

This month, to nourish our reflection on vocations, we have the words of the Vocation Ministry Director of the Province of Meribah. May what Brother Stephen shares with us out of his own profound conviction help us to see how we ourselves can work to help young people to discover and discern God's call in their lives. (AF)

The Seed Sprouts and Grows -- Accompaniment and the Grace of a Marianist Vocation

by Bro. Stephen Balletta, S.M.

Bro. Stephen Vincent Balletta is a graduate of Chaminade High School in Mineola, New York. Those four years at Chaminade, along with the Marianists that he met there, made an enormous impact on Bro. Stephen, who became an Aspirant in the Society of Mary only a few weeks after his high-school graduation. Bro. Stephen made his first profession of vows on June 13, 1976. Bro. Stephen taught English at Chaminade for 31 years; for the past seven years, he has taught 12th-grade religion there. In the fall of 2010, Bro. Stephen was appointed Vocation Director for the Province of Meribah. Since November of 2014, he has also served as the director of the Chaminade-Mineola Community. If you have any questions about the article that follows or if you would like to contact Bro. Stephen for any reason, you can do so at the following email address: SBalletta@chaminade-hs.org.



Ever since my earliest days in the Society of Mary, I remember these haunting words from every single vow ceremony that I witnessed: "Whether you be waking or sleeping, by night and by day, the seed sprouts and grows, you know not how."

But is this really true? Do the seeds of a vocation sprout and grow in ways that we just don't understand? Is vocation work a complete mystery? Is it only the "Lord of the Harvest" who knows the workings of God's call in a young man's or a young woman's heart? Are we professed religious left simply to watch, as largely prayerful but passive bystanders, while the mysterious gift of a vocation unfolds?



I don't think so, but I do believe that vocation work involves vast swaths of mystery with which we are asked to cooperate. Vocation work ushers us into the mysterious intersection of divine grace and human freedom. We can force neither – neither God's invitation nor a candidate's response.

To be clear, the grace of a vocation comes from God. We do not wish to attract young people simply by "marketing," but rather assist them in discerning and freely embracing this grace. Still, there is much we can do to plant the seeds that brings a person's vocation to fruition; to nurture the seedlings, so to speak, of a religious vocation; and to stand alongside each vocation discernor – supportively and patiently – as we, the farmers, await the yield of soil.

The question arises, then: Just how do we engage in vocation ministry? How do we cooperate with God's grace in order to cultivate vocations to Society of Mary and to the Daughters of Mary Immaculate? In a venture that hinges on both God's grace and an individual vocation candidate's deepest freedom, just what is our role? What is the role of each Unit's vocation director, and what is the role of all the members of the Marianist Family in this matter that is so vital to our survival, our health, and our vibrancy in the future?

As a Province, we have experienced both successes and setbacks in vocation ministry. Based on these successes, these setbacks, and the challenges we have faced – not only over the past seven years, but for almost two decades now – I would like to offer some reflections and share some practices as we have tried to cooperate with God's grace and attract new laborers to the harvest.

I offer these reflections in a spirit of humility, knowing full well that challenges in vocation work vary significantly from Unit to Unit and acknowledging that, for almost two decades, the vocation well in our Province ran dry. It is only within the last two years that we have been blessed with vocations – three Novices and strong prospects for Aspirants and additional Novices in the immediate future.

Even with these blessings, we proceed with a mixture of hope, trepidation, and humility. Like it or not, we must admit that commitments are fragile – vocations to the priesthood and religious life perhaps even more so. No vocation is guaranteed. Each young vocation elicits from us much effort, much prayer, and steadfast reliance on God's grace.

To organize these reflections, I would like to examine three areas of vocation work: planting the seeds, nurturing the seedlings, and growing alongside each vocation contact as his or her vocation takes root.



