

Response to 27 January 2011 talk of Father David Fleming, S.M.

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I am deeply honored to be before you and following such a distinguished person as Father Fleming, – distinguished for his wide breath of wisdom, that knowledge that comes from his day-to-day living of the Marianist charism in so many places and a variety of circumstances. I am also mindful that my comments are to be brief out of respect for each of you here at the end of what I suspect has been a long day. There are many important and exciting topics touched upon in Father Fleming's talk. I have chosen as the focus of my comments -- the holy trio's embrace of "new methods" – a "new fulcrum" – or at least what is the source of this embrace. As Father Fleming explained, "This forward-looking, adaptive, realistic stance, building on strengths rather than bemoaning deficiencies, is characteristically Marianist, I think. [and here is my key point] It is part of a deep faith that God's Providence is at work here and now, day by day, in our time." A deep faith, that relationship in, through, and by which we exist embedded in and deeply marked by trust in a mercifully just God who is love and whom we experience as provident, as provider, gift-giver in the most extravagant way, at work – actively engaged – here and now, here and now in this room, this evening, and in every room, and every here and now on this campus and every other place in this world, in this universe -- deep faith that day by day this Provident God accompanies us, each of us, together and singly, in our daily tasks that consume our Mondays that slip into Tuesdays and then Wednesdays and Thursdays and Fridays right through the weekend – in our time such as it is. We are called to "a deep faith that God's Providence is at work here and now, day by day, in our time."

To respond to that call requires courage. I marvel at the courage of our Marianist holy trio who saw what was happening around them and responded not by building barricades but by forming small communities, Sodalities, a creation in a small but very real way of a new social order, with bits and pieces salvaged from the old and with the resources that come from a deep faith. What I suggest to you this evening is that we need more courage. I must acknowledge what sparks this idea. When I was in a particularly dark time in my life, a very wise spiritual director (now deceased) told me in all bluntness "You need more courage." Well as I, in all reluctance pondered his challenge to me, I realized that I had no clear idea what that term really means. And then I recalled a chapter in a book (I am a professor after all) on the virtue of courage -- Romano Guardini's *Learning the Virtues that Lead You to God*, first published in 1967. He writes, "Courage means the ability not only to select what pleases us or makes life easy, but also to accept the whole as it is, in the confidence that it reveals the Providence of God." (99) Remember that "deep faith in God's Providence at work here and now, day by day, in our time? Guardini, on that same page, continues, "So courage means, first of all accepting oneself as one is, with the sensitivity of feeling and the painful experiences that it brings, as well as the precious gifts that it bestows. This does not mean that we must approve of everything – certainly not. But first we must accept, and then try to see what we can change, increase, moderate, or improve." The holy trio certainly accepted and then sought what they individually and together could "change, increase, moderate, or improve." What Guardini insists, and this is very important, is that accepting what is must be an acceptance of what he calls an "integrated whole." To help us understand what he means by integrated whole he uses two images -- "a picture which stands before us and which we survey" -- so this sense of

gaining some distance to see clearly – like Chaminade in exile praying before our Lady of Saragossa – seeing at a distance what needed to be done. Guardini also uses a second image – the integrated whole “is also like a melody which goes on in time, a configuration which is experienced as it transpires.”¹ In other words, one is captured in the melody – listening in the moment as the musical movement unfolds. Consider Marie-Therese listening to the melody of those women who at first repulsed her and whom she came to accept and love while not accepting their fate as sex workers -- seeing what she, in community with others, could “change, increase, moderate, or improve.” Venerable Adele sought through her work with men, including Chaminade, and especially other women of faith ways that she too could “change, increase, moderate, or improve” the world of her time. And I am sure that all three, given their sensitivity of feelings, experienced the painful as well as the precious gifts that came in accepting what is. Here it seems on this deeply personal level we find perhaps our most profound connection with the holy trio – in considering the call to courage – a call to each of us – to accept who I am as I am – with all the limits and possibilities -- and seeing what I can “change, increase, moderate, or improve” in all those areas that Father Fleming spoke about and still many more, but in this place which is my place and this time which is my time. And seeing more than the “I”, certainly in community, and yet in a still greater context, as part of that “integrated whole.” We have a certain luxury at a university – an opportunity to survey the big picture through critical intellectual engagement and active service, but we are also to be receptive, obedient, i.e., receptive listeners, caught up in the providential melody of our time and our place as it transpires.

It brings to my mind a person from long ago who heard the melody and sang along in the form of a hymn, ancient and beautiful. The singer was a woman of great courage who invites us to sing along. The woman is, of course, Mary of Nazareth. She accepted who she was and still is, a woman full of God’s grace. “Yes,” she told Elizabeth, “from now onwards all generations will call me blessed,” Why? Because I am clearly a part of the “integrated whole” “for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name, and his faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him.” And we know that the members of holy trio who accepted their mission from Mary are now also called blessed and venerable because the Almighty did great things for them. And they invite us to join them, to join the choir of the “people of saints” – the people of a God whose name is holy, manifest in faithful love that extends age after age to those who fear him and have the courage to accept the whole as it is knowing that painful experiences will come along with deeply precious gifts – because this knowledge is informed by a deep faith that God’s providence is at work right here and right now, on this day and the next, and day by day after that, in our time and in each of our lives. The holy trio invites us to say yes I accept what is, I see the bigger picture or at least some of it. And maybe, just maybe we can do more than listen to that melody, maybe try a little harmony, and if we really find our courage to dance. It is perhaps in the harmonizing and the dancing that we being to see more clearly or more accurately deeply feel in our very selves what we can “change, increase, moderate, or improve.” So I invite each one of us to pray for more courage knowing that we can find inspiration and follow our trio who found their inspiration in

¹ Romano Guardini, *Learning the Virtues that Lead You to God*, translation by Stella Lange, revised 1998 (Henry Regnery Company, 1967; Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998), 99-100.

the one who courageously embraced the gifts given her and sang and still sings the melody of the one whose name is holy and whose faithful love extends from age to age.