

Reflection on My Trip to Peru For the 6th International Meeting of Marianist Laity

By Matt Dunn
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Three notes: This is about my trip to Peru. You'll read that it wasn't a vacation. It's a long read (for a blog) but hopefully a quick read.

And suddenly there came from heaven the rush of a violent wind, filling the place where they were. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability...each one heard them speaking in the native tongue of each...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power (Acts 2:1-12).

And so it was with the International Assembly of [Marianist Lay Communities](#), in Lima, Peru 26 January -02 February, 2014. From around the world, lay Catholics, formed in the Marianist charism, represented their countries in an assembly to discuss our role as lay Catholics in the church and world.

I had the honor and privilege to represent the United States at this event. For those who thought I was going to Peru on vacation, I was actually at a week-long international meeting. Marianist lay communities are small Christian communities. These are more than bible study groups, more than faith sharing groups, more than book clubs, more than social groups. These are all of those but with a mission. Founded by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade 213 years ago, these groups are an association of people making up local and international communities, inspired by Mary's faith and trust in God to be willing to say "yes" to bringing Christ into the world. We are communities with a mission that is not our own, for we seek like Mary to say, "let it be done unto me according to your will," and like Jesus being open to his fate, "thy will be done."

The diversity of the gathering was overwhelming and awe inspiring at the same time. The official languages of the meeting were English, French and Spanish. And yes, translators were used. But other countries represented included Korea, three different countries in Africa, Haiti, Poland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and more. In addition to the translators, many people spoke more than one language.

The meeting's theme was [Faith of the Heart in the Heart of the World](#). In short, we discussed how our faith in God should bring us joy and hope not only for ourselves, but compelling us to share it with others for the building of the Kingdom.

I've long thought there are pros and cons to any organized religion. I won't go into the cons. I think one of the pros is a common vocabulary, common mission, and common ritual (even with various cultural nuances). In the case of the Catholic church and the Marianist Family, this is the case. Even among our diversity at this Assembly, we were one.

The Spirit truly was present in our meetings. We met in a room with sliding panels that made up one of the exterior walls of the building. With the panels open, we could see the sunlight, feel the breeze and breathe the fresh air. We spoke of our experiences in multiple languages and did our best to understand side conversations that weren't being translated. Liturgies were inspiring as we appreciated the music, dance, scripture, and prayers of the culture whose turn it was to organize each prayer. Prayers, responses, and songs were done simultaneously with everyone in their own language and other times, as we attempted to read the prayers in the language of the organizers. But we always knew what was happening, even if we didn't understand the words. We lifted our voices to God in harmony, grateful for the many gifts bestowed upon us, and grateful to God for giving us Mary and Jesus as examples of making a difference in the world.

Words can't describe the feeling of being choked up or teary-eyed as something in a foreign language causes an emotion to well up inside of you and erupt in joy knowing that you are, all at once, one with the others in the room. And sometimes, words weren't necessary. Unspoken rituals, such as touching the dirt from the earth or reverencing a globe remind us that we are on holy ground and that we are all one family.

One keynote address was by Fr. Eduardo Arens SM. He spoke of **faith of the heart being freeing, that our faith comes from lived experiences, and that like Jesus we must give, and serve, and speak up as if we have nothing to lose.** We must be free of society's burdens, and free of worldly possessions. We must be full of love and joy so that we can be liberated from what keeps us from being fully human. For only a free person can love and give, because they expect nothing in return.

Being free brings us joy – joy in simple things such as family, time spent with friends, doing charity, enjoying the presence of God in all of creation – in nature, in our fellow humans. And in our joy we will want to care for these.

Faith of the heart has its challenges. We discussed, in relation to our lived reality, the fact that **our head and our heart must be connected.** Sometimes we over-think things. We are moved by things (in the heart) but then our head takes over and we tell ourselves that's not my problem, I can't get involved in that, I don't have time, there might be consequences, what will other people think. We must be free not only of our worldly burdens, but those also created in our minds. Our faith calls us to be open and trust that God will always provide when we do what is right. Our hearts and heads must be united so that our hands and feet can put into action God's will.

We are called to mission, permanent mission, a common mission. It's not complicated. As laity, we are not called to the life of priests, brothers, and sisters. But we, in our everyday lives, can **act in a spirit of faith through ordinary activities. We can give witness and evangelize by how we live our lives,** which is different from proselytizing. We can have careers and families and be involved in many things. It's how we live that is important. We talked about how what we do it is different from humanism. Any good person can respect others and nature because it's the right thing to do. We do that, but we also do it because it's what God calls us to do. We are called to be like Christ, which, in many cases, is counter cultural. And so we do it with a certain intentionality.

