

CIRCULAR N ° 2

OUR VITALITY IN MISSION

Rev. David Joseph Fleming, S.M.
Superior General of the Society of Mary,
Missionary Apostolic

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12 September 1997
Feast of the Holy Name of Mary

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DAVID JOSEPH FELMING, S.M.
Superior General of the Society of Mary,
Missionary Apostolic, to all his fellow
Marianists throughout the world.

OUR VITALITY IN MISSION

Dear Brothers,

On this our patronal feast, we remind ourselves each year that it is “in Mary’s name and for her glory that we take up the religious life.” I am happy on this occasion to direct some words of encouragement and stimulation to all of you working in Mary’s name in some thirty countries of the world.

During my first year of service as Superior General, I have been privileged to visit, at least briefly, more than twenty of these countries and talk to Marianists seeking to grapple creatively with the challenges of mission in the most varied contexts. The vitality of our motivation for mission is the theme I want to reflect on with you in this letter. I am further led to take up this theme also by the fact that this year we are celebrating two occasions that invite us to reflect on the deepest motivations for our lives and our mission.

The “Year of Jesus Christ”

During 1997, in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II has asked us to be especially attentive to the person of Jesus Christ, fully a human being in the midst of our beautiful but troubled world, but also fully divine, our source of life and salvation. For us Marianists, Jesus Christ is the center of the spirituality we have received through the charismatic gift of our Founder, for our goal is “to be transformed into Christ’s likeness and to work for the coming of his kingdom” (Rule of Life, art. 2). In joining with the entire Church this year to renew our commitment to Jesus and to his mission in God’s plan of salvation, we at the same time renew our fidelity to our vocation to follow the “Son of God become Son of Mary for the salvation of all.”

Jesus initiated a mission that is still our ultimate purpose two millennia later. We see in his life a self-sacrificing commitment to the teaching, healing and liberating of others, even to the point of dying on the cross. The record of the early Church is unmistakably that of a community of disciples on fire, energized by a great sense of urgency. For all their problems, confusions, and even factionalism, the early Christians were dynamic. They inherited from the Lord what we might call a “missionary project” that drove them to proclaim a message with an urgency that led them to places and social groups for which they were utterly unprepared, often among people who really did not want to hear them. Following the Lord’s example, they felt it imperative that their message be heard, no matter how much opposition there might be and no matter how great the personal cost. We are about to celebrate the two-

thousandth anniversary of the movement that was put into motion by the Lord's grace and example, and extended by the sheer dynamism and determination of his disciples.

The Saragossa Bicentenary

There is another occasion that also invites us to focus our reflection on missionary vitality. Within a few weeks, we will be commemorating an important bicentennial. Exactly two hundred years ago, in the summer of 1797, political fluctuations permitted Venerable Father Chaminade for a brief time to carry out his missionary vocation in a fairly open way, finally feeling free to restore active Christian practice in Bordeaux, reopening his oratory, gathering young people, renewing sacramental life after the dark years of the Reign of Terror, helping weak priests make their reconciliation with the Church. But in September a new political upheaval wiped out all this good work and exposed him again to persecution. This time he was not able to go under cover, and he was forced into his fateful three-year retreat at Saragossa. He arrived on October 11, just in time for the annual feast of Our Lady of the Pillar.

For the next three years he had no choice but to remain inactive, and he must have often felt useless and lonely. As we look back two hundred years, we see a man with a dynamic missionary project being forced to mature it for a long season in exile and imposed silence. From our vantage point we can see that this long exile was providential, seasoning the Founder with a greater depth of prayer and surrender to God's will, enriching his sense of Mary's role, steeling motivation and perseverance for the project that was to dominate the rest of his life. But at the time his exile must have seemed a great and senseless setback.

I was struck by these reflections on this Saragossa bicentenary, recently published in the bulletin of the Province of Chile:

Today we ourselves are also living in a time that requires great effort, carrying out a demanding work to which we are fully committed. We are regularly tempted to let ourselves be shaken by the feeling that our work is useless and sterile. In order to overcome this temptation, we make ever more plans for our more work and projects. One gets the impression that instead of facing the future with more hope we are engaging in escapism. Would it not be better to open a parenthesis in our lives in order to give new value to deep prayer, to the living of our charism, and thus recover confidence and enthusiasm for our vocation?...

