



*Circular
of the
Superior General
#2*

**MARY ROSE AND WENT WITH HASTE
INTO THE HILL COUNTRY (LUKE 1, 39)**

LED BY MARY ON THE PATHS OF PRAISE AND SERVICE

André-Joseph Fétis, SM
XVth Superior General
Missionary Apostolic
Society of Mary
(Marianists)

April 8, 2021

*260th anniversary of the birth
of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade*

Mary rose and went with haste into the hill country (Luke 1, 39) **Led by Mary on the paths of praise and service**

For a long time, I have wanted to share this reflection with you. Right now, our current circumstances have encouraged me to do so. Today, there is no lack of difficult situations in our world and within the Society of Mary. They even seem to be increasing without our knowing how to stop them. Throughout our world, poverty, suffering, wars, rivalries, injustices, disorders, and failures are daily issues. How do we put an end to these? We watch as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread inexorably and we are not sure that we will fully overcome it. The Society of Mary itself continues to age and diminish: will we see the end of this change that affects us all? In such circumstances, we try to adapt and invent, but we struggle to do so. Are we to resign ourselves and passively accept these situations? Should we consider all this as irreversible? Will suffering and evil always prevail? Are we threatened with death and extinction?

The Easter season that is beginning tells us again that God follows a completely different logic than that. To imagine a victory of evil, suffering, and death contradicts the message of Christ. Certainly, no human structure is immortal, but even when it is touched by death, whether partial or total, it is called to bear witness to the Resurrection and its unfailing hope.

It is already on this path that Mary is leading us in the course of her existence, although in a still partially veiled way. Her whole life is a testimony of faith in God, of hope in the realization of Divine promises, and of commitment animated by charity. She collaborates and moves forward with all her strength and faculties on the path that God has indicated to her. Following the central episode of the Annunciation, the Visitation continues to express that message, to comment on it, or to develop its consequences. Mary is the main human character, but it is the Holy Spirit who is the real actor and Mary allows herself to be guided and inspired.

I am convinced that this scene offers us a particularly important message for today, in response to the difficulties we are facing. It is not just a matter of receiving the infinite gift of God's coming among us, and commenting on how God is the definitive answer to every human concern. We must also set out, like Mary, to bear witness to this and to show, like her, what this gift means for today, and to proclaim what it has come to transform and how we ourselves will collaborate in it.

In the Marianist tradition, this story does not occupy the kind of place that belongs to the Annunciation, the central mystery of Chaminadian or Marianist faith and thought. But since it is like an extension and development of that mystery, we are not moving away from the center. Chaminade, whose birthday we are celebrating today, dedicated six teachings to this scene at different times in his life.¹

So let us set out with Mary and we shall receive what we need from her example and her words. And above all, may our own commitment be strengthened today.

¹ Cf. Chaminade, William Joseph, *The Chaminade Legacy II*, 130; II,131; II,132; IV,98; IV,107; VII,35. These different texts are commented on in Chapter 6 of the work of our confrere Bertrand A. Buby, SM, *Scripture and the Marian Writings of Father William Joseph Chaminade*, Monograph Series No. 44, (Dayton, Ohio: NACMS, 2000), 148 pp. Chapter 6 is dedicated to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. I recommend reading this book.

I. IN THOSE DAYS MARY ROSE. SHE WENT WITH HASTE INTO THE HILL COUNTRY, TO A TOWN IN JUDEA (Luke 1:39)

1. MARY'S ENTHUSIASM

Everything starts with movement, enthusiasm. Mary rises, she sets out, she goes towards . . . From the first words, the framework is fixed. The whole scene of the Visitation will be marked by this deep impulse that appears from the very first words: two verbs of movement follow one another and support one another.

Mary rose and set out with haste into the hill country (Luke 1:39)

Mary rises. To rise is to leave immobility and inactivity, it is to decide, it is to accept to give up one's tranquility; it is to be ready for something else. The word used in the text, *anastása*, will be used again to evoke the event of the Resurrection. It is not obvious that there is an explicit intention here, but this fact does not leave us indifferent, and perhaps Luke did want it that way. This discreet echo is not dissonant with the atmosphere of the infancy gospels, which love these allusions. Rising is a sign of vitality and the word chosen expresses it well.

Mary sets out. So this is the reason for her first move, she gets up to leave. This is a second enthusiastic move and a new divestment. Her home, this place undoubtedly loved and cherished, she leaves for elsewhere. She detaches herself from the comfort of immobility and a known and controlled space, to set out on the road. She leaves balance and stability and enters into roaming. To leave is always to abandon a part of one's security and certainties and to accept the unexpected along the road: encounters, fatigue, difficulties and obstacles, dangers, . . . Nevertheless, Mary rises and leaves.

But why is she leaving? Impulsiveness? Instability? Curiosity? Caprice? No, not for any of these reasons. This road has an origin and an end and is explained by one and the other. She sets out “in those days,” Luke tells us (1:39a). Those are the days of the Annunciation, the visit of the angel and the announcement to Mary. Those are the days of the astonishing and overwhelming discovery, for this very young girl, of her unique and amazing vocation. They are still days of the unimaginable and difficult to apprehend revelation of the project of the God who comes among us and makes himself one of us. Those are the days that radically changed Mary's life: mother, Mother of the Son of God, clothed with the Holy Spirit, chosen among all, she, the servant of the Lord. So here she is, carrying this hope received “in those days” in an absolutely unexpected and disconcerting way. Now she is on her way; she rises and sets out.

But where is she heading? ... “into the hill country,” Luke says (1,39b), to the mountains of Judea, to a town. She starts from the valley, in the despised rural regions of Galilee, and climbs towards the hills of Judea. These are somewhat pompously described as mountains, perhaps because of the geographical contrast, or perhaps because this is the region of the capital, the Holy City and its Temple: to be from this region is quite different from coming from a remote village in Galilee whose name no one even knows.

But this is not the reason for Mary's journey. She does not seek to elevate herself; in fact, she does not need to and she is not ambitious. She goes to see the sign that the angel promised her: “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this month is the sixth for her who was said to be barren” (1:36). This is the purpose: to see her cousin, to rejoice with her in this extraordinary grace and to share with her the grace that has been granted to herself. That's right: “Nothing is impossible with God!” (Luke 1:37).

She set out in haste (Luke 1:39b)

Saint Ambrose comments: “She left with the joy of her desire, for the accomplishment of a service, with the eagerness of her joy.”² Mary is driven by a sense of urgency: grace cannot wait. She wants to share and receive, she wants to see, listen, and proclaim. She wants to live a time of family intimacy, but also of inner exchanges. She is experiencing something so amazing. At least Elizabeth will be able to understand this, as she was also marked by a similar grace.

