Timothy Cardinal Dolan, “Simply put, *lay trusteeism* is the claim by lay officials in a parish that they

¹⁴ Thomas Mooney, John Brueck, and Edward Gorman, *American Memoirs* (Dayton, Ohio: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 1999), 73. Brother Louis Curiec, who before joining the Society of Mary had been a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, died on November 21, 1854 in Cincinnati.

have the right to appoint and fire their pastors.”¹⁵ This grew out of a congregationalist ecclesiology and resonated naturally with American democracy, though it conflicts with Roman Catholic ecclesial structures and practices.¹⁶ While the Marianists were not greatly affected by lay trusteeism, later we will see its traces in connection with the acceptance of a mission in rural Ohio. A second dimension of the context to be considered is that of education. It had been a priority of John Carroll, America’s first bishop, to establish a system of Catholic education since he believed, “that society was at its best when it took the education of its children and youth with the utmost seriousness, and that the church was at its best when it was an ally in this effort.”¹⁷ This became an even more urgent priority for the Church in the United States when, under the influence of Horace Mann and others, the character of public education became decidedly Protestant. James Hennesey states that, “Early 19th-century primary education had strong religious overtones. Bible-reading was standard, catechism instruction was not unknown.”¹⁸ In an environment highly influenced by Protestantism, Catholics sought to educate their children in a faith, which some thought was alien to America. When Archbishop Kendrick of Philadelphia asked that the King James Bible not be used for instruction in public schools, anti-Catholic sentiment reached a fever pitch and riots broke out in the city. Thirty Catholic homes were destroyed, eighty Catholics lost their lives, and the court considered the riots to be justified since the Archbishop had overstepped the boundaries of his authority.¹⁹ This is but one

¹⁵ Timothy Dolan, “Right From the Start: John Carroll, Our First Bishop,” Archdiocese of Milwaukee, April 22, 2008, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8269>.

¹⁶ John P. Cush, Lecture on March 13, 2018 (material prepared and presented for the TO1004 course at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Spring 2018).

¹⁷ Dolan.

¹⁸ James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 107.

¹⁹ John P. Cush, Lecture on April 10, 2018 (material prepared and presented for the TO1004 course at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Spring 2018).

example of the specter of anti-Catholicism. This prejudice has deep roots in the United States and the Jesuit Mark Massa says that anti-Catholicism, “was labeled the ‘deepest bias in the history of the American people’ by political and cultural historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr; others have termed it the ‘anti-Semitism of the intellectuals’ and ‘the last acceptable prejudice in the United States.’”²⁰ Anti-Catholicism pervaded the context into which the first Marianists entered, attempting to strengthen the faith of German immigrants through high quality Catholic education.

When Meyer and Schultz arrived in Cincinnati in 1849, the city was in the midst of a cholera epidemic. Between two and three hundred people were succumbing to the disease daily and funerals were held outdoors to prevent the spread of the disease. Seeking to be of assistance, Meyer presented himself to Bishop John Baptist Purcell who “almost immediately assigned him to assist Henry Juncker, pastor of Emmanuel Church in Dayton sixty miles northeast of Cincinnati.”²¹ At that time, Dayton was a city with about sixteen thousand inhabitants.²² There was a much more modest concentration of Catholics in Dayton than in Cincinnati. By the end of July, Meyer met a certain Presbyterian named John Stuart, a descendant of the royal family of Stuarts, who owned a plot of land just outside of the city, which he called Dewberry Farm. This unlikely “ecumenical” encounter would later prove to be decisive.

Perceiving both need and possibility, Meyer wrote to the General Administration in Europe in 1849 requesting more brothers. On October 16, Brothers Andrew Edel, John Stintzi, Maximin Zehler and Damian Litz left Le Havre on the ship *Alfred* bound for New York. The journey was difficult. Seasickness, spoiled food, and dysentery rendered a long voyage even longer. Litz describes the journey, “We made our spiritual exercises in common, just as in the convent chapel.

²⁰ Mark S. Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 7.

²¹ Kauffman, 56.

²² Graves, 17.

That dear old ship! We were all homesick after it. There is a piece of moral in this. We had suffered intensely on *Alfred*; hence, we loved *Alfred*. Those also hold their order or congregation most dear that have suffered most for it, as Jesus loves us in proportion to his sufferings for us.”²³ This “implantation” period was indeed marked by suffering. The brothers arrived in New York on November 27 and Cincinnati on December 3. They began teaching in the parochial school at Holy Trinity in Cincinnati, the first Marianist educational ministry in America.

