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TO ALL MARIANIST RELIGIOUS OVER THE AGE OF 70

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Missionary Apostolic, to all his fellow
Marianists throughout the world

TO ALL MARIANIST RELIGIOUS OVER THE AGE OF 70

Dear Brothers,

During these years, working in Rome and traveling to the different Units of the Society around the world, I have been struck by the key roles played by the various generations in the Society. Each age brings different graces, different needs and challenges.

This year, as I come toward the end of my service in the General Administration, I hope to write three circular letters, this one especially to you our senior members, another to those under 40, and a third one to those in mid-life. If you are interested, perhaps you may want to read the letters addressed to the other groups as well. In this way, I hope to stimulate some reflection about our life-tasks and some dialogue among the different age-groups in the Society.

It is a pleasure to write this letter to you, our senior members over the age of 70. Of course, you form a very significant and active group in the Society. At the present time you number 490, that is about 35 % of our total of 1390 members. In four years I will be joining your number, so your situation as Marianist religious is of immediate existential interest to me!

I am writing you, first of all, to thank you for all you have been and all you have accomplished, for your generous dedication to Marianist life throughout your lifetime.

I also am writing to emphasize that the vocation to be a “missionary of Mary” is a project for a lifetime, something that continues bringing rich results at any age, not a task from which we retire at some stated age. I believe that you are called to bear witness to the meaning and vocation of older people in our world today: to look back on life with gratefulness, to continue to serve others actively in a spirit of free gift, and to share the richness of your particular life-experience with the next generations. I am writing to encourage you to offer us the characteristic gifts of your time of life with enthusiasm and creativity.

Attitudes about Aging

Our Rule of Life speaks of senior religious, telling us that “to the end of our days we are happy to spend our lives and our strength in Mary’s service”(art. 91) and of the attitude of other brothers toward those who are retired, telling us that “all appreciate their witness of serenity and fidelity, their rich experience, and the unique contribution they offer by prayer and example. These older members can count on the concern of their fellow Brothers and the special attention of their superiors” (art. 3.5).

Sometimes we fall short of this ideal. A few senior religious seem to be sad and defeatist. Superiors in general are very attentive to the needs of the senior members, but not always so successful in involving them in mission and ministry. Sometimes younger members are tempted to take give up the effort of trans-generational dialogue and understanding, to take the hard attitude that the old cannot be counted on, that they should be left alone. Thank God, the attitudes just mentioned are not dominant ones.

In the past, people over 70 were presumed to be toward the upper limits of old age, afflicted with various ailments and incapable of working. Today, however, thanks to the blessings of medicine and hygiene, the majority of you lead active lives, continuing to serve people in an amazing variety of ways, participating creatively in our life of community, prayer and mission. In many ways, you are the living link of our Society with our rich heritage.

Like all people of your age, you have some health problems, larger or smaller, but, thank God, they still allow most of you to enjoy a good quality of life. More than ever before, society in general is conscious of the realities, the potentials and challenges of people of your age. In the Society, your unique experiences as senior religious are the object of reflection and writing, of province study groups and Chapters.

Of course, your group is quite diverse. As we grow older, each one of us tends to become more characteristically himself, unique, with well developed and accentuated individual traits. Health and energy in your age group are quite varied, as are national customs and legislations about retirement. Moreover, there is a tremendous difference of experiences in a time span between the ages of 70 and 104, which we now find among our senior religious!

The Pyramid of Ages

The pyramid of ages in the Society of Mary is unparalleled in past history. Even so, it is similar to that of most religious congregations in the Church today. In fact, it looks less like a pyramid than a column with a globe at the top!

At present, our average age in the entire Society is 63. At the upper limit, we have 84 religious over the age of 85 – an age very rarely attained in the past. The largest single ten-year cohort of Marianists (334) is that between the ages of 61 and 70.

The narrowest shaft in our age-pyramid is at “mid-life,” with only 171 members in their fifties and, least of all, 126 members in their forties. Yet, these are the age groups to which we naturally look for leadership.

In the youngest ages, the base may be broadening out slightly again. Our numbers are beginning to grow, especially in our “newer” Units in Africa and Asia. We have 136 members in their thirties and 113 already in the under-thirty years, during which most members join the Society.

