

**CIRCULAR N\_1**

**AFTER THE GENERAL CHAPTER:  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF  
THE MARIANIST CHARISM**

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Missionary Apostolic, to all his fellow  
Marianists throughout the world.

## **AFTER THE GENERAL CHAPTER: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE MARIANIST CHARISM**

Dear Brothers:

These first months after our General Chapter have been ones of much reflection and activity for me. Many of you have sent warm messages of support and promises of prayers, for which I am deeply grateful. I have been privileged already to visit Marianists in a number of countries, to feel the good will and hope for the future among us. More and more I have become convinced that the guidelines of the Chapter, which most of you have received only recently, point us in the right direction for our future. The key points of the Chapter - revitalization and restructuring, a genuine option for the poor and for peace and justice, close collaboration and solidarity within the Marianist Family, a new focus on religious vocations and good formation - these themes speak importantly and concretely to our reality in each of the thirty countries where we work, whether those countries are rich or poor, whether religious vocations are numerous or scarce, whether Catholic culture has long had great influence or the Church is a small and young minority.

The Chapter documents are quite clear in themselves. In this first circular, rather than comment directly on them, I would like to share a personal synthesis that has gradually emerged within me as I have tried to reflect on the thrusts of the Chapter and their application to our current reality. Each of us can appropriate for himself the calls of the Chapter within his own context. Our personal syntheses of these calls may be slightly different, but they can all help us to look together in the same direction towards our common future. I hope my reflections will stimulate you to develop your own. The center of these reflections is a question that preoccupies all Marianists nowadays: what future lies ahead for us in our living of the Marianist charism?

I cannot claim any privileged vision about the future. But it is very important for all of us to have some sense of what God is about in our history, in order to direct our efforts so that we might collaborate, be co-creative in working out the future. Reinhold Niebuhr, a great Protestant theologian of our century, puts it this way: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love." So it is that faith, hope and love, those basic virtues of every Christian life, are linked to our vision about the future and about community.

## I. SEEDS OF THE FUTURE

Normally the origins of any human community bear a stamp, like a genetic code, that permanently shapes its future. This is certainly true for our Marianist Family. We often say that Fr. Chaminade's times were very similar to ours. Let us look at some of the seeds of the future that were embedded in our beginnings.

1. Our Founder lived at a **moment of profound cultural change**. The *ancien régime* stood not only for a style in political life, but also for a culture rooted in the Middle Ages and earlier. It was a culture shaped by the interaction of the Greco-Roman world with the gospel message. A rejection of the political and social regime seemed to imply likewise the rejection of this culture and of the Church, the predominant cultural institution that passed on the tradition of previous centuries. Father Chaminade had evident sympathies with the traditional culture. Yet he also recognized the values of the new social and political style. He had no interest in a fanatical defense of the past. He did not hesitate even to wear the clothes of a citizen of the Revolution, to show his solidarity with the people of the new age!

His desire was to preserve the heritage of the faith in all its power and all its spirit; but he thought it possible to enrich this heritage by accepting insights from the new age. (Later on, during the Restoration, he paid a price for his desire to hold on to some traits of the Revolution's cultural advances, which were no longer in fashion after 1815: liberty, equality, fraternity - values deeply congruent with the message of Jesus, even though not exactly traditional - did not have many defenders, at least not within the Church, during the Restoration!) Father Chaminade fought to preserve what he judged to be the positive outcomes of the Revolution. His foundations, future-oriented, tried to integrate these positive outcomes of cultural change. So it was that the Founder could not feel at home in any party or group, could not opt unambiguously for either tradition or modernity.