FR. GARRET LONG (NOVICE MASTER), BROS. PATRICK J. CAHILL, PETER F. SENNERT, ANDREW J. SANTORIELLO (NOVICES); BRO. STEPHEN V. BALLETTA (ASSISTANT NOVICE MASTER)

Planting the Seeds

Let me return to an image I mentioned a bit earlier in these reflections: For almost two decades, the vocation well in the Province of Meribah ran dry. Prior to the 1990s, we were blessed with a deep well of vocations. Our high schools – first Chaminade High School in Mineola and then Kellenberg Memorial High School in Uniondale – provided a steady stream of candidates entering the Aspirancy immediately after their high-school graduation.

By the mid-1990s, all that changed. From time to time, a single candidate from one of schools would enter our Aspirancy program, but only one persevered. (Praise God, he is now studying for the priesthood at the Marianist Seminary in Rome!)

Why the change? The primary reason, I think, is that young people began making major commitments much later in life. Career choices, marriage, entrance into Diocesan seminaries, and other major life decisions rarely came before young men and women reached their late 20s and early 30s. Among millennials, the timeline for major lifetime commitments had shifted. Meanwhile, we in the Province of Meribah still clung to the old paradigm of young men joining us after they had graduated from high school.

Eventually, we had to admit that our strategy was no longer working and therefore re-imagine our approach to vocation work. This did not mean abandoning our vocation efforts in our high schools. No, if anything, it meant redoubling our efforts in our high schools, but it also meant creating a network of vocation outreach for men in university and beyond.

And what exactly do I mean by redoubling our efforts in our high schools? To put it simply, it meant creating a culture of vocations in our high schools that helped young men and women hear the call of God in their lives. It meant creating an atmosphere in which we openly discussed and encouraged vocations to religious life and to the priesthood in general and to the Marianists in particular.

Some forty years ago, when I was considering a vocation to the Marianists, vocations were a private matter between an individual contact and his “recruiter,” and I was advised not to talk about my vocation with my classmates.

In the last ten years, we’ve turned that idea on its head. We decided to “go public” with our vocation outreach, to cover the hallways with posters encouraging people to consider if they might have a vocation to the Society of Mary, to videotape promotions explaining Marianist vocations, and to air those promotions on each school’s closed-circuit television system.

About every two or three weeks, we televise a four-minute video segment entitled “Meet the Marianists.” In each “Meet the Marianists” segment, a different member of the Province talks about his Marianist religious vocation, about his prayer life, about his mission and community life, about his devotion to Christ and His Blessed Mother – in short, about the joy of his vocation. Additionally, we post these “Meet the Marianist” videos – about twenty different Marianists in all – on our Province website (www.provinceofmeribah.com), our Province Facebook page (Marianists - Province of Meribah), on my personal Facebook page (Bro Stephen Balletta), and on our daily “Into the Deep” blog (www.intothedeepblog.net). Furthermore, we have frozen images and selected quotations from each “Meet the Marianists” segment and adapted them to large, glossy posters that we have hung in our own schools and mailed to neighboring parishes as well.

At the outset of my term as vocation director, we created a twenty-minute videotape that provides insights into Marianist vocations and that offers a glimpse into the day-to-day life of a Marianist in the Province of Meribah. The videotape is entitled “*Ad Jesum, Per Mariam*: The Marianists of the Province of Meribah.” We have posted “*Ad Jesum, Per Mariam*” on our website and on our Facebook pages, featured the videotape on our blog, and shown it to every sophomore in Chaminade as part of his tenth-grade day retreat at our Saragossa Retreat Center.



FR. JOSEPH FITZGERALD (VOCATION DIRECTOR FOR THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTER & BRO. STEPHEN BALLETTA)

Into The Deep

The Vocation Blog of the Province of Meribah

THE MARIANISTS The Province of Meribah



To Jesus Through Mary

Plant the seeds that brings a person's vocation to fruition. They are planted early – as early as freshman or sophomore year in high school. Create a culture of vocations. Let everyone in our schools – everyone associated with us – know that we are committed to vocation work and that we are serious about our call to cooperate with God in assuring the future of the Society of Mary.