Mary's haste is not ephemeral; on the contrary, she is persevering and courageous because it will probably take her four days to cover the distance that separates her from her cousin's home. And on this road, there are few plains.

Mary's haste is full of joy. It is a gift of the Spirit that permeates the entire scene. As the prophet Zephaniah expresses it in the first reading of the Feast of the Visitation: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion! ... Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ... The King of Israel, the LORD is within you.” (Zeph 3:14a,15). This joy is expanded by the presence within her of the one who comes to save his people.

Mary's haste is even more a sign of love. She wants to serve her cousin, “getting on in years” (1:7b) and bring her the vitality of her own youth. But it is also that she has given everything to God and that her *yes* has freed her; now she races with a heart expanded by that inner experience. This run of Mary evokes that of the friend of the beloved in the Song of Songs who runs with him on the paths of love. Again, the liturgy encourages this connection by using these two texts on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains. My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.” (Song 2:8,10).

She went to a town in Judea (Luke 1:39c)

That is where Mary's enthusiasm leads her. That is where her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah live. She wants to stay there, to observe, and to serve. But there is more. Many readers have noticed how Luke has multiplied in this verse and in the rest of the narrative the allusions to the journey of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 6), accompanied by David. In both accounts, the journey takes place in the land of Judea and is directed towards Jerusalem; it provokes the same expressions of joy on the part of the people or of Elizabeth (2 Sam 6:9; Luke 1:42-43); in both cases there is a three-month stopover (2 Sam 6:11; Luke 1:56), which is a source of abundant blessings.

Thus, Mary's journey to Jerusalem takes on a new density. She is the ark of the new covenant offered with Jesus present within her. She takes her Son to Jerusalem: with his mother, he goes up there for the first time. Mary carries Jesus, but it is in fact he who justifies this journey and who provokes it. Without knowing it, she is already accompanying her Son on the path that he will freely take to fulfill the new covenant.

Mary on the move

Being on the road is an activity and an attitude that is found many times in Mary's life: she goes to Bethlehem for the census, she presents her Son in Jerusalem, she returns there every year for Passover (Luke 2:41). Matthew's gospel also presents her as going to Egypt and returning (Mt 2:14, 20-22). Mary is often on the move. That is the sign of an interior availability: she follows

² St. Ambrose, (339-397), *Homily on the Gospel of Luke*, II, 19.22-23.26-27; patristic reading from the Office of Readings for December 21.

her Son who guides her and whose teachings she welcomes. She will follow him to Calvary. Walking is a normal activity when other means of transportation are scarce or expensive; it is still today by far the primary means of locomotion in the world. In how many countries are the roads invaded by walkers! Mary is one of them. She is and will always be on our roads, at our side, it's good for us to remember that.

2. ENTHUSIASM FOR OUR ROAD

That is how Mary leads us. For us, religious of the Society of Mary, this makes sense.

Get up and go!

This is the first lesson. Like Mary, I would like to get up and go. These present times can easily push us into the opposite attitude: to sit down, close our doors and windows, and just stay caulked up inside. That immobility can have various causes: fear of the evolution of the world or of antichristian tendencies, prudence in the face of the health situation and epidemics; discouragement after so many apparently vain efforts; pessimism at seeing ourselves so few and so weak; insensitivity to the particular graces of the present time; deafness to the pressing calls that come from outside; ... I believe that at least a little, and sometimes more so, we are all affected by this immobility. It may only be a slowing down, but that is already a lot and it has a lot of consequences. So, it is good that I ask myself the question: what is stopping me from following Mary along this road? Could it be a lack of faith or hope, or a lack of charity towards those who need my presence and my witness?

I see in immobility a major risk for the Society of Mary today. This can be particularly the case in the current pandemic situation. For many excellent reasons we can stop where we are and thereby stop radiating the Good News that has been entrusted to us. We can spread sadness and discouragement rather than joy. We can stop inventing, risking, provoking. We can take refuge in our habitual ways of doing things, our security and our comfort. We can simply stop really living.

But there are already signs of enthusiasm and joy among us; outbursts of faith, hope and charity; testimonies of generosity without limits and without borders. I remember the example of one brother leaving for a distant mission at seventy-eight years of age, into a culture that was completely new to him, or of another, with a handicap, expressing his availability to go and work in a distant country. I think of so many young brothers ready to try new ways to make our charism present and to evangelize. I think of so many among us accepting, sometimes overnight, a completely new and unpredictable mission. I think of so many brothers who, quite simply, set out each morning for a new day to be offered generously and joyfully, whatever the difficulties and obstacles. Fortunately, there is no shortage of examples, so let us be sensitive to them. Yes, we are often on the road with Mary, but let us be vigilant: let this momentum not stop, on the contrary!

To each of us, Mary repeats: Get up and go, let nothing be lacking in your eagerness! As it did for my Son, this path will pass through Jerusalem. Still, let it be a joyful and enthusiastic path. Since that day of the Visitation, I have walked with you, carrying my Son, your brother.

A gospel-inspired race.

The Gospel sets us on our way: that is its particular grace. It doesn't wait. The Word acts at the very moment it is pronounced, it is enough for us to welcome it and to follow it.

This is why walking, leaping, and running are constantly present in the description of the Christian life. Jesus himself does a lot of walking. The Gospel of Mark, which we are reading this year, says it again and again. We are the disciples of a God who is always on our roads, accompanied by his disciples whom he takes with him. Saint Paul, in addition to the impressive example of his own life, also says: “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward, to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:13-14). Let us look again at the example of our elders, mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews, especially Abraham: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8).

Along the road, we also find so many other witnesses of the Christian faith, so many saints: Columban, Ignatius of Loyola, Benedict Labre, Teresa of Avila, Marie of the Incarnation, . . . Saint Frances-Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917) crossed the Atlantic twenty-eight times and, from Panama, went on to cross the Andes to Buenos Aires. Sister Madeleine of Jesus, founder of the Little Sisters of Jesus, traveled the world in a van to visit her sisters. All of them, and many others with them, eagerly took to the roads to carry the good news.