Father Chaminade returned from his exile renewed and determined. The results of his activity are visible to everyone. He did not spare any efforts to put into practice what he had contemplated: "As I see you now, so I saw you many years ago, in the twinkling of an eye."

In the light of these brief reflections, how are we Marianists of today facing the coming millennium? Are we ready to keep working at the realization in today's Church and world of what the Founder conceived at Saragossa during his years of exile?

May the focus on Jesus Christ as the center of our life and the remembrance of the Saragossa bicentenary serve to stimulate us this year as we continue our service as "missionaries of Mary."

Vitality in our "Missionary Project"

Certainly, the time of Father Chaminade and his circle of disciples was one of extraordinary vitality and a great sense of urgency among Christians. Father Chaminade responded to the situation of his times with what is often called a “missionary project” that evoked great dynamism among his followers. It may be good to reflect for a moment on the meaning of those two words: “missionary project.”

By “project” in this context we do not mean a particular work, some kind of job or program for bettering this or that very concrete situation - housing, for example, or recreation for poor children, or warm meals for the elderly poor, or improving the teaching of any subject in the schools. This use of the word is pragmatic and narrowly focused on some particular purpose, often a philanthropic one. In contrast, when in the current context we use the word “project,” it refers rather to some overall and far-reaching vision that a person or a group “projects,” i.e. “lays out ahead for the future.” Our “project” in this sense is what we are looking ahead to. It is the focus of our hopes and that which gives vitality and dynamism to our efforts. It is why we are doing whatever we do. It puts the prosaic efforts of everyday life into a meaningful and inspiring context, makes our actions take on purpose and urgency.

In this sense, a “project” should not be too small and too pragmatic; it is an overarching horizon that keeps us moving forward with conviction and energy. Maybe our difficulties today stem in part from the fact that we have lost sight of such a project, or that our project is sometimes just too small, doesn’t have enough size to really galvanize our energies or inspire those of others who might join us.

Father Chaminade’s project was a “missionary” one. The use of this word primarily in reference to “foreign missions” came later. In his time, the word “missionary” evoked in the first place the image of an itinerant preacher who went from place to place in the countryside in order to stir up the fervor of people whose faith had grown stale or whose Christian practice had dulled, often using a kind of retreat known as the “parish mission.” When Father Chaminade sought the title of “Missionary Apostolic”, it was this kind of “missionary” that he had in mind. When he said to the first Marianists, “you are all missionaries,” he meant that they were all supposed to be living and acting, wherever they were, as “permanent missionaries,” to stir up stale faith and inspire real love and energy in the service of the gospel.

Images of the Marianist “Missionary Project”

With this understanding of “missionary project” in mind, and in order to set the stage for our reflection, I would like to recall three sets of images Father Chaminade used in trying to explain his urgent missionary project of 200 years ago:

A Fulcrum for the Lever that Moves the World

Answering objections made to Sodalties and his way of directing them, the Founder wrote in 1824 that all thoughtful people were at that time in search of a “new fulcrum” for the “lever that moves the modern world” (*Spirit of Our Foundation*, III, p. 235). What a powerful image and how intriguing to apply to ourselves! Where are we to place the fulcrum and lever, i.e. focus our efforts, if we want to move the hearts and minds of people today? What is the secret that galvanizes so much popular energy around certain trends and movements, for better or worse, and leaves others anemic and devoid of influence? Indeed, where are the

fulcrums and levers that move you and me? What is the secret of unlocking the energies of our hearts? Anyone with an urgent “project” will resonate with the question and continually seek an answer.

Flood and Torch

In writing to the Pope in order to request approval for his foundations, in September of 1838, Father Chaminade said that the Marianist Family was like a “strong dam against a flowing torrent of evil,” a protection from the flood of evil that threatened to engulf the world. And the faith was like a “torch” to illumine the darkness, a torch that had burnt low and needed to be rekindled. “Heaven inspired me, at the beginning of this century,” he wrote in September 1838, “to request from the Holy See the title of Missionary Apostolic, so as to enliven and enkindle on all sides the divine torch of faith by showing everywhere to an astonished world imposing masses of Catholic Christians...who, belonging to special associations, would practice our holy religion without human respect, in all the purity of its dogmas and its morality.” (*Letters of Fr. Chaminade*, no. 1076).

