

**Charism and Crisis**  
**AMU Meeting in St. Louis**  
**June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Cor. 12: 3b-7, 12-13 and Mark 4: 1-9**

Years ago, when I was the provost at UD, a retired university administrator told me that I should never let a crisis go to waste. Why? Because crises, he said, “create new opportunities.” The crises we have been discussing at this meeting are not only important, they are also difficult to address. What opportunities do they create? Given that there are so many crises—environmental degradation, human trafficking, racism, poverty, war, and the lack of respect for all living beings—to name only a few, to how many of these should we respond? As members of university communities, what competencies do we have to respond? In a world so disfigured by greed, violence, egotism and war, what kind of difference, really, can we make?

It doesn't help that many people in our society have their doubts about the value of universities. They think of universities as ivory towers, gated communities in which people spend their time on “academic” matters. It is telling, is it not, that most people use the word “academic” to refer to whatever is irrelevant. It is also true that most universities are not change agents; rather, they typically accept as given the priorities of the societies in which they are located, but rarely set out to change those priorities. Most people, especially the affluent and the powerful, expect universities to prepare their students to fit seamlessly into the work force, perpetuate and grow the economy, but not rethink its priorities. Are we, then, as university communities, irrelevant in the face of world crises? Are we naïve to imagine that we are in a position to change society?

The readings for today's Eucharist offer some help. They stress two things: First, they stress the importance of authentic communities that work together and welcome the gifts of everyone. Second, they call us to be fruitful, to imitate the sower who tosses seeds everywhere—hoping that at least some will take root and bear fruit. In a time of heightened polarization, the need for communities that respect diversity and work together should be both obvious and critically important. At a time when much of the media spread distorted information, when powerful people twist and hide the truth for political reasons, and the very foundations of democracy are threatened, people who know how to work together are literally a godsend. In such a world, we need to plant good seeds, seeds that will bring people together and produce the kind of fruit that truly nourishes and strengthens human communities. Our universities, grounded as we are in our distinctive mission, are not merely academic. Society genuinely needs what we have to offer.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul addresses a community that welcomed Jews and Greeks, slaves and free persons, all of whom were baptized. Today, our university communities welcome not just the baptized. We welcome people of many religions and none, all of whom, we hope, will dedicate themselves to the search for truth and the works of justice.

Besides welcoming more than the baptized into our universities, something else has changed. I am speaking of the Society of Mary. Our numbers have dramatically decreased over the past fifty years. This new demographic situation is a crisis for us—one, however, that also offers new opportunities. Today, all of us, not just the vowed Marianists, are called to collaborate in forming ourselves and our students in ways that respect religious pluralism, that form leaders and undertake works of justice and love. Today, we, together as a community, are

called in a special way to learn in fresh ways about our Catholic and Marianist traditions. In recent decades, the Catholic Church has witnessed the phenomenal growth of lay leadership, especially in the United States. Earlier this year, Pope Francis disassociated the power to govern from priestly ordination, opening the doors in unprecedented ways to lay leadership. Marianist educational associates strengthen the unique mission of our universities. If the number of vowed Marianists has decreased, the Marianist Family has grown, and lay leadership in our universities and in the Church is now more wide-ranging and talented than ever.

We face still another challenge. For decades, attendance at churches, synagogues and mosques have dramatically decreased. Increasing numbers of people, especially young adults, think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, or, as neither. The recently deceased historian of Christian doctrine, Jaroslav Pelikan, worried that his grandchildren might not have a religion to reject! If the relevance of religion disappears, what does that mean for the future of religiously-affiliated universities like ours? Yet even here, in this crisis, there is an opportunity. In the midst of increasing disaffiliation, we have the opportunity to embody and present a religious tradition that is vibrant, prophetic and intellectually stimulating—one that is very much in the world, but not of it. Were it only of the world, we would have nothing different to offer the world. And, the world very much needs what we offer.