We also exist at a time of cultural change - no doubt the greatest change in history since the Founder's time (many would say that today's cultural change is still deeper than that of the Napoleonic era). We too have a rich heritage - a Catholic and Marianist culture - but it is difficult to preserve this culture in a period that often seems anarchical, a confused time characterized more by rejection, universal criticism and skepticism, systematic doubt, than by any desire for definition, commitment or the achievement of definite values. We are ready to criticize everything, but we do not know where we want to go or what is the necessary basis for progress. Today even liberty, equality and fraternity do not inspire universal agreement. So it is that our era, sometimes called "the end of the modern world," extends and in a way concludes the trends of the Founder's time. He played a role in the first act of an historical drama, while we are perhaps taking our part in the last act, but the *dénouement*, the resolution of the conflict, is still unclear.

We face a variety of dangers: pure skepticism, loss of faith, paralysis of action, even hopelessness. We must ask ourselves: what options are we taking in the face of cultural change in our time? How do we foresee the future? Are we satisfied with merely being critics and commentators? Do we believe in a future that is God's plan? Are we following the stance of our Founder?

2. Another historical parallel: we often experience **polarization**, so much so that neither traditionalists nor innovators are much inclined to peaceable and courteous dialogue or to any synthesis of old and new. Father Chaminade also lived in a polarized Church that had great difficulty with dialogue. Even the hierarchy of his time was split between those who had gone along with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and those who had rejected it; between those who wanted to restore the *ancien régime* and Gallicanism in all their details and

especially all their privileges (an aristocratic and fairly autonomous Church) , and those who stressed total dependency on the Holy See (no doubt such dependency then seemed much better than dependency on a changeable government that was usually ill-disposed to the faith). The history of the French Church of the period is full of extreme positions and conflicts.

An example well illustrates the similarity with our times. Shortly before his death, the late Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, tried to launch a series of talks and meetings to foster moderate, peaceful and respectful dialogue on topics most in dispute in the Church of North America. Everyone knew that the Cardinal was suffering from an advanced case of cancer, and this project could well be his last contribution to the Church. Yet many still rejected his plea for dialogue. Some rejected it because they declared that there was no room for dialogue: one must simply submit to the decisions of authority. Others rejected it because they did not think moderate, peaceful, respectful dialogue was possible. It is sad to see on the one hand a tendency to fundamentalism and on the other an anarchy without much sense for pastoral needs or for history.

Father Chaminade would recognize such attitudes, which were typical of his time as well as ours. They would not surprise him. I believe he would take a dialogical stance, committed to the faith and the Church's overall good but also open to what he would call the "indications of Providence." We must ask ourselves what position we take in the face of tensions existing in today's Church.

3. The Founder lived in large measure in a **de-christianized setting**. This was what he meant by the "religious indifference" which was the target of all his apostolic efforts. It was an attitude that would perhaps today be called "secular humanism," an attitude that grants everyone the right to take up religious stances if they so desire, but refuses respect, influence, or support to any religious stance in social, professional, intellectual, political or economic life. This amounts to a privatization of religion, which means also a belittling of it. This attitude, the inheritance of the "Enlightenment," is still predominant in Europe and North America.

It is interesting to note that countries which did not experience the "Enlightenment"- those of the Southern and Eastern hemispheres - do not seem to suffer from so much religious indifference and privatization of the religious dimension. Nowadays people like ourselves, who are more interested in the religious dimension of our existence, often look to these "less indifferent" countries for our inspiration, our theologies and our spiritualities.

Nevertheless we are subject everywhere and in great measure to the influence of this quasi-dominant culture of religious indifference. A kind of secularism, something much more than a healthy dose of secularization, threatens us all. This situation would perhaps not surprise our Founder; but he would emphasize the challenge to go deeper in the spirit of faith, even when we do not enjoy the cultural supports of an environment steeped in faith.

4. Despite religious indifference and a critical attitude toward the Church, the people around the Founder were often people **in search of transcendence**. They joined the Madeleine Sodality and other Christian movements because they were hungry and thirsty for the divine, looking for a spiritual identity that would give meaning to all the aspects of their lives. The rapid restoration of Christian life among many and the surprising flowering of holiness and

Christian idealism in the nineteenth century are due to this search for a transcendent meaning in life, for something to fill the vacuum of secular humanism. Evidently the same vacuum and the same search for transcendence also exist today; they explain the great deal of spiritual

energy we experience around us. Father Chaminade knew how to direct such energy, to respond in a meaningful way to the people of his time. What about us?