The year 1850 would see the death of Blessed Chaminade and the birth of what would become the University of Dayton. On January 23, 1850, Meyer said to the brothers, “Last night, while in bed, but just as much awake as I now am, I saw Reverend Father Chaminade, who looked at me smilingly and then disappeared.”²⁴ Though word of his death did not reach the brothers in America until many weeks later, back in Bordeaux, Chaminade had died on January 22, the very night Meyer had seen a vision of him. On March 19, the feast of Saint Joseph, Meyer purchased Dewberry Farm. “He took a little medal of Saint Joseph, used it as a stamp on the seal, and then offered it to Mr. Stuart as a pledge, saying: ‘I have no money now, but Saint Joseph will pay.’ Mr. Stuart smilingly accepted the medal.”²⁵ Dewberry Farm became the property of the Society of Mary and its name was changed to Nazareth in honor of the Holy Family. While in hindsight this purchase can be seen as providential for the Society and its future mission, it was also quite problematic. Though he understood things differently, Meyer had not received permission from the General Administration to make this purchase. Additionally, the debt incurred would loom large in his mind and affect his decisions as superior. On July 1, 1850, a school named “Saint Mary’s School for Boys” was opened at Nazareth with Brother Zehler in charge of the school and its twelve pupils, among whom was Lawrence Butz, a future Mayor of Dayton. In order to increase enrollment for the next academic

²³ Graves, 27.

²⁴ Graves, 48.

²⁵ Graves, 40.

year, a prospectus was drawn up for the diocesan newspaper describing the course of instruction and fees. It included a clause added by Bishop Purcell: “and none but Catholic boys are admitted.”²⁶ Without benches or desks for students, the birth of this institution was simple and humble. In addition to the school, the brothers worked the farmland and Nazareth became somewhat of a monastic settlement.

This initial period, and in fact all of Father Meyer’s thirteen years in America, were filled with tensions related to his leadership. Perhaps the first to complain about him was Father Juncker, the pastor of Emmanuel Parish in Dayton. Already by 1851, when Archbishop Purcell travelled to Europe to receive the pallium, he paid a visit to the Marianist Superior General in Bordeaux asking for Meyer’s removal.²⁷ A year later, the Superior General wrote to Purcell stating his intentions to substitute Meyer with another priest of the Society. What was the source of tension? According to Meyer, diocesan clergy were jealous of the way that the faithful responded positively to him and to the brothers. Archbishop Purcell on the other hand remarked how Meyer, on several different occasions interfered in matters that did not concern him. Meyer’s strong character seems to have contributed to these tensions. In 1852, the Marianists began work in San Antonio, Texas, under Bishop Odin. During his entire time as superior in the United States, Meyer never once visited this establishment though he was responsible for it. The distance, Meyer’s personal practice of poverty and later the reality of the Civil War were all obstacles to such a visitation. Though the San Antonio mission had its share of difficulties, there was considerably less tension between the Society and the local clergy and bishop there than there was in Dayton. Later, we will see how Meyer’s particular ideas about religious life and the United States would create friction within the Marianist community.

²⁶ Graves, 53.

²⁷ Graves, 65.

There are two other items worth mentioning, which situate this Marianist history within the larger context of Catholic history in the United States: a connection with Father Stephen Badin and a trace of lay trusteeism. In order to pay off the debt sustained by the purchase of Nazareth, Meyer considered selling part of the property. It was Father Badin who advised him not to do so. Badin, the first Catholic priest to be ordained in the United States, had served in various mission posts for almost sixty years and acquired considerable practical wisdom. By 1853, he was living in Cincinnati at the archbishop's residence, and often visited Dayton to stay with the brothers. According to Graves, "he found the company of Father Meyer most congenial and would gladly have spent his remaining years in this little 'French colony,'" if it had been possible.²⁸ Meyer took the advice of Fr. Badin, who passed away later that year. Like Badin who had been involved in so many rural missions, Meyer and the first Marianists also serviced such places. The faithful of one such community outside of Dayton, Saint Remy, took the initiative to approach Father Meyer, offering to purchase land so that a parish and school could be established by the Society of Mary. Protestantism had influenced the Catholic Church in the U.S. and, wary of the threat of trusteeism, Archbishop Purcell wrote, "I approve of the acceptance of this property by the venerable Society of Mary, under whose exclusive direction—and not that of any lay person—the school, church, and congregation shall be placed."²⁹ After receiving this approval, Meyer wrote to the Superior General and tried to explain the particularities of the American context, referring to both the abuses of lay trusteeism and the First Plenary Council of Baltimore of 1852. He wrote that the clause reflects, "the dispositions and rulings drawn up by the archbishop and bishops assembled in Council. The American laws, by which some unscrupulous persons have managed to profit, have already caused them plenty of trouble. Laymen have succeeded in appropriating for themselves churches, cemeteries, etc."³⁰

