

Marianist Lecture
February 2011
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Marianist Education: An Act of Social Justice

I am delighted to be here this evening and to have a chance to share with you some thoughts and perspectives on Marianist education. I've chosen as a title for my presentation, "Marianist Education: an Act of Social Justice". This is not meant to be overly dramatic, and it does reflect one of the five Characteristics of Marianist Education (Education for Peace and Justice). However, the title was suggested to me by a letter I received some years ago from a funding agency in Europe. I had written to them, asking for assistance in running a primary school for some very poor children in Kenya. In declining my request, they indicated that they were not interested in funding schools but, rather, in funding "development projects". I thought to myself: what could be more "developmental" than the development of a child? But it took me a long time to come to that realization myself.

I was ordained as a Marianist priest in 1978 but had been a professed Marianist since 1967. After ordination, I was asked to join the Marianist community in Cincinnati with ministry at Purcell High School. At the time, there were two ministry needs in the Province that were presented to me for consideration: Chaminade-Julienne High School in Dayton and Purcell High School (the following year, Purcell Marian) in Cincinnati. I was keen on working in a racially mixed and academically varied environment that an inner city school provided, so I was happy to join the community and ministry in Cincinnati.

The first year was a huge challenge for me. I had not worked in a single-sex school before (having taught originally at Hackett High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan), the diversity of students and the academic challenges were far more than I had anticipated. Having just completed a four year study of theology at St. Michael's in Toronto and being assigned full-time in the Religious Education Department, I felt like I was a crane sent to pick up a tooth pick. It came to sharp focus one late October day. It was swelteringly hot, it was 1:45 in the afternoon, and I was teaching Sacraments to a classroom full of senior boys. They were NOT interested. Worse still, room 17 was located just above the band room, and the first year students were preparing for the Christmas concert, practicing "Jingle Bells". I was frustrated to say the least. At the end of the class, I walked out of the room and ran into Herb Woeste, the Assistant Principal. My frustration must have been written all over my face. He asked what was wrong, and I proceeded to tell him in great detail. Then, he looked at me and said, "Father, remember: we are just planting seeds". That piece of advice has stood me in good stead during the intervening years because much of what I have learned about education as an act of justice is buried there.

But, God has a very funny sense of humor. After that initial year of struggle, I came to enjoy Purcell, then Purcell Marian, very much. The classes, the counseling, the retreat program, the LIFE group, the sports, the parents' gatherings, the staff parties – I could not have been happier and I felt that I had really found my groove. Then, appropriately, on Halloween night 1981, I received a call from the Assistant Provincial, asking me "how is your Swahili?" "I beg your pardon", I responded. He went on to say that the

Provincial Council was asking me and another Marianist (Bro. Steve Grazulis who was teaching at Moeller High School) to join the Marianist Novitiate staff in Ekpoma, Nigeria. “What?” Now, sensitively, he said that they were not asking for an immediate response. “Good thing”. And with that weighing on my head, I spent All Saints Day in 1981. After I eventually got to Nigeria later that year, I found out that they don’t speak Swahili in West Africa...which told me a lot about what the Assistant Provincial knew about what he was asking!

It was a hard invitation to accept but, in the end, I did, and I will be eternally grateful for that grace that allowed me to do that. As an interesting side note... At the end of our Province Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, last June, as a sort of grand finale, we were each given a copy of the letter we had written, asking for perpetual vows.

In that letter, I requested the clerical category in the Society of Mary and, strangeness of all strangeness, I indicated my willingness to someday live and minister in Africa. God has a very funny sense of humor.

Living in working in Africa has been a most rich and stretching experience. I arrived in Nigeria in September 1982, and it took me a good 18 months before I stopped converting prices of food and other goods into US dollars, complaining about the roads, and thinking about McDonalds. All of that seems so long ago now, and I marvel at how much I didn’t know and how much I had to learn. I remember hearing a compliment about an Irish missionary in Nigeria: “he spoke our language and he ate our food.” That, it seems to me, is the very best description of a good missionary, one that I have, hopefully, emulated in

my own experience of entering in, appreciating, and respecting different cultures and different ways of being human. It's harder than I would have imagined, and far harder than teaching about the sacraments to young lads while "Jingle Bells" is being blasted out by first year band students.