I invite you to ponder these images in your prayer and reflection. Do you feel any floods of evil around you? If so, this feeling will surely give you a sense of urgency. But perhaps the images may seem not only mixed but also a bit exaggerated to you. If that is the case, look again and make sure you’re not mistaken! Some today see, for example, economic neoliberalism, the gospel of the free-market economy, as a “flood of evil.” Others note the flood in the consumerist, sexist, racist thrust of public media. Others see it in the hopeless poverty to which so many are condemned. Others, in a mindless hedonism and sterile godlessness that threatens to engulf us. The document on *The Characteristics of Marianist Education* reminds us that today real Marianist education is a “daunting task” in the face of “grinding poverty and starvation...bloody wars and heartless political oppressionthe hunger for love, the hunger for God”(p. 13). If there’s not a flood of evil out there, what is it that you see?

Can a flood of evil co-exist in a culture along with many signs of grace, like roses amid thorns or wheat and chaff? Certainly the Founder, who often defended the positive sides of the French Revolution, thought so! The answers to these questions are not easy, and we are tempted to blot out the questions because they are such big ones. Yet living with them, honestly, helps us gain purpose and determination.

And what about the image of the “divine torch of faith”? Where is it burning in your experience? Are you nearby, trying to catch the flame and pass it on?

Fighting the Infernal Abyss under the Standard of Mary

The next year, 1839, when he was already close to 80 years old, the Founder projected still another set of images in communicating the fact of the Roman approbation to his disciples. In putting these images to paper he was helped by some of his young disciples, notably the troubled Father Roussel. Perhaps the Founder, who was a more quiet, reserved soul, might have been less florid by himself. But the images that emerged from their interaction in the famous letter of August 24, 1839, are those that have come to be most classic in communicating the urgency of the Marianist missionary project.

The letter's view of the world could hardly be more stark and bleak. Father Chaminade says that the world is, in fact, hellish: "the depths of the infernal abyss are ejecting dense clouds of black and pestilential smoke which threaten to envelop the whole world in a dark night, devoid of good and full of evil, a darkness that is impervious, as it were, to the life-giving rays of the Sun of Justice." The image of the torch is then repeated: "the divine torch of faith is burning low and dying in the heart of Christianity." His view of the near future is no brighter: "it seems that the time is near when we are to witness what has been foretold, a general defection and an all but universal apostasy."

How does this analysis sound to you, today? Granted that the almost unrelieved bleakness of this view owes something to a contemporary apocalyptic mood in the French Church, and perhaps even more to the ornate oratory of the times. Yet I think it good for us to define ourselves and our times. Certainly there are days when we all feel exactly as the Founder says! And perhaps we are not far mistaken in some of our dark perceptions. Do not our best efforts often meet with the greatest obstacles? Do we not often give up too soon for precisely that reason? (That was why Father Chaminade placed resistance to "suggestions" among the key steps in the work of personal purification.) Do we not have formidable and all but overwhelming evils to face, difficulties to overcome, if we (like the Founder) really want to bring about significant social good? And do we not often set our sights much too low since we despair of really making a significant difference?

When the Founder tries to delineate a response to this horrendously dark analysis of his world, he generates another set of images, most of these having to do with Mary. We are not to be discouraged, he says, because her power "has not been shortened." She is still the "Woman of promise who is to crush the head of the serpent from hell." She is like the general of God's army, and we "have enlisted under her banner" in order to "struggle against the powers of hell." Like the Jesuits, whose whole missionary thrust is defined by the great choice between two "standards" under which to fight, we too have our "standard," the flag around which we rally, and it is Mary's.

