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Soaring on Eagle's Wings

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Friday December 3, 2021

By Eric F. Spina

(This piece appears in the Autumn 2021 University of Dayton Magazine.)

On a late autumn afternoon, keyboardist Madison Schroeder '21 softly played the familiar, stirring hymn “On Eagle’s Wings” as faculty and staff filled the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception.

I thought about the meaning behind the song’s lyrics for our six new Marianist Educational Associates we welcomed that day at the annual commitment prayer service:

*“They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on eagle’s wings;
They will run and not grow weary,
walk and not grow faint.”*

Standing before each other in the chapel with shafts of sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows, these lay leaders pledged to “strengthen, sustain and develop the Catholic and Marianist mission and identity of the University of Dayton.”

By our presence and prayers, we wished them the strength to live out the University's values and, by the example of their lives, share the Marianist charism with others. While some universities grapple with their mission and identity in a changing world, we know who we are. In no small measure, alongside the Marianists, the Marianist Educational Associates — known on campus as MEAs — personify the heart and soul of UD.

After completing a formation program, the MEAs partner with brothers, priests and sisters to advance the Marianist educational philosophy in classrooms, offices, labs, residence halls and their informal interactions with others on campus.

At 125 members and growing, these lay collaborators are part of a larger initiative, Forever Marianist, that aims to keep the founding philosophy central to campus life during an age of fewer vowed religious ([see story](#)). As we move into the future, their dedication to our timeless mission will matter more than ever.

If history is a guide, it's a hopeful future. Two centuries ago while in exile during the French Revolution, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade welcomed an eclectic group of religious and laity — priests, merchants, teachers, even chimney sweeps — into a new religious movement. Together, they drew their inspiration from Mary, mother of Jesus, and fostered community, one relationship at a time. From the beginning, lay leadership has been a hallmark of the Marianists.

"Like today, our Marianist founders faced a new and different future, but they faced it with courage and faith," Father Jim Fitz, S.M. '68, vice president for mission and rector, told the MEAs before they gathered at the altar to publicly affirm their commitment.

As we sang "On Eagle's Wings" at the close of the prayer service, we left the chapel with renewed strength, ready to soar into the future with faith and fortitude.

(Photo by Mary Kate Fleisher '23)