On the road, we also find our Founders. As a child, Blessed Adèle went to church on foot rather than by horse and carriage so that she might evangelize along the road. Later, to her sisters, she wrote: ‘We must be imbued with the apostolic spirit and make our heavenly Spouse loved and known. We would be glad to go to the farthest reaches of the world . . . to do his work.’³ Blessed Chaminade also wrote: “We will have to go to the end of the world, if the good Lord calls us there.”⁴ Or again: “God is calling us . . . to contribute to raising up the faith in France, in Europe, in the whole world. How great the enterprise is, how holy and generous! How attractive it is for a soul in love with the glory of God and the salvation of its fellow men!”⁵ During the last thirty-five years of his life, his feet brought him to Agen twelve times and nine times he went to visit the communities of the nascent Society of Mary, the last time when he was 77 years old. Yet, he had said his legs “are worthless.”⁶

Leaving in a hurry is not a privilege reserved to young people, even if Mary herself was young. I really like the conclusion of the Prologue of the *Rule* of St. Benedict where he teaches his disciples:

48 ... do not let yourself be troubled at once by fear and do not abandon the path of salvation. At the beginning it is always narrow (Mt 7:14).

49 But as one advances in religious life and in faith, the heart becomes large. And one begins to run along the path of God's commandments (Ps 118:32), with a heart filled with a love so sweet that there are no words to express it.

This is what fuels the believer's race: the love that fills the heart. And I remember reading, in the bulletin of a Benedictine abbey, the testimony of a very old monk on the words of St. Benedict: “Yes, I can testify to that, it is so!” That inner race is animated from within; it is possible at any age, but especially in old age.

³ Letter 567, dated March 21, 1825, to Sister du Sacré Coeur Diché.

⁴ Letter 233 of March 31, 1823, to Brother David Monier.

⁵ Retreat of 1821.

⁶ Letter 5, of April 28, 1793. He was then only 32 years old.

May Mary's example encourage the youngest among us to run in the ways of God. May it support others to pass little by little from the narrow path to the wider road where one can run with a heart dilated by love.

The enthusiasm of humility

She who moves forward with a light and confident step is the one who describes herself as the humble servant of the Lord. Humility is the virtue of availability and bold confidence. Mary dares everything because she is humble and this humility gives her infinite freedom and confidence. Does not our walking sometimes get weighed down when we are too attached to our fame, or to our dreams of past, present or future greatness? Do we know how to be, according to the wishes of our Founder, the *Little Society*?⁷ Little, not because of size, but because of the humility it receives from its Patroness. Small, humble, and therefore, audacious. Couldn't the present times, which give us the opportunity to make the spiritual sense coincide with the concrete sense of our small number, be the occasion of a new freedom and audacity, in the image of the humble Mary?

The eagerness of zeal

No doubt this race has something to do with the spirit of zeal bequeathed to us by our Founder and which he wanted to see burning in all his disciples. He wrote to Mother Adèle: “Your community will be composed entirely of missionary religious,”⁸ or for the brothers: “. . . the end we propose to ourselves, that of multiplying Christians, of propagating everywhere the true principles of religion.”⁹ “My dear children, we all have the same end in view, the same project, the same interest—that of working with all our strength at the support and propagation of the faith, each one in the post assigned to him for this purpose.”¹⁰ In religious life, it is a matter of “exercising the zeal which is its spirit.”¹¹ Finally, he exhorted religious to be “ready to hasten wherever [Mary] calls us.”¹²

And now?

Ultimately, can we let ourselves be touched by Mary's example? Do we too want to take this road and follow in her footsteps? Are we willing to leave aside our doubts, our fears, our excessive prudence, our pessimism or our sadness and enter into the enthusiastic charity, faith, and hope that animate Mary? There is in this moving out something of the daring and faith that Jesus asks of Peter when he asks him to step out onto the waters of the lake to join him (Mt 14:25-33). Are we ready to follow Mary where she will show us, on known or unknown paths, “to the mystery of our vocation” (RL 8), both personal and collective? Are we ready to do so at any age, in any situation, “to the end of our days, . . . happy to spend our lives and our strength in Mary's service, since they belong to her” (RL 91)?¹³ Can we read in the present times, and especially in the humbling experience of fragility, a call to undertake this with more audacity and confidence? Fragile witnesses in a fragile world . . . ; fragile, but zealous and daring, like she who inspires us and walks on ahead.

If I have dwelt on this first step, it is because it determines everything that follows, for Mary, as for us. Are we already on our way, or do we want to get started if we haven't already?

⁷ “The little Society . . . offers its feeble services to God and the Church, under the auspices of the august Mary”: Constitutions of 1839, Article 1; *The Chaminade Legacy* VII.28.

⁸ Letter 61, of Thursday, January 11, 1816.

⁹ Letter 353, of Tuesday, June 28, 1825.

¹⁰ Letter 1087, of October 1838.

¹¹ Letter 1040, of Thursday, March 29, 1838.

¹² Letter 1163, of August 24, 1839, to retreat preachers.

¹³ We know that this article is inspired almost word for word by the Letter of August 24, 1839.

Everything begins there, in this Marian enthusiasm in which we want to participate: our present and our future and the good that we will be given to do while walking.

I will let Saint Augustine conclude this first part with excerpts from a homily. In it, he expresses the Easter spirit in which the Christian is called to sing while walking. Is this not how Mary walked the road and how she wants us to follow her?

*So, then, my brothers, let us sing now,
Not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors.
You should sing as wayfarers do--.
Sing, but continue your journey.
Do not be lazy, but sing to make your journey more enjoyable.
Sing, but keep going . . . Keep on making progress.
This progress, however, must be in virtue; . . .
. . . But be sure that your progress is in virtue, true faith and right living.
Sing then, but keep going!¹⁴*

Mary's enthusiasm marks the whole episode of the Visitation. It stimulates the whole continuation of the story and its development. It is in this spirit that we continue the journey with her.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *Easter Sermon 256*, §3. *The Liturgy of the Hours IV*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1975), 610. This text is in the Office of Readings for Saturday of the 34th week of Ordinary Time, the concluding patristic reading of the liturgical year.

II. THE ENCOUNTER

Finally, Mary is at the end of her journey and, as Saint Luke tells us, “she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” (1:40).

Although it is the most natural thing in the world, this moment will be extraordinary. What is about to happen will be an exceptional moment of revelation and celebration. We can take from it many important and useful teachings for our present life.

1. A NEW FAMILY

Two women and two babies

The first extraordinary thing is that the sacred history that God is just then writing is entirely realized by two women and the babies they carry within them. In Luke's Gospel, this first public and collective event following the Incarnation is entirely feminine and maternal. This first community brought about by the coming of Christ is in the hands of Mary and Elizabeth. They carry within themselves for the whole world a gift whose meaning has been revealed to them. Above all else, they are guided by the new action undertaken by God for all of humanity. More than anyone else, during these weeks, they will serve this project and be transformed by it. Here, as later at the Resurrection, the women precede others by their action and their faith and show the others the way to follow. It is from those two women that we will receive the first teaching and testimony of the events. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, did not come with Mary, and Zechariah, still mute, is absent from the scene, only mentioned.