²⁸ Graves, 90.

²⁹ Graves, 99.

³⁰ Graves, 100.

During this initial period of Marianist service in the United States, one sees the insertion of a group of Alsatians into a distinctive American context. During these first six years, much groundwork had been laid. The next year, 1855, would prove to be significant for the community and its mission.

VI. Turning Point: 1855

Though the previous section and the one that follows chronicle six and seven years respectively, this section is dedicated to a single year—1855—because it represents a turning point. While there was some growth, it was most of all characterized by various trials. Concerning growth, it was in 1855 when the American Province was formed and Father Meyer became Provincial superior. Prior to this, the Marianist communities in the United States had been dependent upon the Province of Alsace. Furthermore, a community and educational ministry were established in Louisville, Ohio, and Meyer corresponded with Bishop Henni of Milwaukee about the possibility of opening a teacher-training school in Milwaukee. With the exception of these positive developments, 1855 was a trying time.

The United States experienced an economic depression during the years 1854-1855. As is often the case, economic strain fanned into flame the embers of pre-existent prejudices. The secret society of the “Order of the Star-Spangled Banner” or the “American Party,” commonly referred to as the “Know-Nothings” sought scapegoats and pointed the finger of blame at immigrants and specifically Catholics for religious, economic, racial, political and social reasons.³¹ Like earlier Nativists, Know-Nothings were uncomfortable with the influx of immigrants into the United States and sought to exclude them from full participation in civic life. Meyer describes his experience of the economic hardship and a Know-Nothing riot in Cincinnati, “The times are bad here in every way. There is no work; commerce is at a standstill; living is high, and people are in the air politically. A crisis is feared at the next presidential election. Last week while I was in Cincinnati people rioted, some were

³¹ John P. Cush, “Anti-Catholicism” PowerPoint presentation (material prepared and presented for the TO1004 course at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Spring 2018).

killed and others were wounded, and there was question only of electing a mayor for the city.”³² A Know-Nothing mob had destroyed ballot boxes in two German neighborhoods. Within this broader context of economic strife, the brothers also carried their particular burden of the Nazareth debt. The sum owed to Mr. Stuart haunted Meyer who was late in making payments. From the correspondence between the United States and Europe, one gathers that because the General Administration was displeased with Meyer’s hasty purchase, they refused to provide financial assistance to pay off the debt. According to them, Meyer was responsible for solving the problem that he had created.

Illnesses and tensions also plagued the budding Province. Father Meyer’s health had been declining since 1851 and, “The health of the entire community also suffered, especially in the summer of the year 1855.”³³ Dissension arose over Meyer’s authority. Graves argues that, “the point at issue was the regulation of the American communities. They were ruled exactly like the schools and farms of the Old Country.”³⁴ Meyer aimed at the implantation of the Society of Mary in the United States, but did not have a sense of inculturation, which was not yet a common notion. Wary of American materialism and religious pluralism in a predominantly Protestant country, he was convinced that a European model of religious life was needed to protect and preserve his religious brothers from these dangers. The witness of Trappist poverty and piety in Europe had made a strong impact on Meyer. In his file at the archives of the Society of Mary in Rome, one can find multiple documents affirming his affiliation with these monasteries. The desire of other brothers to “Americanize” seemed to him incompatible with an authentic religious witness. Brother Litz wrote to the General Administration complaining of how the boarding school at Nazareth was run, mentioning disorder and poor food. He wrote of Father Meyer, “I love my superior. He is amiable with regard to his person; I would certainly be sad to be separated from him, and yet I am bound to

³² Graves, 135.

³³ Graves, 147.