It seems indisputably true that our total numbers will continue to decline still for some time. The next generations of Marianists will, at least for some decades, be smaller in number than the ones you have known.

Many people naturally lament this numerical decline and this lopsided or “top-heavy” age-distribution. But numbers are not the key criterion in the Kingdom of God; God does great things with tiny groups, like the twelve apostles or the 300 soldiers of Gideon (Judges, chapter 7). We should not forget that our religious congregations were the work of Blessed Father Chaminade in his senior years! Rather than lament our realities, it would be better for us all to rejoice in all the richness of life that has been yours as senior religious, give thanks for it, rejoice in the creative and gratuitous possibilities you still experience, and do our best to transmit your richness of living the charism to those, however many they are, who come after you.

Your Life-experience

You have lived through a dramatic period in history. I am struck by this fact every year as I write letters to our jubilarians and review the record of their assignments and accomplishments.

You entered into formation and came to maturity in an age when classical European culture still dominated the world, a time of stark confrontations between political and ideological blocs. As faithful Catholics, when you entered the Society you were immersed in a series of seemingly immutable customs and unquestionable verities. The large houses of formation of that era were apt symbols of the rock-like solidity of Catholic culture and the Marianist world within it. It seemed like nothing basic had ever changed or ever could.

When you entered the Society, religious life seemed absolutely central to the life of the Church. “Separation from the world” was a key value of religious life, and a whole series of practices, taken for granted by everyone, clearly distinguished it from secular life. People of your generation, unlike our younger members, remember and have stories to tell about such customs as praying in Latin and singing Gregorian chant, reading at table, the Chapter of Faults and the Little Office of the Immaculate Conception.

Our big houses of formation were full to overflowing, our traditional apostolates flourishing. The only imaginable perspective - barring the tragedies of another war or persecution - was continued linear growth. I vividly remember how in my own home-province in the 1960's we began projecting future numbers and dreaming about the buildings we needed to house new members and the new schools we would be able to open.

But the illusion of cultural-ideological immobility and linear growth dissolved very rapidly. There are not many parallels in history to the rapid change through which you have lived. Only the eras of the Reformation and the French Revolution offer comparable experiences of transformation in a short time-frame.

In your lifetime cultural and religious ground shifted under your feet. Nearly everything in our way of life was subjected to searching examination and rethinking. Many of you welcomed the rapid changes in the Church and in society in general, took an active part in promoting them and educating for them.

During your peak years, we rejected much from the past, and it was only later that we began to wonder if we might have lost too much or moved too quickly. Many of us thought we had clear ideas about the role and mission of religious life, but still at times it seemed to drift, without clarity of purpose and sharp focus. Many friends and companions left us to walk another path, leaving us with a certain sense of loneliness. Our institutions, so central to the Marianist way of life, were transformed almost beyond recognition. We experienced a new role for the laity, new ways of relating with them; in the Church, we sometimes sense that lay people are now seen, much more clearly than we, as the protagonists of the future. Our own role is not always so clear.

Simply to have survived and maintained a permanent commitment as a religious in such times of change is no small grace and no small accomplishment! Despite all the setbacks and disappointments you have experienced, I am convinced that your period will go down in the long history of religious life as one of extraordinary creativity and courage. Nothing of value that you have accomplished will be lost.

You have maintained and preserved our historic ministries of education and pastoral service that continue to be of great worth to the Church and world. You have reached out in new creative ministries such as spiritual guidance and the formation of lay Christian communities, service to the poor and creative forms of alternative education on their behalf. You have founded new communities and new groups of Marianists, religious and lay, in more than twenty countries where we were not present when you entered the Society. You have been teachers and writers, pastors, youth leaders and organizers, technical experts and practical men, administrators, generous coworkers with many others. You have passed on the best of Catholic culture and worked intensely to develop the stunning new insights of the Second Vatican Council. These are outstanding accomplishments.

But these accomplishments have not been easy. Each of you has his own history of response to this difficult time of transformation. You have implemented many new ecclesial and social visions, and at the same time most of you have moved along the continuum I spoke of in Circular no. 9, about “witnessing to the hope that is in us”:

- from denial of any problem to blaming someone for its causes,
- from blame to bargaining for solutions,
- from bargaining to resignation to inevitable decline,
- from resignation to hope for a new future.