The Marianist had been in Anglophone Africa since 1957, having gone there at the invitation of Bishops to run mission schools for African youth. There was a time in the 1960s when the Society of Mary was the third largest mission-sending religious congregation in the United States, and our Provinces had excellent schools in Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia (with the French-speaking Marianists in Togo, Ivory Coast, Congo, and Tunisia). That, however, was not to last as the religious vocational curve began to descend after 1967 and as the Marianists in Africa began accepting local vocations. The early Marianists had tried off and on to recruit and form young Africans in the religious life, but most of those early efforts were futile since the requirements for a solid formation program, good discernment of religious motivation for religious life, and the lived ability to form intercultural communities were simply not there. In 1979, the leadership of the Society of Mary (Fr. Stephen Tutas, Superior General), Fr. Bill Behringer (Provincial of the Cincinnati Province) and Fr. Jack McGrath (Provincial of the New York Province) met in Lusaka, Zambia, and determined that, if the Society of Mary was to have a future in Anglophone Africa, it would be through the recruitment and formation of African Marianists. The request for me and Bro. Steve to join this effort was a result of that meeting.

By 1984, it became clear that something drastic was needed if we were to have focus and strength to this final effort of forming a Marianist unit in Anglophone Africa. We were spread out in four countries across the continent, and most of the vocational interest for the Society of Mary was coming from East Africa. We found the Nigerian Church deeply clerical, not the most conducive environment for a congregation such as ours. In a dramatic Chapter meeting in December 1984, we decided to terminate our presence in Nigeria and to concentrate our efforts in Eastern Africa. Bro. Joe Davis, who was the District Superior at the time, was vehemently opposed to this decision and, in the end, he was the one who had to implement it. He did this without anger, rancor, or blame. For me, he was a striking example of religious obedience. And, so we came to establish our novitiate formation house, and all of the formational pieces before and after, in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985. It was the best decision we could have made. For the next 24 years, I was engaged in all levels of recruitment and formation of African members of the Society of Mary. We made so many mistakes in those early years, accepting candidates then who would not even get in the front door these days. In the end, a cohort of talented, committed and capable African Marianists has formed the newly independent Region of Eastern Africa which began on Pentecost Sunday last year. Like Herb Woeste told me in 1979: “Father, we are just planting seeds”. By God’s grace, those seeds grow and mature.

But all of this was, in some ways, a prelude to another major involvement that has taken my time, energy and strength for the last 13 years, an involvement that was directly focused on education and on the intransigent issues of poverty.

Our Lady of Nazareth Primary School was begun in the Mukuru kwa Njenga slum area of Nairobi in 1992. Sr. Mary Killeen had a sixth sense for real needs and she, along with a number of Sisters of Mercy, began five informal schools in the industrial slums of Kenya's capital. She was determined to provide at least some rudimentary education for children who would otherwise be forgotten: English, math and Kiswahili. With these, children might be able to get a slightly better job, if jobs were even to be had. The Sisters of Mercy were able to do this by employing untrained teachers, basically high school graduates, and paying them a minimum salary for their services. But, by 1996, even this scant effort became too expensive and unwieldy for the Sisters, and they began looking for partners to off-load one or the other of these informal schools. Happily, the Marianists at that time were looking for just such an involvement. Our own Bro. Peter Daino, who also has a sixth sense for human need, was the lead person in this effort. When we assumed responsibility for the school in November 1996, there were five unpainted buildings constructed from iron sheeting, no water, no electricity, a river of mud flowing through the center of the compound, 900 students in grades 1-7, and no trained teachers. Such was our challenge. It made Room 17 at Purcell Marian High School look like Disney World!

During the Christmas holiday that year, the Marianist novices painted all of the buildings with bright red, green, blue and yellow paint (providing a stark contrast to the dull grey of the surrounding slums); we set sidewalk paths; we planted grass and trees and flowers; and we built a library. We opened in January 1997 with about 1000 students in grades 1-

8 and began hiring qualified teachers at a salary slightly higher than government salaries. With lots of effort, many generous donors, a good administration, and a supportive Marianist presence, we began to transform this place into a little “Oasis” that it is today with it’s 1900 students in grades k-8, its 45 members trained teaching staff, its 20,000 volume library, and its state- of-the-art computer lab. Even slum kids need to be computer literate! At last accounting, the school placed #17 out of 97 schools in the District on the most recent national exam. Not bad for a slum school! Through the kindness of the Marianist high school in Madrid, there is now running water on the compound and proper hygiene facilities. The school is fully powered with a fine back-up generator, and plans are afoot to construct a Learning Center where computerized learning can help these poor kids gain an academic edge. Happily, the Barry Scholars from the University of Dayton assisted in raising funds for a first class science lab and a visual arts center. They also managed to raise enough to provide four full scholarships to area high schools for OLN graduates.

But, there have been lesson that needed learning, sometimes painfully. There are seven that I would like to comment on briefly.