In addition to Pope Francis' exhortation, [*The Joy of the Gospel*](#), some thoughts we reflected on, in the Marianist tradition, are:

While faith of the mind is important, it is not sufficient. Father Chaminade insisted that what we believe with our mind must pass to the heart. By faith of the heart we give assent not only of our mind, but we adhere with our whole heart to what we believe. We love what we believe, and we commit ourselves to embrace it with our whole being. Faith of the mind brings us knowledge; faith of the heart attaches our person to what we believe... Faith of the mind gives us ideas about Jesus; faith of the heart gives us a personal relationship with him.[1]

Try to perform all your actions in a spirit of faith. I think that is the path the Lord wants you to take: a very ordinary life, ordinary actions but with more than ordinary intentions, that is what the Lord wants.[2]

We evangelize with our lives that give testimony to a lived Gospel faith. We live in a state of permanent mission.[3]

To be authentic, generous, and faithful in our mission, it is essential that we be men and women "strong in faith, firm in hope, and constant in love." We find this strength through prayer, continuing formation, personal and community discernment, commitment, and community life.[4]

Marianist prayer is characterized by deep interiority. It is from the heart that Marianists view the world, their personal life, and their interpersonal relationships. The Spirit of the Lord who prays in us makes our prayer arise from the heart, where the Spirit plants the love which is its principal fruit.[5]

Mary remained attentive to the Word and lived the "faith of the heart," confidently accepting the will of God in her life. Following her example we make faith the criterion for our discernment and the center of our lives.[6]

You can see the richness in these conversations. They truly were inspiring as we learned of how we live our faith as a global community.

People of faith are joyful. People who have nothing are also joyful; they are happy with what they have and nothing else matters. The important things in life are family and faith. While I could experience this in some places in the United States, the reality is that faith doesn't mean much to many. We have too many choices for entertainment and immediate gratification. We are too mobile and distant from those who should be the closest to us. We do what makes us happy with disregard for the happiness or plight of others.

Our delegation in Peru was comprised of leaders within the Marianist Family (lay and religious). We attended because we have roles in our own countries and local communities. As an assembly, we guide the direction of an international association, considered by some as a movement. We are servant leaders. We don't do it for acclaim. We are not politicians or

celebrities. We are not the Pope (who also doesn't do it for acclaim but is a celebrity in his own right).

Some overwhelming experiences were shared by the delegates as we experienced the hospitality of the people in Peru. On our first night, we participated in an outdoor Mass. We were the guests of honor, afforded the privilege of sitting at the front of those gathered. At the conclusion of Mass, we were escorted, by a Peruvian for every delegate, to a reception where we celebrated Peruvian culture through music and dance as we watched youth show pride in their heritage and their faith and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

On Thursday, we toured the city of Lima and its surrounding “Districts.” We saw well-to-do areas. And we saw the slums. We met people in those places - all joyful. We were treated, as royalty, to a feast where youth again displayed pride in song and dance, while we enjoyed their entertainment, good company, and good food. You couldn't help but be joyful because they were so joyful.

The most humbling part of the week came Thursday night when we arrived at a Marianist parish in one of the poorest communities. We walked into a church whose congregation stood to greet us waving flags and posters, with words declaring their welcome and their pride in being associated with Las Comunidades Marianistas. Among them were seniors, youth, and families. They reached out, wanted to shake our hands, touch us, be touched by us. We, globally, as Marianist laity, are part of their heritage. We are people they admire, not unlike other religious leaders who give them something to hope for, something to believe, a reason to have joy. Yet it was they who brought us joy in their welcome, during Mass, and after Mass. We joined a reception after Mass where there was singing and dancing by all. They wouldn't let us just stand there. We were invited in. They reached out to welcome us and include us, strangers, yet strangely familiar. We danced, and danced, and danced, as if we were long lost relatives. We were one. One family. Even with language barriers we experienced the joy of the encounter by being completely present as they were with us.

I couldn't help but look at the neighborhood around the church. Buildings were missing doors, and windows, and roofs – and people lived in them. Laundry was hanging out of windows or on lines atop the buildings. Water isn't safe to drink. Yet these people were happy. They had their families and they had their faith. They were joyful. They knew the important things in life. I was particularly struck by the kids socializing in the same space as their parents, proud of who they are, knowing they are loved. I was struck by the music and uplifting spirit of the Mass. I believe all of their Masses are like that, and that our Mass was not unique simply because of our presence. It was clear that children and teens were there because they wanted to be not because they had to be. And I couldn't help but think they had something that we're missing in the United States. Their lives revolve around their family and their faith. And I don't mean in a pietistic or crazy devotional kind of way. Their joy was genuine.

The joy of the Assembly was contagious as well. For as many countries and languages that were represented, we left not as new-found friends, but as one family, aware of and part of the larger world.

My prayer is to remember that joy, and the joy we can bring each other, even amid diversity. We must be grateful for the small things in life, grateful for our loved ones and mindful that we are all one family. May we remember the important things in life and not fret over the things for which we have no control! Finally, may our joyful witness be an example to others.

Footnotes

[1] Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *The Great Design of God's Love, A Companion to Growing in the Virtues of Jesus* (San Antonio, Texas: Burke Publishing Company, 1997), 43.

[2] Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, *Letters of Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon*, trans. Joseph Roy, ed. Joseph Stefanelli (Dayton, Ohio: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 1999), vol. 2, p. 529, letter no. 532.4 to Sister Séraphine Robert (Oct. 8, 1824).

[3] *The Mission of Marianist Lay Communities* (Lliria, Spain, 1997), 5.1.

[4] *The Mission of Marianist Lay Communities*, 3.2.

[5] Enrique Aguilera, SM and José María Arnaiz, SM, *Enfleshing the Word, Prayer and the Marianist Spiritual Journey*, trans. by Joseph Stefanelli, SM (Dayton, Ohio: North American Center for Marianist Studies, 2000), p.41.

[6] *In Alliance with Mary* (Bordeaux, France, 2005), 21.