An experience of freedom

This barely described situation is only one aspect of the novelty of this family where women lead the way. Another novelty is the freedom in which the events take place. There is no equivalence at all between the two women's conditions. Mary has come from Galilee, from an almost unknown village, while Elizabeth is living in Judea, near Jerusalem. Mary is a young girl (1:27), Elizabeth is “advanced in years” (1:36), an age that carries an ambivalent message of respectability and fragility. Mary is promised to Joseph, a carpenter; Elizabeth, who was “a descendant of Aaron” (1:5), is the wife of a “priest of the priestly order of Abijah” (1:5), as such assigned to the Temple service twice a year (1Ch 24:1-19). One was sterile, marked by that sorrow, while the other was simply not yet married.

But it is striking to see how these human situations are turned upside down and surpassed by the action of God. Their meeting takes place in total freedom. The older and more socially elevated woman shows her admiration for the younger; the unique grace she herself has received of being delivered from sterility is overshadowed by Mary's grace of being the mother of the Savior. Both of them burst out with cries of joy and praise. The traditional iconography represents them embracing with affection and respect. In some representations, their two faces are sometimes so united that they seem to merge into each other. In a tradition especially present in the Germanic countries, the two children appear, as in transparency, in the wombs of their mothers. More than once John the Baptist is depicted kneeling before the infant Jesus, joining in his mother's praise. The one who should be the greater stoops before the one who is coming: “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal,” he would later say (John 1:27).

This freedom of the two women reshapes the traditional family ties. But then, even if we follow the new hierarchy established by God, the greater, Mary, serves the one who now comes second, Elizabeth. “The greatest among you will be your servant,” Christ said to his disciples (Matthew

23:11), and added: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, is already doing this. In the liturgy of the Visitation, one of the two choices for the first reading is an excerpt from the Letter to the Romans (12:9-16b). Many of Mary's and Elizabeth's attitudes can be found there:

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord, . . . have the joy of hope, . . . be assiduous in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

This situation speaks to us Marianist religious who wish to form "a new family based on the gospel of the Lord" (RL 35). We want our family to be new because it is inspired by new principles, as we see in the home of Elizabeth. We want a spirit of freedom, respect, mutual aid, service, and joy in which to live. Titles and honors don't matter when we live as brothers. Generational distances are blurred or become a source of mutual enrichment, and the gifts of each are used for the good of all. The *Rule* continues: ". . . we share in common: prayer, friendship, possessions, work, successes and difficulties" (RL 35). The same article adds: "We aim . . . [to grow] in the characteristics of Mary, particularly her faith, humility, simplicity, and hospitality." That is why it is good for us to contemplate this "new family" of Ein Karem, the one that God creates in this home by his action in each of its members. As our *Rule* says: if "The whole of our community life is inspired by this new commandment of love. . . . Community life will rekindle joy, inspire love and esteem for our vocation, attract others to share our life, and strengthen our apostolic dedication" (RL 38). So many reasons to for us to enroll in the school of Mary and Elizabeth.

2. THE ACTION OF THE SPIRIT

It is quite clear that the great actor of the Visitation is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who guides events, inspires people, makes them act. It is the Spirit who reshapes the family and gives it a new physiognomy. It is also because the Spirit is so present that the scene is full of movement and joy.

"And it came to pass," says the Lucan text (1:41). The coming of the Holy Spirit suddenly appears in Elizabeth's life. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." It is, therefore, a free gift from God. Ambrose comments: "The Holy Spirit does not proceed by slow, laborious efforts. Quickly, too, the blessings of Mary's arrival and the Lord's presence are made clear: as soon as *Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the child leaped in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit.*"¹⁵ He states: "The child leaps in the womb; the mother is filled with the Holy Spirit, but not before her son. Once the son has been filled with the Holy Spirit, he fills his mother with the same Spirit."

This moment is a revelation of the profound vocation of each one. John the Baptist is animated with a prophetic kick ("leap") in the womb. He signals to his mother the coming of the Savior. The word Luke uses for this "leap" is the same word used in the Septuagint to describe David's

¹⁵ St. Ambrose, (339-397), *A Commentary on Luke 2, 19.22-23.26-27*; patristic reading from the Office of Readings for December 21. (*The Liturgy, I, 353-54*).

dance before the Ark as he brings it up to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:2-15). The child recognizes in Mary the mother of the Messiah. Already he announces the one who is to come.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth prophesies. She is the voice of her son, the one who will be the voice announcing the coming of the Messiah. “She exclaimed with a loud cry” (1:42a). This redundant expression highlights the strength of her proclamation. Again, these are the words used to describe the acclamations that accompany the Ark as it goes up to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:15). Elizabeth reveals at the same time the presence of a son in Mary, his dignity and that of his mother: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (1:42b-43). At the same time as she proclaims the identity of the Son, Elizabeth performs the first act of Christian Marian veneration. She describes Mary by an element so essential to her being that it defines her: she is “the blessed one”; generations have never ceased to invoke her by that name.

This episode can refer us to two articles of the *Rule* which call us to develop two complementary attitudes. The first one tells us about the role of the Spirit in our lives: “When each member is faithful to the Spirit, the community as a whole grows into the full stature of Christ; each shares his gift in building up the Body of Christ” (RL 41). The new relationships that are established between Elizabeth and Mary, John the Baptist and Jesus, are the fruit of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ in their midst, whom they celebrate in unanimity and joy. It is because each one is open to that gift that the event occurs as we know it. In a similar way, the Spirit builds a new community among the brothers whose life and action he inspires. “Mary was continually attentive to the Lord, contemplating his words and actions in her heart. . . we honor her with filial piety and with joy we celebrate her feasts” (RL 57). Elizabeth receives from the Spirit the revelation of the gift given to her cousin and of her exceptional dignity and that provokes her to praise. In order for us to imitate her, we too must let the Spirit reveal to us the greatness and beauty of Mary in the eyes of God. These are the two challenges that this Marian story addresses to us: welcoming the Spirit and celebrating Mary.

3. MARY’S VISITS

Receiving visits from Mary

At all times, but even more so in these complex and often trying times in which we live, we must remember that what Mary began at the Visitation has never stopped. Since Mary set out and crossed the threshold of the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, she does not cease to cross the thresholds of all the homes of humanity, one by one, until the end of time. That is her mission: to come and bring the presence of her Son to each one of us to arouse our joy and praise.