- (a) **The world is not a fair place.** Now, that sound likes a platitude, but I know it is true and have experienced it firsthand. I was born in a good family that cared for me, nurtured in faith, given a superb primary education with the Sisters of St. Joseph in Cleveland, attended the Marianist St. Joseph High School in Cleveland, and received a superior education at the University of Dayton. I didn’t ask for these blessings and I really don’t deserve them. They are the accidents of my

birth and they are, by the way, one of the primary reasons why I felt called to join the Society of Mary: to love Jesus and to share the blessings, like the Brothers at St. Joseph High School, with those less fortunate. The children at OLN are born in the slums to parents who are unemployed, often come to school with nothing in their bellies, have limited educational opportunities in a country where only 50% of primary school children gain entry into secondary schools, and where only 2% of high school graduates join a university. The world is not a fair place and the deeper causes for systemic injustice should be the concern of universities like UD and of people like you. We cannot right the world overnight or alone, but we can do what we can, one student at a time. They tell the story of a man who was walking on the beach, tossing star fish which had washed up on the shore back into the ocean. Seeing him as he faced thousands of these star fish on the shore, an onlooker remarked: "Why are you doing that? It's not going to make a difference." The man picked up a star fish, looked at it, and tossed it back into the ocean. "I made a difference to that one." That has been my experience with these children at OLN, one at a time, making a difference: to Jenipher Nyawera who first came to OLN because of the lunch program and who will graduate from the Moi University this December as a surgeon; to Maurice Otieno who watched the planes fly over the slums from the nearby Jomo Kenyatta Airport and who will be sponsored to aviation school when he is finished with the university; to Jared Odera who was just hired by PriceWaterhouseCoopers as an accountant; to Mildred who will be a nurse next year; to Abdihakim Yusuf who just was sent by his high school as an ambassador to a sister school in the UK, and to the 1900

children who get a hot lunch each day. The world is not a fair place, but every child deserves a fair chance.

(b) **Development is more than economics.** So often the two are linked and we gauge First and Second and Third World countries by their GDP, their inflation rates, and their foreign exchange reserves. The sadness of “underdevelopment” is the underdevelopment of the person. So much potential, so much energy and entrepreneurial spirit, so much creativity and talent, so much desire for a better life and for a way to break the cycles of poverty. Two striking images have impressed themselves on my memory. The one is a woman in Nigeria, probably 30 years old, with a baby on her back, a two year old in tow, and a 50 gallon drum on her head, walking five steps behind her husband. That lady isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. The other image is of the women in Kenya who carry huge bundles of firewood or hay on their backs. They are strapped to the forehead and the women lean forward as they walk, the load squarely on the small of the back. Those ladies have huge problems later in life with back problems, all from trying to provide for their families. Sadly the men too often are enjoying themselves at the local bar! Those women capture for me something of underdevelopment: head bent, looking at the ground, taking one step at a time. Their worlds are small and their futures are simply a repetition. It’s the human person who needs “opening up” and “development” and “liberation.” Obviously, economics is not unrelated, but it is also not the deepest issue.

(c) **It's hard to live and work with the poor.** Dorothy Day, in response to someone who had a romantic notion of coming to the Catholic Worker and serving the needy, wrote back and said: "Just keep in mind, the poor are smelly and they are demanding." In 2003, the newly elected government of Kenya, three days after its win in the polls, declared universal and free primary education. It was a campaign promise kept, but it was a disaster in terms of implementation. Two things happened: one, overcrowded classrooms became more overcrowded, totaling in some instances to 90 students in a classroom with one teacher. Some education! The other was that we at OLN could not longer require parents to pay the meager 400 ksh per term (\$5). Rather than making people grateful, they became more demanding: "if you can do this for us, you can do a whole lot more." It made our hard financial situation even harder. The lesson for us was clear: for the poor, and perhaps for others as well, financial investment strengthens commitment and adds value to the relationship. It is also a way to fundamentally empower people, giving them a real investment in the education of their children. More to it, people who are poor have so many problems facing them that the needs of their children and the value of education is often decidedly second or third or fourth priority. They often revert to alcohol or drugs or theft as ways to blunt the pain or gain a slight advantage. Illegal (and dangerous) local brew, sexual abuse within cramped and unlit living areas, parents sending their daughters out to beg or sell themselves to get food for the family, and a widespread illiteracy that prevents people from knowing their rights and taking their lives into their own hands are all part and parcel of working with the poor.

Hardly romantic! I told someone once that I had lives in Africa for 25 years and I had never been lonely or bored. That's true...but I was frustrated, angry, exasperated, and judgmental. Working in the slums and with the poor is not for the faint of heart...nor for the romantic. As for "smelly", Day was right.