I invite you to interiorize these last images as well. Militaristic images are not very appealing for many of us in today's world. Yet they project a sanguinary reality that is particularly characteristic of our times, the most militarized and deadly ones in history. Our devotion to peace and non-violence should not decay into a kind of bland and anemic niceness. In associating military images with Mary, Chaminade is not trying to comment on the realities or glories of war, but rather to show that this ingenious woman and gentle virgin is for us a source of the kind of heroic struggle and urgent commitment that is needed to face the challenges of our days. This very dynamic and powerful image of Mary is precisely what many are calling for today, as they try to bring out the dynamism of the womanly role in a society that is one-sidedly masculine and sexist. Often pious people have a rather bland and passive view of Mary, and that may make them a bit bland and passive themselves. Just recently we installed a stained-glass window of Mary fighting the dragon (as in Revelations 12) in a new chapel in India. It shocked many people. Does your image of Mary accommodate a forceful and dynamic person engaged in struggle? It is certain that the Founder's image of Mary was such.

How Urgent is Our Project?

I believe it is important for us Marianists today to reflect with the help of such images on our vitality in mission because I have the impression that it is hard for many of us to feel urgency

about our missionary project. Good education makes many of us thoroughly at home in the modern world. Combined with our maturity and our experience, this may give us a certain wisdom, which is helpful; but it may also give rise to a high degree of comfort with the culture as it is, which is not so helpful. After 200 years, we Marianists may have become in many cases too well “installed,” too comfortably settled in to things-as-they-now-are.

Like much in the Church, we may be a bit too genteel, too bland, too appreciative of the positive features of the status quo, too hesitant and dithering in our commitments to any possible conversion and transformation. Our missionary project sometimes does not seem very compelling. We need to recapture fire, to think and act with more boldness. We need to mean it when we pray each day, “Thy Kingdom come.” Biblical theology tells us that God’s Kingdom is both “already” and “not yet.” But I think that too often some of us contemporary Christians act as if we are already fully enjoying our own comfortable little kingdoms and are quite happy to keep the “not yet” at a great distance!

It is becoming increasingly obvious that a certain model of Church renewal and of the readaptation of religious life just is not working. The aftermath of Vatican II left us thankfully with a new appreciation of the goodness and beauty of the world around us, which is full of the presence of God. But perhaps we thought we could get in touch with this presence of God in the world a bit too cheaply. Perhaps we felt for a while a somewhat heady and optimistic sense that it would be easy to find and communicate that divine beauty, mainly by sloughing off the stern Jansenistic negativism of the past. Perhaps we sometimes thought we were affirming the beauty and goodness of creation and resolutely leading the Church into the modern world, when in fact we were just letting the noonday devils of comfort and consumerism and trendy aestheticism get a good grip on us. The resulting “project” of religious life, which is far from the intention of the Council, may be something banalized and lacking in solid spiritual substance, a genteel, middle-class kind of ecclesiastical professionalism.

No doubt I am exaggerating. But if there is a little grain of truth in this analysis, it is no surprise that today we often do not communicate a sense of urgency or awaken crowds of followers, or that we ourselves after a while lose our fire and the intensity of our commitment to our vocation. The urgency of a dynamic missionary project is only possible, I think, if we see some difficult good that has enough “size,” is big enough and gripping enough, that is gravely threatened by existing conditions and merits a struggle and the dedication of our best talents and energies for a long time. Especially today, when people are so impressed - and rightly! - by the formidable difficulty of life-time commitment and the greatly demanding challenge of living a life of chastity (not to mention the other vows), there will not be many decent and capable people willing to make the sacrifice unless they feel moved by a missionary project big enough to justify it in their eyes.

It would be good, then, to reflect on the images that truly motivate us, those things about which we in fact feel some urgency. There may be other images of our vocation that appeal to us, and we could stimulate one another in sharing them. But, if we are honest, we may also find that the really dynamic motivation in our lives does not have enough to do with our vocation. Television and advertising today fill our imaginations with great numbers of images and are often quite successful in creating urgently felt needs. “Where your treasure is, there is your heart,” said Jesus (Matt. 6:21). That which in fact moves us may sometimes be far from the thrust of our charism. A good look at our motivation may lead us to pray and work for a genuine conversion.

Differing Situations

My visits during this past year bear out the key role of the missionary project in promoting the vitality of Marianist life. It is clear that the Marianist missionary project we communicate to others is much more compelling in some situations than others.