Wherever along this continuum you may find yourself at the present time, you have certainly learned a lot of patience in the process.

Looking at your past with gratefulness and reconciliation

There remains a deep question of discernment at your stage of life. It would be mistaken – a recipe for tedium and ennui - to think that nothing new or different lies ahead. As one of your number puts it, the question is “Lord, what do you want of me in the evening of my life?”

Surely, one of the first things the Lord wants at this stage is thankfulness, the ability to savor the gifts of God that have accompanied us again and again on our life-journey. For many years the Lord has been with you, accompanying you at every step of your life given through the Society of Mary to the service of the people of our Church and world. God has worked

through you for the good of many people you have served. It is natural and good for senior religious to spend some time looking back over the years, recalling the ways in which God has been so faithful, as well as the ways they have tried to respond to Him. An overarching feeling of gratitude for God's goodness and grace, to us personally and through us to others, should be a hallmark of these years. With Mary you can pray sincerely, out of our personal lived experience, that "God who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

The sense of simple gratefulness and serene fullness is perhaps your greatest gift to us - your fellow Marianists - what the psychologists of the life-cycle call "integrity." You are, or can be, men of great integrity for the rest of us.

Your example shows that our kind of life is worth the struggles and the sacrifices. It shows that our mode of life is a rich and fruitful gift to today's Church and world, a way of transmitting the gospel of life and love to others.

Your current-day reality may call you to special gratitude to the many fellow Marianists and lay friends and workers who give you the extra help and support - physical, psychological, spiritual - you need at this moment in your life-journey.

Gratitude does not exclude reconciliation and repentance. Most also feel some resentments and regrets as they look back over many years of religious life. The somewhat slower pace of later life is a time of reconciliation, a chance to make some new starts and let go of old hurts borne after long years of experience. In a special way, these years are a time for reconciliation in community, forgiving us, your fellow Marianists, for any part we may have played in the painful parts of your experience, and experiencing your brothers' readiness to forgive any pains you might have occasioned them over the years.

Temptations of Old Age

No age is free of its pitfalls. We all know that many spiritual and psychological dangers bedevil your time in life. They consist mostly in letting oneself be conquered by tiredness, sadness or bitterness.

It is easy to be absorbed by the physical pains and limits of daily life. We can become obsessed by the conflicts and ennui of community and sometimes by the misunderstanding of younger generations.

We can long to return, impossibly, to an idealized past, and we can try to impose our ways on others. As a result, we are kept from cultivating the great thankfulness that is God's due in the face of our experience.

Some sink into a narrow, circumscribed range of interests, indifferent to most of the world outside themselves. They may install themselves in comforts and pastimes. Since the years have made them skillful at self-justification, they rationalize their attitude: "We are tired," they seem to say, "we did what we could in this crazy world. Now we have earned the right to rest, to live in peace." Such elders rationalize their self-centered worlds as the best response to a cynical sort of hopelessness, and they claim they have no idealism left. They settle for a placid, bored but safe, tranquil life.

The most common temptation of all, perhaps, is a simple crabbiness, a cranky and querulous stance before the many problems, big and small, of everyday life.

If we succumb to such temptations, we are kept from being the thankful, serene, integrated senior religious who help everyone believe that Marianist life is really worth it. The attitudes just described are an abdication of the vocation to which we are all called, individually and as communities. It is wonderful to see that most of you resist these temptations rather effectively!

Abandonment to the One Thing Necessary

There is a paschal dimension to your experience. You are called by life's experiences to acceptance and abandonment, to let go of some things and attitudes and capacities cherished in the past. You are also invited during these years to experience a new kind of life in Christ.

For many of you, with the years, life has become more simple and clear, stripped down to a few things that really count. A Marianist friend of mine told me that he compares his experience of aging to the challenge of the disciples called by Jesus to leave behind their fishing nets and follow him (Matt. 4, 19 and parallels). At his time in life, around the age of 70, he perceives a call to leave behind the nets in which long experience has enmeshed him, which chain him to past or present, impede a movement into God's future. He labels some of these nets: pervasive discouragement and sadness, false rationalizations, settling for comfortable mediocrity.