(d) **Kids need a chance and strategic help makes a huge difference.** In 1999, we began a program to identify sponsors for students who performed well on the KCPE and who could gain entry into good high schools. In the 12 years that this program has been in place, about 150 students have gone through high school and, in many instances, to the university. Often sponsors were glad to continue the sponsorship when the student performed well. It is just creating opportunities for these kids. Cost of a year of high school education in Kenya at the best schools: about \$600. About three years ago, we began a similar program of sponsorship for children at OLN itself. It costs \$125 to sponsor a child for a year, and the school currently has over 400 children being sponsored in this way. Compare that with educational costs in the United States. What it costs to educate one student at UD for a year could provide for about 300 children at OLN. Not bad value! As I have told many people, we are simply about creating opportunities for these children, opening doors, and unleashing the human spirit.

(e) **Education is the key.** When I was in high school, a Marianist Brother described education this way: a student is not a vessel to be filled but a lamp to be lit. Right. I have come to believe firmly that the only way to break the cycles of

poverty is to provide a quality education and, in our case, a quality Marianist education. That education is provided within an educational institution that respects each child, stimulates the talents and capabilities of each student, builds a family spirit, is concerned for the cause of peace and justice and that looks to the future. It is the institution, based on the Gospel of Jesus and on the Marianist educational tradition, that shapes the hearts and minds of the students and empowers them to be free and responsible. That's "development" and it is worth more to me than the self-help, "development" projects that treat the problems that could be avoided if a better foundation were set in the first place. The word itself means "to draw out": what a marvelous task and vocation for those of us who call ourselves educators. We are about "planting seeds", allowing and encouraging them to grow, pruning the plant so that better growth can happen, and empowering the God-given life of a child or young person to become what God has created that child to be. An education that does that is a work of grace and an act of justice.

Here's the point. Often, in discussions concerning peace, justice and the integrity of creation, a sharp distinction is made, or at least implied, between these issues and the ministry of education. The rub often centers around institutional commitments and how these are sustained. There is a needed place for relief work. There is a serious need for the work of Mother Theresa and the Missionaries of Charity to care for the dying and to help them at the end of life with dignity and loving care. There is a needed place for Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement to feed the hungry and destitute and to raise consciousness about the works of mercy. There is a needed

place for the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative with its issue teams focused on immigration reform, child labor and sweat shops, ecology, and gender justice. I was put off recently by a funding group that refused to support this type of work, saying that they did not want to keep giving people fish but wanted them to learn how to fish. True as far as it goes...but sometimes people don't have a fishing pole and they are too hungry or sick or depressed to find a place to fish. And Marianists are seriously involved in all of these things.

What I have learned, as well, is that education, both formal and non-formal, is every bit as much an act of justice and a way to build a more just and peaceful and human world. I have just returned from a five week visit to the Marianist communities and ministries in India. Our Brothers there have concentrated on these type of ministries: as in Africa, focusing on the youngest and the poorest in the cities and in the rural areas. Their Ragpickers Educational and Development Scheme (REDS) targets street children, provides for some of their most basic needs and seeks to get them into regular schools or into vocational training programs. It's "development" at its most elemental level – the development of the human person. I have also learned that institutions are key as they ground and focus a ministry, giving it access to large populations in a consistent and sustained way. I might mention, in this regard, the MUSP program that is sponsored by the Marianist Province of North America. The Marianist Urban Students Program has a center at VASJ High School in Cleveland, at Purcell Marian High School in Cincinnati, and at Central Catholic High School in San Antonio, Texas. It identifies capable students from urban areas, mentors and supports

them through high school, and eventually through higher education. That is also an act of social justice.

But, the University of Dayton is also important here. As I mentioned earlier, provisions in the curriculum that invite students to become exposed to issues of poverty and injustice, to become educated about the deeper, systemic causes in global economic and social policies, and to become sensitized to the deeply intransigent obstacles to changing the global coordinates is no small matter. Broadening horizons through service learning projects, UDSAP, and other immersion programs – all of these plant seeds that will also grow and develop. The DECA project moves in the same direction. And, perhaps equally important, is the role of campus ministry in challenging students to embrace a vocation or a career that is focused on service to others, on education for the poor and on development. At the very least, asking students to pray for a caring and generous heart so that these concerns can find a place in their future families and employments.