Many years ago, I read a text that made a deep impression on me. I have never since been able to think of the Visitation without thinking of these words that are so enlightening. This text is by Fr. René Voillaume (1905-2003), Founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus, in the tradition of Charles de Foucauld. Because I believe that this text can still inspire us today, despite its length, I would like to quote it in full here.

VISITATION. I celebrate Mass in the church of the Dominican Convent, thinking of Brother Charles of Jesus and how much joy, love, and confidence he found in contemplating this seemingly ordinary visit of Mary to her cousin who was about to have a son. I am struck by the text of the “Secret” of the Dominican Mass of the feast day which I am reading for the first time. We ask the Virgin

Mary to come and visit us in our daily needs. We usually think more of imitating Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, seeing in this mystery an action to be imitated, as if Mary had made only that visit, and so that she might be an example for us to imitate, forgetting that it is in the nature of the Virgin *to make visits*, and that visiting people has even become for her an occupation. As if we were a friend, a close relative, she comes often to visit us. The Visitation is always the celebration of that total dedication which animates Mary's heart since she knew that she was the mother of Jesus; she will now begin that innumerable series of "visitations" which will never end as long as there is a human being on earth. Her glorification and the prodigious extension of her motherhood to all those born of her son will give Mary an infinite number of relatives to visit, simply to help, with that humble presence that characterizes her. Mary comes to visit us with Jesus hidden within her, to help us in our most urgent, daily, I was going to say "household" necessities of work, duties of state, relationships. Mary visits us. . . and perhaps we may not even have thought about that? She visits us often, every day. This is the deepest, truest meaning of this feast: the feast of the countless visits, all simple, all personal, all ours, that Mary multiplies in our lives, at every moment, in every difficulty. This is not just a pious thought, but a wonderful reality. It is in Mary's nature to "visit." She visits because she carries Jesus, because we are related to her and because we need her. I have often spoken to you about the presence of Mary in your life, because she knows, she sees, she is concerned, she loves, she asks, she intervenes. That is her way of visiting us. The Visitation gives this presence of Mary a more familiar, very human character: she wants to help so discreetly that we will not know that it is she, that we don't realize that Mary was visiting us! It did not start today; what I have just told you should make you discover the reality. No, she's not just now starting to visit us, because she has always done so, without waiting for you to say thank you. . . Didn't you know that? Perhaps today you will begin to be a little more attentive, and will strive to receive Mary's visits in a more conscious way, to desire them, to wait for them, and, sometimes, to pay attention to them in the depths of your heart, with wonder and a feeling of infinite gratitude.¹⁶

I believe that it is a great consolation and a great stimulus for us to know that Mary does not cease to visit us and, indeed, to visit all of humanity. In these times of difficulty, she is the one who comes to encourage us with her presence and her help, just as she did for her cousin. Nothing escapes her of our present needs and necessities. She is there, joyful, enthusiastic, considerate, patient, understanding, good, just, . . . And above all she offers us Jesus her Son, she carries him within herself, she never stops giving him to us so that he might become our joy and our strength. And as always, she opens our lives to the gifts of the Spirit so that he might work more deeply within us.

If this consolation is given to us, it is also so that we may pass on this encouragement to others. Those who suffer, who are sick, weak, isolated, abandoned or neglected: let them know that Mary never ceases to visit them and to present her Son to them. May they may become aware of her presence at their side. So many people today suffer from the experience of loneliness, a situation now multiplied by the health crisis: Mary overcomes this obstacle, joins them and consoles them.

¹⁶ Voillaume René, *Lettres aux fraternités*, vol. II, 2nd ed., (Paris: Cerf, 1960), 252-255. The letter is written in 1959, from Rio de Janeiro, on July 2, the day of the celebration of the Visitation before the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council.

Visiting as Mary did so as to extend her maternal charity

It is also our particular role in the Church to make “our devotedness extend her maternal charity on earth” (*Consecration to Mary*). It is a matter of being not only the voice, the hands, the eyes, the ears of Christ to our loved ones, but also those of Mary to whom we have promised our collaboration. We want to be “assisting her in her mission” (*Three O’Clock Prayer*). Father Chaminade tells us: “we are . . . the auxiliaries and the instruments . . . for the projects which are inspired by her almost infinite charity, and we make a vow to serve her faithfully till the end of our life, to carry out punctually all that she tells us. We are glad that we can thus spend in her service the life and strength that we have pledged to her.” (August 24, 1839).

4. OPENING THE DIALOGUE

But how does one do that in today's world? A beautiful reflection is offered to us in a commentary by Blessed Christian de Chergé, monk of Tibhirine in Algeria, martyred in 1996 and, moreover, a former student of the Marianists. He invites us to observe how Mary begins the proclamation by provoking dialogue, thus opening a fruitful path of mutual enrichment. At the beginning, there is a simple greeting from her. This commentary is born of his experience in a Cistercian community in a Muslim environment, in Algeria, and therefore in a situation of daily dialogue with Islam. This is in line with the context of many other places today where it is not easy to find a way to share our faith, let alone link up with that of the other. Let us listen:

I can well imagine that we are in the situation of Mary who goes to see her cousin Elizabeth and who carries within her a living secret which is still one that we ourselves can carry, a living Good News.

. . . and we have come, a bit like Mary, first to be of service (after all, this was her first ambition) . . . but also, carrying this Good News, [without knowing] how we are going to tell it . . . and we know that those we have come to meet are a little like Elizabeth, they too are bearers of a message that comes from God. And our Church does not tell us and does not know what is the exact link between the Good News we carry and this message that gives life to the other. . . And when Mary arrives, it is Elizabeth who speaks first. That's not quite exact because Mary had said: *as salam alaikum! peace be with you!*

And that's something we can do. This simple greeting struck a chord in with something, someone within Elisabeth. And in his leaping, something was said . . . that was the Good News, not all the Good News, but what could be perceived at the moment. *How is it that the child within me leaped? . . .*

And Elizabeth freed up Mary's *Magnificat*.

Finally, if we are attentive and if we situate our meeting with the other at this level, with attention and a will to reach him, and also in a need for what he is and what he has to say to us, most probably, he will say something to us which will link up with what we carry, showing that he is actually in league with us. . .

How can we communicate Mary's mission? With what words? The encounter is at the heart of that mission. We are bearers of peace . . .