5. Father Chaminade lived at a time when **traditional structures of human community had begun to disintegrate**. Bordeaux at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a place typical of the first phase of the industrial revolution and the flight to the city. Traditional parishes, familiar styles of organizing the village, the work-place, and sometimes even the family, were hard put to respond to needs for community in this new world. Unless I am mistaken, this is the reason why the Founder never wanted to be a pastor or a bishop and remained for his entire life a bit on the fringes of normal institutionalized ecclesial life. Instead, he stressed new apostolic methods and new forms of community organization that would fit the new era.

We live in another phase of the industrial revolution (perhaps we could call it the “computer phase”) and we understand very well, by our own experience, the human loneliness and the fragmentation of existence that characterizes urban complexes as diverse as Rome or Calcutta or New York - but that in our time reaches areas that are much smaller and more remote as well. We too need to find new forms of community life for mutual help and for the support of human and Christian values. Father Chaminade inspires us by his example and his insights.

6. Father Chaminade lived in an age of **new social and political consciousness**. Society in his day was reaching out to new forms of inclusiveness and heightening its desire for justice for all people. It has often been said that the French Revolution meant the rise to power of the middle class. Efforts to provide public services for everyone - education, medical care, transportation - have their origin for the most part in the Founder’s generation. Representative democracy as we know it was an invention of his contemporaries. The ideal (still far from being realized) of fundamental respect for every human being without any slavery or any discrimination on the basis of race, color, wealth, or religion began to structure laws and social institutions in his time. While being critical of some aspects of the new social consciousness, Father Chaminade devoted his apostolic efforts to the realization of other aspects. He desired to create a more just future and a society that would be more equal and united. He directed energies by preference to situations where he thought societal change possible. What are the priorities that direct our energies?

7. No doubt we could lengthen the list of comparisons between the Founder’s time and our own. But I would like to conclude with an aspect that has perhaps not been sufficiently studied. Father Chaminade lived in a time, like ours, of **great technological advances**, especially in the means of communication. The final years of his life coincided with the organization of the postal system on a national and even continental level and also with the opening of the first railroads. How much simpler his life would have been if, for his abundant and varied correspondence, he had been able to count on a safer, faster, cheaper mail system! How much more he could have traveled with his consciousness of being a “Missionary Apostolic” and his constantly growing and spreading foundations, if he had been able to count on an adequate system of transportation! If he had lived in our times, would he not have given an enthusiastic welcome to all the opportunities for spiritual and organizational animation offered by the Internet?

Many of you can add to this list of comparisons between Father Chaminade’s time and ours. It seems to me that this list suggests many directions for reflection as we consider the future of our charism. But let us move on to a more systematic analysis.

## II. PRINCIPAL ASPECTS OF OUR CHARISM

Five key words can sum up the essence of the Marianist charism:

- faith
- mission
- community
- inclusivity (or the “mixed composition”)
- Mary.

It seems evident that each of the realities denoted by these words well corresponds to one of the principal needs of our era, just as they corresponded to the needs of the early nineteenth century.

The Founder stressed **faith of the heart** - a deeply rooted and convinced faith, a faith that is thoughtful but not intellectualized, a faith that reaches far beyond a few pious practices and transforms the structures of daily life and the basic insights of the human spirit. This stress corresponds very well to the search for transcendence and the need, felt more and more urgently each day, for a contemplative dimension in our lives and an identity anchored in something that is firm and worthy of stable and lasting commitment.