We named the slum school in Nairobi Our Lady of Nazareth: it was at Nazareth that Mary had her formative influence on Jesus during his youngest years. It was there that the Prince of Peace was educated; that Jesus first learned to give human expression to God's passion for justice and the redemptive nature of sacrificial love (the Kingdom of God); and that Mary and Joseph modeled for Him what it meant to be "family": to put others' need first, especially the "least".

(f) **Education needs to be wholistic.** Children are not just heads but hearts and bodies and feet and faces. Sadly too much of the educational system in countries like Kenya is a holdover from a colonial past with its emphasis on curricula, testing, exam results and class placements. Quality instruction is important, but so are sports and music and dancing and drama and art and karate and playtime after lunch. Little by little, all of these found a place in the little Oasis that OLN has become. There were two very important developments in recent years.

Some years ago, a very good friend of ours, the wife of a key person here at UD, came to Kenya for a safari and, through Bro. Ray Fitz, made contact with the school. She loved it and has returned to Kenya 19 times since that first visit in 2000. At the end of a visit about four years ago, she suggested that something could be done to support the nutrition of the children. They already get a hot lunch each day through the World Food Program, and, for many of them, it's the only meal they get each day. I asked her what she had in mind. Bananas! Twice weekly for each of the then 1600 students. I thought to myself: 1600 bananas twice weekly...that's 3200 bananas and 3200 banana peels!!! I suggested instead that we provide hot porridge (uji) to the younger children each morning at 9am. For many of the children, there is no breakfast and their bellies are empty when they come to school. It's hard for a 5 year old to learn or play when he or she is hungry. That program has now be extended from k- standard 5 students...at the cost of 5 cents per child per day.

The second important development was the Ujamaa Family Center that we started to address the needs of the parents of these children. Many are illiterate, many lack employment of any type, many have no idea of their legal rights, and most need help with nutrition and hygiene for their families. Through the support of the Rotary Club in Stockholm, Sweden, this center aims to educate and support the parents of the OLN children (as well as others) with the hope that helping the parents will, in the end, help the children. It also became clear that many of these families need economic empowerment: in many cases, a bit of capital to boost their fruit and vegetable stalls, or their used clothing business. Ujamaa, which means “families working together”, now supports a number of merry-go-round loan schemes after the model used in places like Bangladesh. Schools do not exist in a vacuum. Neither do students.

(g) Finally, Jesus said: When you did it to the least, you did it to me.” That provides the deepest reason why we do what we do, and why we care for those who are youngest and poorest. I want to end with a story about Michael Githae. Michael was a small Kikuyu boy in standard 4 when his mother died. As so often happens with poor families in the slums, he was shunted from one sister to another, while the father married another wife and moved away from Mukuru. The sister’s husband did not want another mouth to feed or another child to clothe and educate, so Michael, like so many kids, made his way to the streets of Nairobi. He lived on the streets for two years. Our school councilor was able to contact him and persuade him to return to school. When he did, he was both physically and experientially advanced for his

classmates in standard 5. But he persevered. I remember the day, just after the national exam results were published when he was in standard 8, when he came to the car as I was leaving and asked me if I could find him a sponsor to attend secondary school. That year, we had eight scholarships for standard 8 students; Michael was #9. So, the two Marianist communities pulled savings from our Lenten practice of meatless meals, and the teachers themselves took up a collection which enabled us to enroll Michael in Aquinas High School, a school which the Marianists ran until the schools were nationalized in 1978. Michael did well, and we were able to secure a regular sponsor for him, a family deeply connected to UD and to the Society of Mary. When Michael finished secondary school two years ago and earned a good mark in the national exams, his sponsor pledged to support him through the Sisters of Mercy Nursing School in Nairobi. He has completed his first year and is well on his way to becoming a licensed nurse, something that he could not have even dreamt possible. In other circumstances, he would surely not be alive today. Last week, I received this email from him:

Dear Fr. Martin,

Your words touched me so much. Truly God works wonders, and very soon I will graduate and begin carrying out my life's responsibilities.

The truth is that I love the sponsors you got for me!! And when I trace where God's hands have delivered me, through these kind people, I feel the strong urge to see them, to feel them, and to embrace them. God has used them to deliver me from that place where I had been long dumped and forgotten.

When I first approached you at the OLN gate, when you were in the car, and opened my life to you, by then I was a young boy but now...well, it's incredible how far I have come.

The work of a shepherd is to make sure that none gets lost and that is what you and my sponsors have done for me. I am so grateful.

Mike Githae

To make sure that none gets lost. To help the seeds to grow. To educate poor kids, and all our students, in a Marianist way. In justice, they deserve that, and it helps make for a more peaceful, just and free world. Besides, when we do it to them, we do it to the Lord.

MAS

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