In a number of cases the situation itself evokes an urgent response. These are precisely the countries where we have a good number of vocations and a lively Marianist lay movement. You do not have to be very insightful to feel the great need of responding to the poor in Africa and India, and the Marianists in general have a good record of commitment to that compelling project. In countries with masses of newly baptized Christians among the young and among mature adults (I think particularly of things I saw in Korea, in the Ivory Coast, Togo and Congo), it is comparatively easy to feel the urgent need for formation in the faith and to respond with programs that involve fervent faith communities. In certain countries where newly militant religions (Islam in some parts of Africa, Hinduism in India, fundamentalist Christian “sects” in other parts of Africa and in Latin America) are aggressively attacking the Church, it is natural to feel an urgency about the mission of formation in faith. In places dominated by poverty and by merciless socioeconomic regimes, urgency comes pretty naturally. In countries as diverse as Colombia, Ireland, and Congo, our Brothers live very close to violence and to warlike conditions: there is not much need to convince them that their work in solidarity with the poor and with peacemakers is urgent.

It is harder to feel the urgency of a compelling apostolic project in prosperous welfare societies. These societies are often characterized by hollowness in the lives of many people, an emptiness of overarching values and commitments, a seeming indifference to God and to the transcendent in any form. Marianists working in such situations are clearly part of those who long for more. But how establish the kind of missionary project that speaks urgently to people who seemed to have no interest in the transcendent, to have lost their spiritual sensitivities? We may do good, useful work and be appreciated by many; but our missionary project easily becomes vague and amorphous, and we often flounder.

Yet there is a core of belief and idealism that still subsists, even in the most secularized and comfortable societies, somewhere, often beneath the overlay of a sophisticated and blasé popular culture. There is a longing for someone or something worth believing in, worth the gift of one’s life. Many people today feel rootless and lost in a confused search, fearing a void of meaning and idealism and morality. Idealistic young people and parents confronted with the task of handing on values to their children are particularly prone to feel this way. They are looking for something. Can we not find a way to share a vital Marianist missionary project that will tap this spiritual energy, unleash the forces of this longing? I believe that is the most urgent task facing us Marianists today.

Some Doubtful Urgencies

But perhaps, like me, you are uncomfortable with some in today’s Church who obviously feel moved by what they conceive to be an urgent missionary project. A relatively obvious response to the quandary of our world is to take refuge in some clear-cut, simplistic life-project.

Some groups have a vital, almost fanatic commitment to what I would call a “restorationist” project: all will be well if we just return to a golden age, the way things used to be, when there was certainty about eternal truths and simple clarity about norms of conduct. Since the golden age has obviously vanished, restorationist projects always imply a certain pugnaciousness, a gathering of the forces of those who embrace the project in sharp hostility to the decay of recent times. In Catholic circles, restorationist projects often stress the Latin mass, the culture of relations between clergy and laity that emerged in the later nineteenth century, and the condemnation of all pluralism in doctrine, worship, or lifestyle. In Protestant circles such projects often give rise to biblicist fundamentalism. In the Muslim world restorationists call for the literalist application of traditional law and can even sanction the concept of a “holy war” against unbelievers. Restorationist projects are compelling and dynamic for many people today. They become all the more tempting in the absence of other vibrant missionary projects to respond to a confused and frightening world.

Other common projects are not really restorationist, but I would call them more “authoritarian” or “paternalistic.” They coalesce around powerful and assertive religious leaders who seem to project an answer to spiritual confusions and vacuums. These leaders function by asking their adepts to sacrifice their own flawed and confused judgments in favor of the leader’s superior insight. (This is a sacrifice easily made in a world as complicated as today’s!) Some self-proclaimed evangelists and moral leaders seem to manipulate groups of followers in this way. But even very genuine spiritual and moral leaders who have no desire to create such a following sometimes spawn personality cults, whose members consider themselves the only “true” disciples of the leader, more devoted to the “church of so-and-so” than to that of Jesus Christ.

The Missionary Project we Need

Most of us Marianists reject the kinds of movements just mentioned. But how can we find a valid and worthy missionary project, neither bland nor fanatical, that will give us renewed vigor today, one to which it is evidently worth dedicating lifetimes of chastity, poverty, obedience, stability, and ministry?