³⁴ Graves, 149.

say that, in my opinion, he ruins our wonderful mission. If the work must prosper, he is not the man to bring this about.”³⁵ Litz was not alone in this strong criticism. Yet all of these problems were soon, “reduced to whispers in the face of a great calamity, which visited and almost overwhelmed Nazareth at the very end of the year 1855.”³⁶ Fiery words were soon to be overshadowed by an actual fire.

On the night of December 26 and 27, a blaze completely destroyed the home of the students and Marianists at Nazareth. In the midst of the tragedy, as the Stuart mansion burned, Meyer oddly repeated, “*Deo gratias.*” He considered the edifice too fine a dwelling for poor religious. Brother Litz awoke all the students, led them in prayer, and tranquilly led them out. Thankfully, no one was injured and they were able to salvage many items such as bedding, beds, and items from the chapel and classrooms. Outside, eighteen inches of snow covered the ground and the temperature was below zero. No fire engines came in time and the buildings burned to the ground. It is interesting to note that when reporting this event, the local Dayton newspaper stated that the rumors, “that either of the engine companies declined going to the fire because the college was a Catholic institution, or that upon their arrival the Oregons [one of the engine companies] refused to work because of the non-cooperation of the brethren and students are... false.”³⁷ It is telling that the author felt compelled to state this. Its inclusion may be a sign that anti-Catholicism was indeed present, whether or not it played a part in this particular episode. After the heat of the fire, the brothers were left literally and figuratively out in the cold. The school was suppressed, students were sent home, and the brothers were scattered to various locations in the city, including a house owned by one Mr. Viot where the walls “were glittering with ice.”³⁸ The fire at Nazareth in a sense symbolized the troubles of the

³⁵ Graves, 151-152.

³⁶ Graves, 153.

³⁷ Graves, 156-157.

³⁸ Graves, 161.

brothers in 1855. Fire can be both destructive and yet purifying and this fire marked both an end and a new beginning.

VII. Growth Through Challenges: 1856-1862

Though painful, the fire of 1855 put an end, at least for a time, to dissension within the community. The temporary closure of the school at Nazareth also freed some religious for missionary labors in other locations. During the final seven years of Meyer's leadership in the United States, the brothers began ministries in rural Wisconsin and in the cities of Cleveland, Sandusky, and Pittsburgh. The institute in San Antonio continued to grow and the boarding school at Nazareth was reopened. The administration of Father Meyer continued to be contested and friction once again arose within and beyond the community.

The personnel for 1856-1857 of the Province lists thirty members in six cities with a total of eight works. Twelve of the thirty religious were in Dayton. In 1856, the brothers in Dayton were once again under one roof at Nazareth and ready to rebuild for an eventual reopening of the school. In the same year, the Province committed to teaching at Saint Patrick parochial school in Cleveland, the first English-speaking school in which the brothers were engaged. Up to this point, instruction at all other institutions had taken place in German and preservation of the German language and culture was understood to be a vehicle for preservation of the faith.

One rather charming chapter during this phase concerns the mission work of Father Mauclerc and Brother Litz in Wisconsin. Meyer had been in contact with Bishop Henni of Milwaukee and after the fire he was free to send these two religious to him. They were assigned to Germantown, a settlement on the Wisconsin River about one hundred miles northeast of Milwaukee. Mauclerc performed priestly ministry and Litz created a small "school" in a nearby log cabin. Their zeal in this "backwoods" missionary context is edifying. "In the winter, snow drifted in through the cracks between the logs that formed the walls of the house, and wind whistled below the rough timber floor. The scholars sat huddled around the stove, which hardly heated the room, and their feet were nearly

always cold.”³⁹ The Marianists were serving immigrants of both German and French-Canadian provenance within a sixty-mile radius. Mauclerc, a more severe and taciturn man, would paddle in a frail canoe amidst heavy ice, undeterred by poverty and privations. Litz, a more jovial man, would use a large tin horn as a church bell to call the faithful to worship. They relied on local farmers for their subsistence. Litz was called to Cleveland after about a year in Wisconsin where Mauclerc then remained alone until returning to Nazareth in 1859.