What resources, then, do we have to meet these crises? If we return to the Gospel, we see that Mark does not tell us what seeds the sower sowed or where the sower got them. In a way analogous to the sower, the faculty and staff of our universities also sow seeds. Faculty, of course, have to prepare classes, correct exams, keep office hours, and attend to the needs of students. Faculty and staff also

can be creative, innovative and rethink how to do better what they do better. We all need to be active learners. Research is significant. Teaching without doing research is like going to confession without having sinned: neither the teacher nor the penitent has anything relevant to say. The best among us, however, make learning and research our way of life. Drawing deeply from our Catholic and Marianist traditions, our unique resource, we are innovative, and in response to crises, create new ways of thinking, even new degree programs. More than some faculty realize, the staff plays a crucial role in all these efforts. Campus ministers, financial aid officers, fund raisers, cafeteria workers, all make important contributions to our life together. Faculty and staff together prepare the soil and help the seeds they all sow in different ways take root.

One of the most important contributions our Marianist universities can make is to create learning communities that are careful about words, that search for the truth, that find ways to communicate that truth effectively and compellingly, and that commit themselves improve society, not just fit into it, or worse yet exploit it. Judaism, Christianity and Islam foster strong traditions of justice and care for the poor. Catholicism in particular has developed a sophisticated body of social teachings that addresses the big questions—the economy, the environment, globalization, world governance, and the sacredness of all life. However, these important social teachings do not provide any magical solutions or quick fixes, and no short-cuts past the endless and painful labor of trying to understand what is going on in the world, and how to heal our society, divided and broken as it is. Jesus died to save us from self-destruction. He died because of the way he lived and spoke. If we do not love, we will die; if we do love, we will die (Herbert McCabe, O.P.). As the Jesuit poet Daniel Berrigan once wrote, if you want to

follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood. Our mission will make us vulnerable.

Our work requires patience and humility. We sow seeds, but we do not reap the harvest. We give our very best to our students, but what they will do with what we have given them becomes evident only over time. Sometimes, we are quite pleased by what our students become and do. Sometimes we are surprised, as when students who seemed to sleep through one of our courses tells us years later what a positive difference that course made in their lives. A former member of the board of trustees at Dayton recently told me that “A” students become professors, “C” students run the world, and “B” students keep the books for the “C” students. A bit of an exaggeration, to be sure. We pray that all our students, whatever their grades, learn, lead and serve others. Grades are less important than learning how to love and serve others.

At the end of the parable of the sower, Jesus tells the people, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.” Jesus wants people not just to listen. He wants them to hear, to take his words to heart. When I was a child, my mother once told me not to speak unless someone spoke to me first. I think she told me that because she thought I talked too much. In retrospect, she had a point. But later I came to realize the deeper truth of what she had said, namely, that the way anyone learns to speak is by first listening carefully to what other people say. That is how we all have learned our mother tongue. Therefore, “we cannot speak unless we are spoken to; all speech is, in the last resort, response...” (N. Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence*, p. 75). No one was more attentive, more attuned to the Word of God, than Mary. In our Marianist universities, we teach responsible speech. In the beginning was the Word. The Word is sacred. Pondering words in our hearts, as did Mary, instills wisdom and forms welcoming communities.

My dear friends, may the language we speak and the seeds we sow nourish and form communities of faith attentive to the common good. May our communities work together, respect differences, not just differences between baptized Jews and Greeks, but also between people of different religions as well as the many who today are in search of one. May we welcome into our common mission people of every color, people who are straight and who are queer. Let us teach what is true and good and beautiful so that no one is enslaved, least of all by ignorance and prejudice. Let us freely draw from our great and capacious mission, deepen it, and widen it. Let us pray for wisdom and courage.

I pray that Jesus inspires us in the ways of truth and justice, that Mary, seat of wisdom, form among us communities that lift up the lowly and feed the hungry. We have a great mission. We can and must address the crises of our day. Let us be patient and humble, but also bold and fearless. Marianist universities are never just academic. We are truly blessed!

James L. Heft, S.M.