In our senior years, unless we rediscover the Lord, whose presence we are fast approaching and who has given us our vocation as a grace, nothing remains. Looking back on a religious life without that personal sense of God's presence makes us see only pointless failure, making us doubt that our lives have been worth it.

Conviction and peace can flow only from a personal relationship with God. Jesus may tell us, like Peter, that "when you were young, you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt around you, and take you where you would rather not go." Traumatized by the scarcity of younger members, we can ask, like Peter did when he looked to John: "What about him, Lord?" And Jesus simply answers: "...what does it matter to you? You are to follow me" (John 21: 18-22).

Blessed Father Chaminade, who turned 70 in 1831, in the wake of a second Revolution while his very young Society was experiencing growing pains, knew this paschal stage of life very well. He lived it with much struggle and with great dedication to those around him. He seems to have had the experiences of senior religious very particularly in mind when he spoke and wrote about the "virtues of consummation": humility, modesty, self-denial, renunciation of the world. He experienced the challenge of these virtues personally in his final years, when he was ignored and rejected by his disciples. He is a model for us in the process of fidelity, continued growth, and maintaining a missionary spirit in old age.

The final word on the paschal experience of following Jesus is a personal newness of life for each of us. We all know that death can come to religious at any age, but its nearer approach becomes a certainty as we grow older. The witness of the passing on of exemplary men

whom we have intimately known and who are now with the Lord is a strength to us at this time of life.

Contemplation and Intercession

Traditionally, the later years of life have been seen as a time to focus on eternity. The end of life is not far distant, and our thoughts and hopes focus ever more clearly on what lies beyond. It is a fine time in life to grow in our capacity to reflect and in our experience of prayer and contemplation. In order to grow in this direction, we have to move beyond merely decent conformity to the community schedule and into a life of reflection and prayer that is an intense personal encounter with God, a meeting here on earth but in the antechamber of eternity.

In Marianist life today, these years usually provide us with some blessings of leisure, a slower pace and a less demanding set of responsibilities. Now, if ever, we have the opportunity to try to see the world around us with eyes of God the Father, who created it and found it good, with the loving and redeeming eyes of God the Son, with the life-giving power of God the Spirit, and also with the merciful gaze of Mary: *illos tuos misericordes oculos*. We have the time to pray for others, to give them our encouragement and to ask God's mercy and love for them.

The spirit of contemplation and intercession will make us different elders, a sign of life to those who know us. To remain patient, yet at the same time involved in the life and mission around us, is a great grace. We continue to share in the common mission, at least by the ministry of intercession and fraternal support. Rather than being withdrawn, tired and self-centered, discouraged by the contrarities of life, we should be happy and enthusiastic in following Jesus and Mary.

Missionary freedom and creativity, fruitfulness and generativity

Whatever age we attain, we never retire from the vocation to be "missionaries of Mary." "Do whatever He tells you" remains Mary's watchword to us, at every age of life.

But the expectations of our work change, and we must let go of the past, be grateful for the new possibilities. We are often able at this age to work gratuitously, as a free gift rather than a legislated societal duty. We can be creative in opening up new styles of ministry, less trammled by the demands of income and bureaucracy. Our work, because it is freely given, becomes especially fruitful and generative of new life for the future.

You can apply to yourselves what Pope John Paul II said in *Vita Consecrata* about religious life in general: "you have not only a glorious history to remember and recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished" (*Vita Consecrata* 110).

It is painful to witness senior religious who cling too long to tasks and positions of authority and influence. It is also painful to see some who seem to have nothing to do. Some appear to feel sterile, like old people without progeny. In contrast, those who continue giving whatever they can for the good of people around them, without imposing their own control and points of view, become important architects of the future of the Society of Mary and of our modern world.

Even if you are not yet retired from your previous life-work, I encourage you to begin thinking very seriously about how you can make your best contribution to others at your moment in life. New approaches may be needed. If you are officially retired, I urge you to be active in seeking ways to be “missionaries of Mary” within your limits but also with all the talents, experience and apostolic freedom that are yours.