**Mission** was the major motivation for Father Chaminade and his first disciples. For them the mission was something new: *Nova bella elegit Dominus*. The new era needed a response based on new methods and a new style of evangelization. They did not think that some of the traditional structures and methods were appropriate for the needs of their time. As for us today, we are constantly being called, even by the highest authorities in the Church, to a new evangelization, new in its motivation, new in its means, and especially new in its courage and boldness. We are called in a special way to develop a new synthesis of faith and culture - and this implies an **enculturation** of the Gospel that is deeper and more far-reaching in all the many cultures of our world, even in those that have traditionally been thought of as "Christian." We are also called to a consistent and serious option for the poor, reaching out to the poor and marginalized of every kind, of every race and culture. We cannot just get on with what we formerly considered to be the Church's mission, without thoroughgoing changes of focus and courageous restructuring. The missionary spirituality of Father Chaminade continues to be the key motivation for our times as well.

It seems evident that the Founder's stress on **community, family spirit**, still responds, even more than formerly, to a deep longing of the modern world. The prologue of the Rule of Life puts it this way: *"Inspired by God's Spirit, Father Chaminade understood the rich creative possibilities of a Christian community for apostolic service. Such a community could bear the witness of a people of saints, showing that the gospel could still be lived in all the force of its letter and spirit. A Christian community could attract others by its very way of life and raise up new Christians and new missionaries, thus giving life in turn to other communities. A community could thus become the great means to re-Christianize the world"* - what today we call "the new evangelization." A dynamic community life takes us out of our isolation and, at least a little, out of our fearfulness. It gives us an identity and a sense of belonging. But even more, it empowers us to common and bold action against the dynamics of death and the urge to facile conformity that threaten us. Men and women in our time feel increasingly isolated and powerless, fragmented and weak in face of the all-engulfing waves of a consumerist welfare society. The creative potential of a faith community helps us find the hope and courage we need.

I have used the word "**inclusivity**" to express the Founder's insight that seeks to reproduce within the Marianist Family all the variety and wealth of experience that exists within the Church as a whole. He included in his foundations, from the beginning, women and men, religious and laypeople, people coming from all socioeconomic classes. The mixed composition of the Society of Mary is simply one interesting example of this "inclusive"

tendency in the Marianist charism. I am convinced that this inclusivity offers us a breadth of vision (which means also a generosity and “catholicity” of vision) that is still not very common today. In our times this principle of inclusivity should prompt us to stretch the horizons of our Marianist Family to races and cultures that are marginalized in a world that is so dominated by a North Atlantic mentality - but for how much longer? Today we are particularly invited to solidarity and an inclusive attitude with those who have less voice and less power in society.

Finally, our Founder’s focus on **Mary**, his conviction that the Woman Mary is the dynamic driving-force of modern history, seems to respond very well to the spiritual longings of our time. I partly understand the reticence about Mary that some may feel in reaction to an exaggeratedly sentimental style of piety and even more in reaction to a co-opting of the Virgin Mary for the purposes of certain ideologies and reactionary groups. But in spite of all this, Father Chaminade invites us to raise our eyes to this “Woman *par excellence*,” as he called her. Mary is the archetype of an attitude that is holistic, community-centered, welcoming, respectful of the earth and its inhabitants. She is a Mother who throbs with the dynamics of nature, receiving and nourishing life. She is a strong Woman in solidarity with the aspirations of a people that is poor, humiliated, and marginalized. Many think that the root of our cultural and spiritual problems is to be found in a masculine sort of aggressiveness, self-centered and self-assertive, thirsting for power. To counterbalance such tendencies, what spirituality could be better than one that is Marian and apostolic?

### III. SOME CHALLENGES

Thus it seems clear that we Marianists - religious men and women and laypeople - have a heritage that is well adapted to current-day human aspirations and to future thrusts that keep emerging with ever greater clarity . Our charism should have a great future.

But will it? Evidently the answer depends very much on us. Hence I would like to conclude by noting four challenges. It seems to me that we must necessarily face these challenges if our rich charism is to make its contribution to the future world that is already being formed.