Mary presents to the Church the image of its Mission.¹⁷

Today's world, worried, suffering, desiring to find peace and consolation, awaits such greetings of peace and hope. Hearts are waiting, often secretly thirsty, but we do not find ways to reach

¹⁷ Chergé, Blessed Christian de, OCSO, *Mystery of the Visitation*, unpublished text in French, <https://mission-universelle.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/02/Mystere-de-la-Visitation.pdf>.

them and speak to them. Perhaps there is a part of the answer in this commentary: let us try to open a dialogue, let us start with kind words of greeting. Let us find words that touch hearts and allow the Spirit to reveal himself and pursue his task. That is one way of prolonging the maternal charity of Mary.

What's next?

There are so many messages that we receive from the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary. For us, these are ways for reflecting and acting:

The Spirit knows how to reshape and renew our communities, according to his freedom. The Spirit opens the space necessary to welcome Christ and Mary present in our midst.

Mary does not cease to visit us and the multitude of her brothers and sisters in the world; we want to extend her maternal charity by collaborating with her in this mission.

Mary invites us to find today words of peace and blessing that open the dialogue with our times.

III. MARY'S *MAGNIFICAT*, PRAISE AND PROPHECY, TOWARDS A NEW WORLD

Mary's enthusiasm and the depth of that encounter lead to an outpouring of joy and a prophetic announcement. While sharing with us what is at the heart of her life and her personal mission, she really teaches us how to interpret God's activity. The Spirit continues to manifest itself through gifts: under the Spirit's influence, Mary exults and sings of God's action in her and for his people. She understands and proclaims, in a prophetic way, that the divine activity is the source of a profound transformation of the world, and, especially, of human relationships. In Mary's prayer, exultation and prophetic proclamation are linked and complete each other.

So that is where Mary is taking us now. It is quite clear that this is not an individual grace for her alone. She leads us into a universal message that starts from her person to arrive at a rereading of human history according to how God sees things. It is more than information: it is a proclamation and a call to enter into that view and that action. We find ourselves at the climax of the encounter: Mary presents us with a vigorous challenge.

Every day we sing the *Magnificat* at Evening Prayer. Because of its unique place in the liturgy, it is a constant call to our attention and vigilance. It cannot be, for us and for the Church, the simple repetition of an historically important message: it is a manifestation of the actuality of these words to describe the action of God today; it is an invitation to collaborate in the realization of the new world proclaimed by Mary. Far from being a pious wish or a purely sentimental act, singing the *Magnificat* is an act of faith in a reality that is already present, but still often hidden, that our commitment can make more visible and real.

In rereading these words, a child of Mary must ask himself whether he really belongs among the witnesses of the *Magnificat* as Mary proclaimed it, or whether he is just one of many distracted repeaters.¹⁸ Could Mary herself say to us what Christ said to his countrymen: "This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7,6; Is 29,13 gr)? The 2001 General Chapter told us: "Only by incarnating these attitudes of Mary in his own life can the Marianist discover his full identity and can respond with all his energy to the mission. When this spirit of Mary is incarnated in us, we become *Men of the Magnificat*."¹⁹

In order to become these *Men of the Magnificat*, let us allow ourselves to be challenged again by the words of Mary. How can we receive and live them today?

1. A CALL TO PRAISE (LUKE 1:47-50)

An explosion of joy

The *Magnificat* is above all an expression of the exuberant joy that arose in Mary's heart. Elizabeth's words are a first cause. Mary heard in her cousin's words a confirmation of the gift God had given her. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth describes with astonishing depth and accuracy the grace and mission received by her cousin: she refers to her as the woman blessed by God, the mother of the Lord, the one who believes in the fulfillment of God's promises. With this same proclamation, she recognized Mary's son as her Lord, the Messiah. The accuracy of

¹⁸ Cf. James 1:22-24: "Put the word into practice, and do not merely listen to it, deceiving yourselves with false reasoning. 23 For if anyone hears the word and does not do it, he is like a man who looks in a mirror at his natural face, 24 and when he has looked at himself, he goes away and immediately forgets what he was like."

¹⁹ *Sent by the Spirit*, XXXII General Chapter, 2001, No. 26.

these divinely inspired words touched Mary at the very heart of her being and of her vocation and she rejoiced.

Although it is not explicitly mentioned, there is no doubt that Mary's song is also inspired by the Holy Spirit. Luke did not need to specify this since the descent of the Holy Spirit on Mary, announced by the angel (1:35), had already taken place at the time of the Incarnation. The joy manifested is indeed the work of the Holy Spirit. In Mary, no obstacle comes to tarnish it and it can take on its full extent. Like many psalms, this praise takes a litany form to evoke the motives of thanksgiving.

Inserted into a long history

Mary's song is part of a long line of women who had praised God for his countless blessings. In the Old Testament, many proclaim the benefits of God in this way. Miriam, Moses' sister, gives thanks for the deliverance of the People from their oppression in Egypt (Exodus 15). Hannah gives thanks for the son who was given to her (1 Samuel 2). Judith acclaims God after her victory over Holofernes (Judith 16) and Deborah after Yael's victory over Sisera. These are not the only ones. So many psalms also sing the praise of God for his brilliant deeds. The *Magnificat* is in this vein, as revealed by the abundance of references to the psalms or hymns of the Old Testament that appear in it; the notes in almost any Bible make that clear.

The fruit of humility

The virtue of humility facilitates praise. That is why Mary's praise is expressed so easily and abundantly. Jesus, the Humble One par excellence, exults: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to the little ones. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Mt 11:25-26). Thus, when Mary gives thanks to God because "he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Luke 1:48), she reveals what was for her the simultaneous path of all graces and praise. This also refers to the message of the first beatitude, the one that is a prelude to all the others: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:3).

Mary praises God because she is humble and knows that every gift comes from him. She identifies with the little ones and the poor who know the value of every gift received. The superfluous does not clutter their hearts, as is unfortunately too often the case today, including among religious. It is always surprising and deeply moving to hear people express their trust in God's goodness in a context of great deprivation. In order to be able to praise, one must strip oneself of the superfluous, the useless, whatever it may be: possessions, occupations, information, preoccupations, overvalued leisure activities, etc. This is the path that Mary teaches us.

A victory over darkness

In these difficult days it is especially important to give full scope to praise. Praise is the antidote to pessimism, discouragement, fatalism, all forms of navel-gazing . . . God deserves to be praised and praising him is already a victory over all that. Mary who "exalts the Lord" and "exults in God her Savior" presents herself as the woman who is victorious over the destructive tendencies of life and of the world. Despite her smallness and the immensity of the difficulties of her time, she sings and magnifies God. She does not close herself off within her own concerns and those of her time, but she turns to God. Praising God is an act of faith and hope and freedom. It is a sign of life and victory.