Re-establishing a vocations club has played a pivotal role in creating a culture of vocations in our schools. Seven or eight years ago, when I was paging through Chaminade High School yearbooks from the 1950s and early 1960s, I noticed that the school sponsored a vocation club, and that it numbered several young men. By the time I was a Chaminade student in the 1970s, however, the vocation club had disappeared.

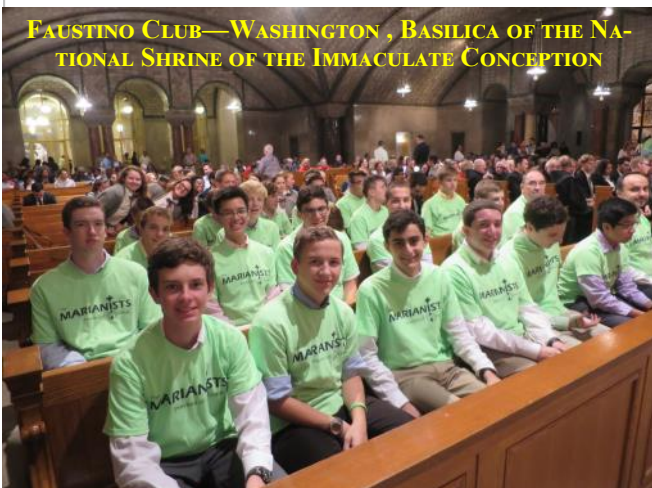
In the spring of 2013, we decided to revive the vocation club in an effort to put vocations “back on the map” in our schools. We decided to name the re-established vocations club the Faustino Club, after Venerable Faustino Pérez Manglano, a fitting patron, we thought, for high-school boys considering a vocation to the Society of Mary. We began small, and with no small degree of doubt whether we were making the right move. We would invite our high-school-age contacts to join the Faustino Club, but would they be willing to make such a public commitment to vocation discernment?

It turns out that they were more than willing to do so. Today, our Faustino Club numbers about 30 high-school-age young men. We meet once a month for about an hour. During that time, we explore the life of Venerable Faustino, listen to witness talks from members of the Marianist Community, watch videos about religious life and the priesthood, and open up the floor to a lively question-and-answer period. We always conclude our meetings by praying together – oftentimes using “Fifty Times I Love You: The Rosary with Faustino,” compiled by Fr. José Maria Salaverri, S.M. We have welcomed several guests and guest presenters to our Faustino Club meetings – including all the members of the General Administration during their visit to the Meribah Province this past October.

Twice a year – once in the fall and once in the spring – we hold come-and-see nights. Dubbed “Operation Fiat,” each come-and-see night includes Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Evening Prayer, and dinner with all the members of the Province. At each Operation Fiat, a different member of the Province gives a witness talk, recounting his own vocation story and testifying to the joy of his – and our – Marianist vocation. We invite everyone in the Faustino Club to Operation Fiat, as well as other potential vocation contacts, using these biannual evenings as a springboard to encourage young men to join the Faustino Club and thus commit themselves to the next level of vocation discernment. Attendance at each of our Operation Fiat evenings ranges between 40 and 50 young men and includes students from both schools – Chaminade and Kellenberg Memorial.



FAUSTINO CLUB FOR VOCATIONS WITH THE GENERAL COUNCIL OF THE SM (OCTOBER 2016)



FAUSTINO CLUB—WASHINGTON, BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The Faustino Club has been a real blessing for our vocation outreach program. When we started the club up again in 2013, we wondered if our contacts would accept the invitation to participate. Today, students are approaching **us** to ask if they can join, and current members are inviting their friends to sign up for the club as well. All of this means that students at Chaminade and Kellenberg know that classmates of theirs are thinking about a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. Further, they are praying for these classmates of theirs and encouraging them on their vocational journey.

Here's a timely example of what we are trying to do: On Friday, April 7 of this year – just before Holy Week – the Province sponsored a Holy Hour for Vocations in conjunction with our Diocese, held at Chaminade High School. We utilized our Faustino Club – as well as musical groups and World Youth Day Pilgrims from Chaminade and Kellenberg – to promote and animate the event. In a Spirit-filled evening attended by over 700 young people from across the Diocese of Rockville Centre, the Holy Hour gave powerful witness to the importance of vocations for the future of the Church. This is what we mean by creating a culture of vocations. This is what we mean by planting the seeds!