1. First of all, we must **delve deeper into our roots**, deepen our personal and community acceptance of the charism. No matter how fine a charism may be, it has no value unless it is integrated in the life of concrete persons. Perhaps this point does not need much commentary. What is needed is to put it into practice. Sometimes the Marianist charism seems to interest us more as an object of analysis and discussion than as something we live in depth. The forces of the predominant culture around us are so strong that we easily fall into a lifestyle determined by them, and our spirituality can become only a thin veneer. We must ask the Lord for the grace to avoid this danger!

2. Secondly, we must open up to a **greater and more committed inclusivity**. We live out our charism within the Church for God’s Kingdom. It is not something we preserve for a small group, an elite. Our charism is meant for all, and it should work together with all, be enriched by the gifts of all. We have in fact done a great deal in order to integrate women and men, laypeople and clergy, within our family. Of course there is still much to be done in these areas, but at least we are aware of them. I do not feel we have yet done enough to integrate a variety of cultures and mentalities and a variety of socioeconomic classes in our Marianist Family. The great majority of us are white people, Europeans or of European background. This allows us to understand one another rather well, to share more easily our aspirations and our difficulties. We must build on the strengths of our similar backgrounds

and our socioeconomic status, for they represent positive values. But there are some important realms of experience from which we are excluded because we are part of the classes that are dominant in our time.

We have within our Family few people coming from other races and cultures, even when we exist in countries, like those in America, that have strong Christian minorities coming from these races and cultures. We can hope that the growing enculturation of Marianist life in Africa and Asia will help us broaden our cultural horizons, but we must also do whatever we can in order to come into more living contact with other cultural groups so that we can understand their aspirations and needs and respond to them.

Especially we need to make an effort in all countries to spread our Family among simple and poor people. Maybe the problem comes from the fact that we live out our charism in a way that is too intellectual, or maybe our customs are too middle-class, or maybe the needs of the poor are so immediate and concrete that they have no leisure for a more conscious pursuit of spirituality. But whatever the reason, even in countries where there are great numbers of poor people and where we have many contacts in friendship and solidarity with them, we do not easily succeed in creating Marianist Family groups among them. We need to rethink our charism and our way of living it so as to integrate their rich experience, their longings and their sense of building the future.

Another aspect of the challenge of inclusivity is the creation of models of closer collaboration between religious and lay members of the Marianist Family. We have made much progress, but much still remains to be done. We share our spirituality, our faith-life, with enthusiasm on the part of both groups. But we are just beginning to share a sense of mission. Lay Marianists sometimes are reticent because they do not easily see how to combine a commitment in mission with the responsibilities they have in their families and their professions, which are thought of as something “profane.” Religious also are reticent because they are used to directing their apostolic works and do not know how far they should go in entrusting direction to others, how they can ensure the Marianist character of a work if it is not under the direction of a religious. These hesitations on both sides are normal, realistic and very understandable. But they should not keep us from moving ahead. Mission involves some works, but not only works. The future of our charism certainly involves a much more highly developed co-responsibility at all levels of the mission.

Can we also share community life? Community life is an integral part of the Marianist mission. But to what extent and in what ways can Marianist religious “live in community” with lay Marianists? There have been some valuable and interesting experiments, for example in the case of lay Marianist volunteers or in cases where religious and lay Marianists live close together in the same neighborhoods and meet several times a week for prayer and community sharing. Clearly, this is not easy and in many cases it will not be a good idea. But in other cases it offers new possibilities for enhancing mutual support and deepening spiritual formation. I think we should keep looking in this direction with the aim of strengthening that great Marianist community that was the vision of our Founders.

3. Thirdly, we must increase and improve our **option for the poor**. This is another topic that has been much talked about. We do not need to say much more, but rather to live it more consistently. That was the opinion of the recent General Chapter: few words, but more concrete action!