Your senior years may give you the opportunity to experience in a new way that loving ardor of service that our founders liked to call “zeal.” Here are a few examples I have met in the different Units of the Society:

- Many senior Marianists continue to be present in communities where they have long served, sustaining the community mission by many extra benefits, by their presence and the multiple contacts with the public they have come to know over many years, by their witness as people who continue to give themselves out of love to build up God’s Kingdom.
- Some are at the core of houses of prayer or centers of spirituality, accompanying others by intercession, by example and by their rich experience of the ways of God.
- Some senior religious are wonderful teachers of spirituality to people of all ages, supporting the work of vocation ministry and serving as spiritual consultants for Marianist Lay Communities.
- Some have moved into poorer neighborhoods, devoting themselves to the needs and to the encouragement of the simple people around them. Many attend to the needs of poorer people, such as immigrants and minority populations, who need help in adjusting to the dominant culture.
- Many serve as tutors and guides, offering their long educational experience to meet the needs of people who might otherwise be unable to get the specialized help they need.
- Some devote themselves to personal attention to the sick, whether people of their own generation or those afflicted with plagues of our time such as AIDS and mental illness.
- Some serve in a particularly valued way as mentors and role-models, sources of guidance and inspiration in the young growing areas of the Society.
- Others have even found the courage to make a start for Marianist life in a new place, like Abraham, who left the comforts of Ur of the Chaldees when he was 80 years old.

In the nature of things, these presences of senior religious may be limited by time, less permanent institutions than witnesses to the endless creativity of God. In our later years we come to realize, in an intense way, that nothing is forever. However, the gratuitous witness of our senior brothers shows unmistakably that God never leaves us without resources for the service of others.

Mary the Elder

One of my favorite images of Mary is a statue created by Brother Joe Aspell for a parish in California. It depicts Mary as a woman of mature years, seated in peaceful contemplation, eyes open and interested in the world around her. Perhaps we may imagine that it depicts her in a moment of rest during the momentous early years of the post-Pentecostal Church. Her role, it seems to suggest, is less to preach or organize than to serve as a point of reference for the young Church, to transmit to those around her the wisdom and the sense of the presence of her Son that she had learned over the years.

Our senior years may be a special moment for us to enter into this spirit, to rediscover our relation with Mary and to share in a new way in her mission. The Constitutions of 1891 which we memorized during our novitiates, echoed St. Bernard in assuring us that Mary is the *tota ratio spei nostrae*, a major and adequate ground for our hope (art. 295). Vatican II took up a similar thought when it concluded its Constitution on the Church with the figure of Mary, “image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come,.... a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 68). As Marianists, we are invited to keep growing in our sense of Mary’s presence and activity, even until the end of our lives.

As I conclude this letter, I leave you with this image of a Mary who shares in your life-experience. May she accompany you as you continue your route in her service!

Fraternally,

David Joseph Fleming, S.M.
Superior General



Comments from the artist, Br. Joseph Aspell, SM:

“In Mary, the older woman, we see reflected our own lives. When I began to sculpt Mary as an older woman she became someone in whom, I felt, people could recognize their own image.

Her life was not protected. No longer the girl of the Annunciation, she is seen here as having lived through the same contradictions that our lives face, especially the lives of millions of the world's poor.

Here is a person who confronted the mystery of her own life. I felt people today, especially women, are looking for this older woman from whose wisdom they can find inspiration and strength.

In the Gospels she is homeless at the time of her child's birth. She and her family are the target of a massacre. She becomes a refugee and must flee her own country to, become a foreigner in a strange land and culture. Later her own neighbors drive her son out of the community she raised him in. She is a widow, perhaps at an early age. Tradition has it that she lived out her last years in a foreign place.

Beyond these hardships, like us, she too experienced a crisis of faith. It was the contradiction of outliving her child. And it was also the contradiction that everything her culture led her to believe did not happen - this was not what was supposed to happen to the Messiah. At that moment she had to take her faith and make it more than what others said. She had to make it her own. She came through that, and this is the person we see at Pentecost.

The moment is Pentecost when she, an older woman, helps the first Christian community receive the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures provide in Pentecost a key moment where our notions of community and Mary converge.”