Nurturing the Seedlings

As I said earlier, we didn't abandon our efforts to plant the seeds of religious vocation among our high-school students. No, we redoubled them. But we also expanded our efforts significantly on another front -- with university contacts and with post-university contacts, both graduates of our own high schools and those who responded to the increased number of advertisements we began placing in vocation magazines and on social media. This phase of our vocation work meant that we were not only planting the seeds among our high-school students (and among older men as well), but also cultivating the seeds that we had already sown. To put it another way, we were nurturing the seedlings.

We have found three programs to be particularly effective as we attempt to "nurture the seedlings" of a Marianist vocation: retreats for university-age men, university-campus visits, and our Summer Discernment Community.

Since our vocation contacts are no longer following the old paradigm of entering the Society immediately after high school, how do we keep in contact with them once they have left for a university, oftentimes at great distances from our two high schools? How are we maintaining a relationship with these young men when we are no longer seeing them on an almost daily basis? How do we make sure that "out of sight" does not transmogrify into "out of mind"?



Retreats for university-age men have provided one of the ways that we have addressed this issue. Since 2011, we have held 14 of these retreats, one during the extended winter break (late December and early January) that most American universities give their students, and one in mid-May, just after the conclusion of most students' second semester, but before most of them begin their summer studies and internships. Generally, 20 to 30 young men attend these retreats, and while the retreats are not limited to vocation contacts, we certainly invite regular attendees to consider a vocation to the Marianists. If a young man is attending two or three consecutive university-age retreats, there's good reason to hope that he may be open to discerning a more permanent kind of commitment to the Lord! Our university-age retreats have led to many fruitful vocation conversations with the young men who have attended.

In addition to inviting our graduates back "home" to one of our retreat houses (Meribah in Muttontown, New York and Founder's Hollow in Accord, New York), we also go out on the road to meet them. Three or four times a year, we will travel to universities to hold evenings of prayer and recollection. We choose universities that have large numbers of our graduates enrolled in them (especially graduates who are vocation prospects). Then, three or four of our brothers and/or priests will drive or even fly to these universities and conduct a program of "spiritual refreshment." Typically, the program includes Mass, readings from scripture, discussion, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and, of course, food and fellowship. Once again, attendance at these programs is not limited to vocation prospects. *All* are welcome – male and female, young people we know and friends of theirs whom we have never met before – even students who did not graduate from a Marianist high school! You can be sure that, as each evening of recollection unfolds, it soon becomes apparent which young people might be open to the grace of a religious vocation. These, then, become the young men with whom we continue the vocation conversation.

I might add that, when we make these excursions to university campuses, we try to involve our most serious vocation discerners in the planning of our university evenings of recollection. Several months ahead of our visit, I will contact our most serious vocation discerners and invite them to form a planning committee for our upcoming program. I ask these university-age contacts to help us publicize the evening of recollection, spread the word among their friends, contact a caterer (The Province pays the food bills, however!), and secure spaces on campus for worship and fellowship.

There's a very important reason why we involve our most promising vocation contacts in the planning of these events: it gives them a sense that they too can contribute to the Marianist mission of making Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother known, loved, and served.



This, it seems to me, forms the foundation of vocation work among those nearing the age of major – perhaps even lifetime – commitments: enabling and encouraging them to envision themselves as members of a community contributing to the Marianist mission of making Christ and His Blessed Mother known, loved, and served. We try to help them imagine themselves as contributors to the mission of Blessed Chaminade. We want to empower them with a vision of making a difference, of becoming the next generation of Marianists who will bring their fellow men and women to Jesus through Mary.