In September of 1857, the boarding school at Nazareth was opened after a hiatus of twenty-one months. In 1860, Brother Zehler became the director of Saint Mary’s Institute there. Under him, the institution experienced growth in many ways as he attended to classroom instruction, the physical plant, and the farm. His broad vision helped this important educational ministry to grow. In 1861, after twelve long years—two more than were prescribed in the original contract—the debt owed Mr. Stuart was finally paid off. The debt had become a millstone around the neck of Father Meyer. Some of his confreres believed it was an obsession that narrowed his field of vision as superior. For example, he was criticized for holding back the development of the educational institution because he wanted his religious to work more on the farm and so help to pay off the debt more quickly. When the mortgage was finally paid off, Mr. Stuart wrote from Europe, “I have had the pleasure this day to cancel the mortgage on Nazareth.... I now congratulate us both for bringing this long account to a close and wish you and your brothers every prosperity and happiness at Nazareth and long life to enjoy it.... I shall always be happy to hear from you from time to time and the unceasing prosperity of Nazareth.”⁴⁰ Nazareth was to prosper, growing exponentially and eventually developing into the University of Dayton.

Unfortunately, Father Meyer’s leadership continued to displease both Archbishop Purcell and several of his fellow Marianists. In 1858, the Provincial Council of Cincinnati was especially

³⁹ Graves, 167.

⁴⁰ Graves, 209.

focused on education. “To render the schools efficient, the Holy Father was petitioned to commend to the superior of the Congregation of Christian Schools the establishment of a normal school within the Province of Cincinnati.”⁴¹ When the official announcement was made that it was the Congregation of Christian Schools and not the Society of Mary that would be charged with the operation of this teacher training school, Meyer received it as a slight and afterwards even suggested to the Archbishop a good location for the school. Purcell wrote on the other side of this letter, “Nine years here and never gave me one teacher, and always meddling with things that do not concern him.”⁴² The patience of the Archbishop had worn thin. Meyer’s relationship with his own religious was also strained. The issue at stake then was the formation of candidates for the Society of Mary. As before, Meyer did not seem to fully appreciate that, “European methods of education, government, and living did not fit into the American picture.”⁴³ His brothers complained that candidates were being ill-prepared to teach in schools because their formation was overly-focused on maintaining the mother house at Nazareth. Graves says, “To the Provincial’s mind, everything and everybody to the aid of the mother house; to the brothers on the mission, the mother house was to aid everybody and every work.”⁴⁴ By 1860, Meyer was well aware of these issues and, in a letter marking the tenth anniversary of his mission in America, recognized that perhaps he had given this undertaking as much as he could. He wrote to the General Administration:

It seems that the Society of Mary has taken root in America. There are all kinds of provisions to make in the interest of the work, but I see that eventually my task is accomplished and that somebody else is necessary to bring about the success of the work. . . . It seems to me that the good of the Society demands it, and yet I submit in advance to your decision. Do not think you

⁴¹ Graves, 213.

⁴² Graves, 214.

⁴³ Graves, 217.

⁴⁴ Graves, 219.

will disappoint me in any way. I am ready to go wherever you will send me.”⁴⁵

Though it had been a rather rocky road, Meyer accomplished what he came to do. The seed had been planted and had taken root.

1862 was Father Meyer’s final year in the United States. That year, Reverend John Courtes came from Europe as an official visitor. In his conversations with the Marianists, he became convinced that the brothers’ previous critiques concerning the situation were well founded. After visitations and interviews, Courtes gathered the province together for a retreat, seeking to strengthen union in prayer. He must have left quite a positive impression, since after Meyer’s departure in November of 1862, Courtes became his successor as Provincial superior. By then Meyer, “had been in the country for 13 years; he had opened 21 establishments, of which 9 had been suppressed, leaving 12 still in operation. In July 1862 there were 65 brothers in the province, of whom 20 had come from France.”⁴⁶ From the United States Meyer sailed to Paris, lived at Ebersmunster and finally settled at Saint Remy, the same community at which he first felt called to the Society of Mary. He died there during the month of January 1868 at the age of sixty-eight.

VIII. Conclusion: Echoes from the Past and Lessons for the Future

As part of my research for this project, I visited the archives of the Society of Mary here in Rome to find the letter of obedience that Father Caillet wrote to Father Meyer on April 28, 1849. Though it is a single piece of paper with a short, simple message, I wanted to hold it in my hands because in a remote but real way, it made my religious vocation in the Society of Mary possible. The decisions, faith, foibles and foundations of the past certainly echo down through the decades and centuries to today. What lessons can be gleaned from a reflection on this first chapter of Marianist history in the United States? While I find it hard to draw clear conclusions, in my own reflection certain themes arose and, with them, further questions. To conclude this paper, I will comment briefly on each of

⁴⁵ Graves, 232.