St. Ignatius opens the book of the *Exercises* by stating that “Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created . . . Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.”²⁰

Our *Rule of Life* tells us that “Present in word and sacrament, Christ unites us with his perfect praise of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring the human race to holiness” (RL 49), or that “Every morning and evening in the Liturgy of the Hours, we join the Church in its unending rhythm of praise and supplication” (RL 51).

Praise is a victory. It is an act of courage. It belongs to strong souls. Let us remember the moving episode of Block 13 of the Auschwitz Camp where Father Maximilian Kolbe transformed that place of atrocious death by hunger into a place of prayer, intercession, and praise. Hatred and destructive forces were overcome by praise.

In these days of many difficulties and great challenges, we need praise to overcome the inner obstacles that prevent us from seeing the signs of God and discourage us from moving forward or giving of ourselves.

In his catechesis on Wednesday, January 13, 2021, Pope Francis said:

Praise . . . must be practiced not only when life fills us with happiness, but above all in difficult moments, in moments of darkness when the path becomes an uphill climb. That too is the time for praise, like Jesus, who in the dark moments praises the Father. Because we learn that, through that ascent, that difficult path, that wearisome path, those demanding parts of the road, we get to see a new panorama, a broader horizon. Giving praise . . . does not leave you imprisoned in the difficult and dark moments of hardship.

Drawing on the example of St. Francis of Assisi, he added:

There is a great teaching in that prayer that for eight centuries has never lost its vitality, that Saint Francis composed at the end of his life: the “Canticle of Brother Sun” or “of the creatures.” The Poverello did not compose it in a moment of joy, of well-being, but on the contrary, in the midst of difficulties. Francis was by then almost blind, and he felt in his soul the weight of a solitude he had never before experienced: the world had not changed since the beginning of his preaching, there were still those who let themselves be torn apart by quarrels, and in addition, he was aware that death was approaching ever nearer. It may have been a moment of disillusionment . . . of that extreme disillusionment and the perception of his own failure. But at that instant of sadness, in that dark instant Francis prays. “Praised be You, my Lord . . .”

Praise is a way to overcome the temptation of deadly sadness and discouragement. Is praise in our heart and in our prayer as it is in Mary’s? If it is lacking, let her help me to introduce it so that I can be like her in this too. Nothing is more discouraging than a sad and dull prayer. Such cannot be that of the children of Mary.

²⁰ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 23,2-3.5a.7.

2. A NEW WORLD (LUKE 1:51-54)

Mary engages us even further. She invites us to a new reading of history, quite different from the usual and conventional interpretations. The Spirit makes her see beyond appearances. As we listen to her, it will become clear that this new understanding cannot be realized unless we take part in it and take action. This is also the purpose of her proclamation.

The victory of the poor and the little ones

Mary's praise also celebrates God's action towards the poor and the little ones, quite different from the dominant trends in the world. God appears as the defender of the poor, the hungry, the humble who surpass the rich, the powerful, and the proud. God's action is expressed with the same vigor as the announcement of the liberation from slavery in the Exodus when Miriam proclaimed:

*Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. (Exodus 15:21).*

The similarity of spirit is not accidental. This is also a radical and definitive liberation. God creates something new and brings about the birth of a new world that frees itself from the exaggerated exercise of human power and rediscovers its original inspiration.

Those who are defeated are those who find their strength in themselves. They “are proud in the thoughts of their hearts” (Luke 1:51). They are those who take the place of God and ignore his calls. The prophets or the sages frequently denounce their attitude and show that God acts according to other criteria and prepares a new world. Thus, the Book of Job comments: “He leads priests away barefoot, and overthrows the mighty” (12:19); “He sets on high those who are lowly” (5:11); “For God abases the proud, but he saves the lowly” (22:29). The Book of Sirach confirms:

The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the lowly in their place.
The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations, and plants the humble in their place
(10:14-15).

Ezekiel adds that “things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, abase that which is high” (21:26).

Many have noticed the great similarity in spirit between the statements of the *Magnificat* and those of the Beatitudes, especially in Luke's version (6:20-26). Those who triumph are the humble, the hungry, the weeping, those persecuted for their faith, while the rich, the greedy, the mocking, or the proud wither away. Mary proclaims the coming of a new civilization based on God's call and activity in human history.

This proclamation does not seek to establish a boundary between one group and the other or to announce the victory of one and the defeat of the other. Its objective is to invite all men to accept the true values that are in conformity with God's plan, including through the conversion of the iniquitous. This can be achieved if they too become humble, stop abusing power or wealth against their brothers. Then, their guides become those whom they had despised or dominated but whom God has raised up and fulfilled. Mary invites all people to accept the values of this new world and to recognize those who come first: the little ones, the poor, the humble. God never stops looking for the lost sheep: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” says

the Lord God, “and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23). Mary's proclamation is a sign of hope for the little ones and the poor; it is also a call to conversion so that all may be open to this proclamation and to its realization.

In our Marianist tradition

Being children of Mary invites us to share her desires and her projects. We too want to act to enable the growth of this new world. Our Marianist tradition calls us to do this constantly. Let us find in it the spirit of the *Magnificat* translated into the concreteness of our lives and our commitments.

The *Rule of Life* asks us for a simple lifestyle (RL 25, 28, 2.7, 2.9, 2.19), trust in God allowing us to accept insecurity and privations (RL 23, 25). We want to live the condition of all those who work (RL 25) and share with the poor (2.10, 2.14). Stripping is the source of a new availability for the mission (RL 64).

Our condition should make us close to the poor (RL 2.7) and provoke in us “a special love for the poor . . . to help build a society that is just and fraternal” (RL 27). We are sensitive to their needs like Mary (RL 65). Our works are open to them (RL 2.11) and even, whenever possible, intended for them (RL 2.17). We “work at . . . the transformation of society . . . in unity with those who struggle for justice, freedom, and dignity” (RL 72; 5.16-5.20). We are inspired by the example and commitment of Blessed Chaminade (RL 5.2).

The abundance of these quotations, and the exigency of these demands, presented in a very synthetic way, lead to reflection. What is our real response to these demands? Where do we stand, personally and collectively? The Society of Mary has made progress in this area, but we must recognize that we still have much to do. The recommendations of our last General Chapter can offer the opportunities. They ask, in Article 35, that in each Unit and community “religious [be] challenged to make a commitment to serve those who are marginalized by offering direct service to support their needs.” The Directories must also include orientations that encourage this, and demonstrate “that another kind of world is possible,” according to the spirit of *Laudato sí* (56). The seriousness of the current social situation, reinforced by the pandemic, compels us to act. How can we make what Mary proclaims more visible in our lives and commitments?