I think we already know the answer but have a hard time motivating ourselves to take it seriously. Everything points in the same direction - exhortations from Rome, General Chapters, studies on topics as diverse as vocations, youth ministry, Christian education and parish work. A missionary project that is faithful to our contemporary world, to the tradition of the Church, and to the gospel itself, must be characterized by three components.

First of all, a missionary project valid in today’s world must cultivate a deep spirit of faith and prayer. Our prayer must be something more than a restoration of antiquated forms and more than a bland, liturgically tasteful, contemporary mediocrity. People today are longing for a depth of contemplative experience. They are impatient of merely trendy secularism and also of an external prayer-life that fails to make them “taste and see” God’s goodness. They want a faith that leads to experience. They want something that relates to their culture but also takes them beyond it into new depths. They are looking for masters of prayer, and they will flock to places and people who communicate a real depth of contemplative life. Such communication of itself has a great power to attract and motivate. It is an indispensable component of a compelling missionary project for our time.

Secondly, community (see *Partners in Hope*, nos. 32-33). A vital missionary project must invite to a depth of brotherhood and sisterhood. The decline of community is one of the key problems of our time, and anyone who offers a meaningful experience of it, as Father Chaminade did 200 years ago, will touch the lives and energize the commitments of many followers. The word “community” is used in so many contexts today that it might not evoke the powerful sense of solidarity and human care that we need. The words “brotherhood and sisterhood” suggest that the kind of community in question is much more than some kind of organizational belonging, much more than a vague heartiness or a cheery camaraderie. Today’s lonely people, especially youth, long for a real set of family relationships, which some of them have hardly ever experienced. They long for the sense of a common commitment that emboldens people to try to achieve difficult goals together. But in our Marianist communities it is easy to settle for a kind of congenial individualism, a convenient and benevolent agreement to keep in touch and not to interfere much in one another’s private lives. No strong apostolic team will emerge in such a community. Obviously this stance does not make for a compelling missionary project. On the other hand, whenever people manage to establish a warm and welcoming and challenging sense of real brotherhood and sisterhood, engaged together in a mission that is worth doing, there is a powerful response.

Thirdly, I believe it is no exaggeration to say that every compelling gospel project of our times is marked by an effective concern for God’s poor, for the marginalized and neglected in our world. (See *Partners in Hope*, nos. 41, 45.) Middle-class comfort, preoccupations with consumer goods, and smug satisfaction with the realities of sociopolitical life do not awaken a following. They are so much the order of the day that no one will see much of a reason to make a dynamic commitment to a life-project that involves them. There is no need to make a Marian consecration or to sacrifice your whole life in poverty, chastity, and obedience just to maintain the status quo! Anyone who wants to do that probably has something wrong with him.

There are many ways to take up a mission in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and this commitment can be made in all apostolates and all kinds of institutions, but the commitment needs to be focused on something rather difficult and clearly visible; the commitment must not be too intellectualized, it must be something more than just vague benevolence, if it is to be part of a missionary project that galvanizes energies today.

Conclusion

In the last analysis, the urgency of a compelling missionary project is not determined by external circumstances. We all know people who communicate such a project in the seemingly most mundane of circumstances - I think of some of the great Marianist teachers I have had, for example. We also know others who seem bored and bland even where the challenge is greatest. The conditions of the world around us and the corporate energy of our religious community will help or hinder the sense of urgency, but ultimately a great deal depends on each of us individually. Here, as in so many things, the “essential is the interior.”

For this reason I invite you to reflect prayerfully on yourself first of all, more than on the attitudes of others or even the atmosphere in your province. What missionary project do you in fact have at this moment in your own life? Are you energized by it, and is it dynamic to others, drawing them into a current of faith and commitment? Where are you in regard to the three essential components I just mentioned: prayer, brotherhood, and the poor? What can you do to recognize and break out of any genteel blandness around you?

Let us join together in thought and prayer, during this year when we seek to renew our commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and when we recall our Founder's long, prayerful exile under the guidance of Mary. Let us pray that we may all be energized by a missionary project that responds to the urgent needs of our times.

Fraternally,

David Joseph Fleming, S.M.
Superior General, Missionary Apostolic