Despite the great deal that has been said, I do not think we have yet had great success in integrating the option for the poor into all our apostolic activity. In this area we experience much romanticism but also much defensiveness. We tend to classify the option for the poor

as one Marianist work among many, one of our fields of action. And so we think there is an opposition between the option for the poor and the maintenance of our existing works. We do not realize in practice that the option for the poor implies before all else a change of mentality, a change in our social stance. It is possible to work among the poor like rich people, benevolently but paternalistically; it is also possible, and much more praiseworthy, to work among the rich like poor people, that is, in solidarity with the poor, carrying the cause of the poor and their well-founded aspirations in our hearts. It is perhaps not so important whether we work in social service or in education or in a parish, whether we work with the rich or the poor or the middle class. It is much more important to ask ourselves again and again what implications our work has for the needs of the poor. How can I commit myself in my concrete local situation to improve mentalities and hearts, motivate people, cooperate more fully in the creation of a just and equal society? If we seriously ask such questions, it is certain that some new works will be created. But existing works will also take up new thrusts and new outlooks. We still have much to do along these lines, so as to integrate the option for the poor into every Marianist work and into the heart of each individual Marianist apostle.

4. Finally, we need to **re-enforce the vitality of the religious branches** of our Family and rediscover their key role. It may seem paradoxical to talk of re-enforcing branches that have in fact lasted with the greatest continuity for almost two hundred years and that still hold a kind of “primacy” in the Marianist Family. It may also seem strange or inappropriate to talk about a key role for the religious branches when we sometimes still note here and there an exaggerated predominance on their part. But I am convinced that this is a very important challenge. It is evident that the religious branches of our Family are in trouble in Western countries. Religious vocations are lacking, despite all the efforts that have been made, and well made, in recent years for our renewal and for the deeper assimilation of our charism. Perhaps a day will come (soon, we hope) when the culture around us will once again foster vocations to the life of celibacy, poverty, and obedience. Perhaps we religious in the West will once again find a way to live out our religious life in a way that attracts many young people. Perhaps Christian parents (including lay Marianists) will once again rejoice when their son or daughter wants to join religious life. Perhaps ecclesial life in general will be purified so as to become again an object of idealism rather than skepticism among young people. But for the time being we exist in a slow and almost silent crisis in the countries of Europe and North America. Despite it all, we must do something.

Why must we do something? Because the religious branches have an irreplaceable role within the Marianist Family. Father Chaminade explained that he founded his religious congregations to be “people who never die” in order to maintain and spread the great Marianist Family. Nowadays we must insist that this does not mean that the religious should exercise power and dominance, but rather that they should be men and women who are expert in spiritual guidance so as to ensure depth and continuity in Marianist spirituality. Nowadays it is also evident that this role itself should not be reserved exclusively to the religious. But what is clear is that normally religious life prepares its members to be those guarantors of the spirit, those “specialists in transcendence” spoken of by the recent Synod on religious life. Without such guarantors and such specialists, many of whom are religious, we will certainly run the risk of no longer being what we are meant to be.

What must be done for vocations? Obviously we have to pray and work a great deal to promote religious life, especially among young people. This needs to be done not only by the religious themselves; all the members of the Marianist Family need to commit themselves to promote religious vocations. Without this commitment the future of the Marianist charism will perhaps be doubtful, certainly much poorer.

I am in no way pessimistic about the future of our charism or our religious congregations. Today we have some ten thousand people in the world who consciously live out a spirituality that is Marianist - many more than ever before, even many more than in the "glory days" of the Founder or Father Simler or the 1960's. I have had the grace of spending the past nine years in a country that has an abundance of religious vocations, and I know that our charism and our religious life as well have a great future. But we must respond to the vocation crisis that is threatening us in Europe and North America. We must respond creatively, but also with the assurance that the Lord and his Mother will be with us on our way to the future.

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As I said at the beginning, each of us needs to make his own synthesis of the mission given us by the General Chapter. In this circular I have shared what has struck me, on the basis of the context in which I have lived. Perhaps your own syntheses will focus on other points. But I think that the kernel of it all is something on which we all agree: our commitment to the charism of Father Chaminade and our conviction that this charism has a great future in our world. Let us pray together so that we can move ahead to make this future a reality.

Faternally,

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