BRO. ANDREW SANTORIELLO (NOVICE) WITH LIAM, A CHAMINADE NINTH-GRADE STUDENT

For this reason, we have invited our most serious university-age-and-older vocation contacts to participate in a Summer Discernment Community. The program lasts between three and four weeks, depending on other commitments of the members of the Province in any given summer. Members of the Discernment Community spend those three or four weeks living in Community with us. From Monday to Friday, they follow our daily schedule; pray the Liturgy of the Hours and attend Mass with us; take meals with us; work alongside of us on our Community assignments; recreate with us; and spend their afternoons in prayer, assigned reading, and a class on spirituality and Marianist religious life. Participants in the Discernment Community are free to visit family or friends on the weekend, although most opt to stay in our Community for the weekend as well.

As we state in the written invitation to the Summer Discernment Community, the program “will provide young men with the opportunity to further explore their vocations in the context of a Community with other men their age, living the Marianist Family Spirit as they discern if God is indeed calling them to the Marianist way of life.”

Our first Summer Discernment Community, back in 2012, numbered two participants. One of those young men is now a Dominican scholastic. The second is one of our three Novices in the Province of Meribah! Since that first summer, participation in the Discernment Community has risen to include as many as eight young men at a time. One of them is our second Novice. Many of the others are still actively discerning a vocation with the Marianists.



CHRISTMASTIME RETREAT FOR COLLEGE-AGE MEN, WITH SM BROTHERS (MUTTONTOWN, NEW YORK)

Awaiting the Yield of the Soil

This is undoubtedly the most challenging part of vocation work: waiting supportively, patiently, and prayerfully for the seeds we have sown and the seedlings that we have nurtured to bear fruit. The words **encounter** and **accompaniment** are paramount in this aspect of vocation work. For all the vocation programs that we run and events that we sponsor, for all the printed vocation literature that we publish and outreach that we extend through social media, nothing matters more than personal contact, personal encounter, and personal invitation. Ultimately, young men and young women respond to a person, to a relationship, much more than they do to a program, to a video, or to an advertisement in a vocation magazine. The retreats, the evenings of recollection, the come-and-see nights and the discernment experiences – all of these are meant to be channels of personal encounter with God and with those living the religious life. But, they never take the place of personal encounter.

Nothing can ever replace the individual Marianist extending that first **personal** invitation to a young man or a young woman: “You know, I see in you many outstanding qualities that could indicate God is calling you to be a Marianist.” This is the language of encounter, and the more of us who are willing to employ this language and have this conversation, the more effective will be our vocation outreach. Vocation outreach is not exclusively, not even primarily, the work of the vocation director. Vocation outreach is a grassroots effort. The role of the vocation director is to organize and encourage a truly grassroots vocation outreach in every Unit of the Society of Mary.

In truth, we are called not only to invite and encounter vocation prospects, but to accompany them as well on their vocation journey. And, quite honestly, accompaniment will leave us vulnerable. Sometimes, the vocation journey is a long one. Sometimes, our vocation contacts will take unexpected detours, and we might very well find ourselves not only inviting young men and women to our Marianist way of life, but also counseling them and guiding them as they grapple with challenging personal and spiritual issues in their own lives. Not infrequently, accompanying young men and women on their vocational journeys will mean helping them discern that God may be calling them to some religious congregation other than the Marianists, or to the Diocesan priesthood, or to marriage.

There is just no way around it: accompaniment demands patience. Accompaniment requires that we grow in grace and wisdom even as we ask our young contacts to grow in God’s grace. Accompaniment will mean disappointment, fatigue, doubt, pain, and heartache from time to time. That, at least, has been my experience. But accompaniment also brings deep fulfillment and great joy. I can assure you of that.

Ultimately, the work of vocations is the work of accompaniment. Accompaniment permeates every stage of vocation work: planting the seeds, nurturing the seedlings, and awaiting the yield of the soil. We can draw great strength from the assurance that God accompanies us as we accompany each young person on his or her vocation journey.

St. Augustine famously counseled, “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” We would be hard-pressed to find better advice as we accompany young people on the paths towards their vocation!



SPRING'S RETREAT FOR COLLEGE-AGE MEN (2017, FOUNDER'S HOLLOW MARIANIST RETREAT CENTER)