⁴⁶ Graves, 204.

the following themes: faith, communion in the Body of Christ, Nazareth as an historical “motherhouse”, adaptation, and finally traditions.

Faith

In the first chapter of the current Rule of Life of the Society of Mary, which was approved in 1983, there is a section entitled “Faith, the Foundation.” Article 3 reads, “Our religious vocation is a life of faith rooted in Baptism, by which we first began to live in Jesus Christ. We come together to form communities of faith, and we aim to share the same faith with our brothers and sisters.”⁴⁷ Our Blessed Founder insisted that those in his religious family cultivate not just a faith of the mind, but of the heart, one that deeply penetrated one’s entire person, affecting their entire outlook and way of being in the world. Though Father Meyer’s shortcomings have already been described, it must be noted that he was indeed a man of tremendous zeal and profound, unshakeable faith. Graves writes, “Among all his virtues there shone forth his faith under every trial and his confidence in Providence, which God recompensed more than once with miraculous favors.”⁴⁸ An alumnus of Saint Mary’s Institute in Dayton, who for years was plagued with a very serious ailment of the eyes, recounts a time when Meyer took him to Mass. He recalls, “He told me also that he wanted me to pray to the Blessed Virgin, as he intended to do, and to ask her to cure my eyes.”⁴⁹ After Mass, the bandage fell from his eyes, which had been cured. The alumnus expressed his gratitude saying, “I have always felt grateful to the saintly priest, for I felt that it was his prayers that obtained the cure for me.”⁵⁰ What is the lesson here? To put it coarsely and simply, God can write straight with crooked lines. With all of Meyer’s shortcomings, God operated through his faith of the heart. In this particular instance, such faith may have prepared the way for a healing. His faith also laid a solid foundation at

⁴⁷ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Rule of Life” (Religious constitutions, Rome, 1983), article 3.

⁴⁸ Graves, 242.

⁴⁹ Graves, 243.

⁵⁰ Graves, 243.

Nazareth and beyond, through which God has wrought many things in Marianist ministries. God can do much with people and plans that are far from excellent if individuals and, more significantly, communities trust in Him.

Communion in the Body of Christ

Article 33 under “The Vowed Life and Holiness,” the Rule of Life states, “The vowed life belongs inseparably to the holiness of the Church.”⁵¹ Connected with this is the importance of communion with the whole Church. We saw how Meyer was sometimes at odds with local diocesan clergy and even Archbishop Purcell. While the reasons for this are complex, this tenor had a negative effect on the mission of evangelization. On the other hand, the foundation in San Antonio, unfolded more tranquilly. The historian Christopher Kauffman comments on the distinctiveness of the San Antonio enterprise saying, “there was a certain flavour to the Texas story: pragmatic adaptability, an easy openness to the culture, a less than competitive spirit with non-Catholic neighbors, and a generally good relationships with bishops and other religious that revealed a mutuality of interests.”⁵² This recognition of mutuality of interest and stronger communion with the broader Church is desirable. Each religious congregation and family has its proper charism and mission, which it has the right and duty to share with the wider Church. It is unfortunate when the episcopacy does not recognize these gifts of the Spirit and treats religious sisters, brothers, priests and committed laypeople as if they were mere functionaries in a given diocese. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on charismatic distinctiveness can tempt a community to operate as an almost parallel entity, distant from the heart of the life of the diocese. This too would be very unfortunate. Unity in the Body of Christ seems to be a prerequisite for fullness and flourishing of ecclesial life. How can Marianists today become more deeply inserted and committed in the dioceses where we serve? What particular gifts can we offer within this communion of Christ’s Body?

⁵¹ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Rule of Life” (Religious constitutions, Rome, 1983), article 33.

⁵² Kauffman, 86.

Nazareth as “Motherhouse”

From the initial American Province were eventually formed several others. In 1908, the Provinces of Cincinnati and St. Louis were created. Eventually in 1948, 1961, and 1976, the Provinces of the Pacific, New York and Meribah were founded respectively. In 2002, all of these Provinces, with the exception of Meribah, consolidated to become the Province of the United States. This was a large logistical undertaking. Over the decades, each of the respective Provinces had developed its own culture, traditions and ways of proceeding. Becoming one, just as in any individual community or marriage, can be a painful process entailing loss and sacrifice. We see in the foundation period of the Marianist of the United States that while the establishment at Holy Trinity in Cincinnati was the first Marianist ministry, Nazareth was truly the motherhouse. In a sense, we Marianists in the United States can all trace our roots back to that piece of land and to the faith and sacrifice of those first brothers. I do not contend that Nazareth, today the University of Dayton, ought to be our contemporary motherhouse. At the same time, perhaps fixing our gaze further back into our history and seeing where all Marianists in the United States were in a sense “born” can help put more recent differences within a broader context and enrich our reflection on the missionary project entrusted to us now and into the future.

Adaptation and Change

A characteristic of Marianist education, which all of our students learn is “adaptation and change.” Briefly, I would like to mention two interesting examples of this adaptation from 1849 to the present: agriculture and common dress. Nazareth, originally called “Dewberry Farm,” was a working farm on the periphery of the city of Dayton. In fact, in the personnel lists for each year, Father Meyer not only named the brothers, but also indicated their roles on the farm, as if the property was a Benedictine or Trappist monastery of old. The brothers worked the land and lived off of it. Cultivating the land is certainly not an essential characteristic of Marianist identity, though at different points it has been an aspect of mission in Dayton. While the University of Dayton is no

longer a farm and the brothers no longer work any fields, the Mission of Mary Cooperative run by Marianist lay missionaries is engaged in urban agriculture. They have taken vacant plots and cultivated fresh, organic produce to serve the people in the economically impoverished Twin Towers neighbourhood.

The issue of uniform or common dress is also noteworthy. Since the Society of Mary was founded immediately after the French Revolution, our Founder did not want his religious to don a religious habit similar to those worn in congregations founded during the Middle Ages. He thought that in his context a religious costume of that kind would be an impediment to evangelization. For him, this was a practical matter to be understood in light of mission. Nevertheless, in the original 1839 Constitutions, he insisted upon uniform dress among the members. This is made clear in article 176, which states, “Uniformity in the costume is very important; every arbitrary change, however unessential, makes one doubt whether we are religious of the Society of Mary, or whether we approach the world which we renounced; either case implies a sort of religious apostasy.”⁵³ Soon after working in Ohio, Father Meyer wrote to the General Administration asking for an adaptation of this uniform that would be more suited to the ministerial context. Instead of wearing a “chestnut coat” as was prescribed, he said, “it seems to all of us that it would be proper to change the form.”⁵⁴ This attitude of adaptation is intrinsic to the Marianist vocation since we take Mary’s words—“Do whatever He tells you”—as our motto and are “open as a Society to all means of evangelization,” dedicating ourselves, “to the apostolic activities to which Providence calls us, according to the needs of time and place.”⁵⁵ Since Vatican II, most Marianists in the United States have not dressed uniformly. In an American context of individualism where we hope to bear witness to the vitality of

⁵³ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Constitutions of the Society of Mary” (Religious constitutions, Bordeaux, 1839), article 176.

⁵⁴ Graves, 65.

⁵⁵ Society of Mary (Marianists), “Rule of Life” (Religious constitutions, Rome, 1983), article 10.

Christian community, might it be good to reconsider this issue? Is there a way to balance and reconcile an insistence upon uniformity of dress in the original constitutions as well as a spirit of adaptation, change, and nearness to the faithful? Today as with the Founder and in other periods of Marianist history, I believe this conversation should be framed in terms of mission and how best we can contribute to the work of evangelization today.

Traditions

In conclusion, I would like to mention two traditions that have been handed down from the first Alsatian Marianists in the United States. For some brothers, it is important at certain special occasions like a profession or jubilee celebration, to sing the same German toast—*Er lebe hoch*—that the Alsatian brothers sang. Another tradition that has been handed down is the preparation of “Marianist cornbread.” While the brothers at Nazareth were truly poor and their rations often left much to be desired, they did grow corn and had apple trees. Marianist cornbread is simply cornbread covered in apple sauce, a curious combination born out of necessity at Nazareth many years ago. Both of these traditions, while certainly not essential, connect us to a past that continues to inform our future. Father Graves says, “The brothers of the American provinces shall always look with reverence upon the character of Father Leo Meyer and with loving and grateful remembrance upon his record in America.”⁵⁶ Reading the history of Meyer and my fellow brothers, I give thanks because the seed that they planted became a tree that extended a branch for me, for us, and for our time. May the good God bless grant it growth for the salvation of souls and the extension of God’s reign in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

⁵⁶ Graves, 248.

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