The experience of Blessed Chaminade

This is a subject that had always preoccupied Blessed Chaminade. In 1789, as a member of the St. Charles community in Mussidan, he participated as a delegate in the preparatory assemblies for the Estates General. It is striking to see his signature in a declaration of January 8, 1789, demanding that the deputies of the Third Estate (of the people) be given equal place with those of the nobility and the clergy; it also asks that priests, not only bishops, be elected as delegates of the clergy. A little later, he participated with his brother Louis-Xavier in the drafting of the book of grievances of the Périgord clergy. Although that book is lost, and therefore the signatures are unverifiable, we can think, with Father Verrier, that the Chaminade brothers “were satisfied with the wishes of the *cahier de doléances* . . . [and that they] wished, even in their order, a reasonable democratization.”²¹ This booklet demanded, among other things, a less unjust distribution of ecclesiastical revenues among pastors, vicars, and bishops. Thus, Fr. Chaminade, conservative in his political choices - he was fundamentally royalist - was also sensitive to the need for social reform.

²¹ Verrier, Joseph, *Jalons d'histoire sur la route de G.-J. Chaminade*, 2nd ed. (Bordeaux: Maison Chaminade, 2007), vol. I, 141 [first edition: Rome, 1983, vol. I, 102].

That would be verified in his action. After 1800, during the time of the lay Sodalities, he multiplied social activities with them. He promoted the visiting of prisoners; he worked with children hired as “Little Chimney Sweeps” - street children of the time; he supported the start of a work in favor of the liberation of prostitutes, which gave birth to the Miséricorde of Marie-Thérèse de Lamourous; he was interested in the bakers' guild and he promoted the entry of young people into the world of work through a system of mutual assistance among Sodality members. The highlight of all this is that the movement of the Sodality of the Immaculate achieved in one and the same group a real “union of all honorable conditions . . . and of all classes of society” and even of all “ages,”²² but “without confusion.”²³ That was one of the novelties of those Sodalities. That was why Father Chaminade had to respond to the criticism of his opponents.

He expressed the same sensitivity after the foundation of religious congregations. He often insisted on the simplicity of life that he expected from his religious.²⁴ He intended them “for young people and especially for the poor.”²⁵ In the *Constitutions* of 1839, he states: “The Society . . . wishes to *preserve*; and this by the education of the youngest and poorest of children” (Art. 253).

An inspiration for our Family

This desire for social transformation was particularly visible in Father Chaminade during the first stage of his founding work, with the laity, and then at the time of the birth of the religious. The call of our last General Chapter to be “*In Mission with the Marianist Family*” can allow us to renew this tradition of a strong social commitment lived as a family. The laity or members of the Alliance can stimulate us with their knowledge of the social conditions and the concrete situations they encounter. The sisters can encourage us by the witness of their Foundress, always very committed to the service of the poor, as witnessed by her actions and writings, and by the continuation of that commitment through the centuries. And we receive the call of Blessed Chaminade to be at the service of “the young and the poor especially.”²⁶

²² Chaminade, William Joseph, “Answers to the seven questions or objections usually raised about the New Structure of the Sodalities of Bordeaux...,” *The Chaminade Legacies* I.153 [4].

²³ Chaminade, Guillaume-Joseph, “Réponses ...,” *Ecrits et Paroles* I.153 [1].

²⁴ “As regards the spirit and the practice of poverty and of the renunciation of property, taken intrinsically and in the evangelical sense, I think I have sufficiently shown it to be possible in the Society of Mary and, to speak truly, it is the great desire of my heart and it will be the object of my solicitude, to have it deeply rooted more and more in the Society of Mary until the end of my days.” Letter 388, February 15, 1826, to Pierre-Bienvenu Noailles, *Letters II*.

“What is this round tower, covered with zinc, that has been in the process of construction in the enclosure of the walls for three months? It is said that Brothers Clouzet and Gaussens are to lodge in it? ... Would Brother Clouzet have considered as necessary an elegant building to lodge the superior of a poor community vowed to poverty?” Letter 656, December 30, 1832, to Father Chevaux, Saint-Rémy, *Letters III*.

“You have embraced a state of poverty, and do you love your state? Have you the love of poverty, and especially its spirit, which is one of the things that has contributed the most to the conversion of the world?” Letter 834, April 15, 1836, to the Directors of Alsace, *Letters III*.

“The Society of Mary is totally devoted to poverty, not only in its individual members, but still more in each one of its establishments. . . There is in the nature of riches something to corrupt the hearts of men. From whence came the relaxation in most of the religious orders before the first Revolution? Is it not from riches? As long as the Society exactly follows its Constitutions, as long as it preserves their spirit, it will be in the state of fervor. God will bless its labors; it will edify the world. As soon as it turns aside from the practice (of poverty), disorder will come with relaxation and its miserable consequences. You see the scandals that have been seen at about the same time in Layrac, in Agen, and in Saint-Hippolyte. I prefer that establishments do not exist, rather than have them operate in contradiction to the original views of the Society,” Letter 1009, November 7, 1837, to Bro. Louis Rothéa, *Letters IV*.

²⁵ Chaminade, William Joseph, Letter 1163, August 24, 1839, to retreat preachers, *Letters IV*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The change proclaimed by Mary in the *Magnificat* overturns human and social relations: it is especially a call to fraternity and to equal consideration for all. The highest dignity is achieved through humility and service; the neediest become the most fulfilled. This is the family of Mary, the one we are called to build. The responsibility of this family is not only to act in favor of the poor, but also to witness to this new fraternity that gives first place to the humblest and most marginalized. It is a radical upheaval of the ways the world operates. This new form of fraternity is what Mary proclaims and hopes for from her "privileged children." It is therefore impossible to imagine that the Marianist Family, Marian in its very essence, would ignore this call. The *Magnificat* cannot be read only from a spiritual and doctrinal point of view, for that would be to amputate and disfigure the message of the one we wish to serve. Our Family, and our congregation within it, are called to accept Mary's invitation, to be faithful to the witness of our origins and to the exceptional urgencies of our time.

Fratelli tutti

All of this is supported by the call of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (FT), inviting us to put the human being and common fraternity at the center everywhere. The poorest cannot be "lifted up" or "filled" (cf. Luke 1:52b, 53a) if we do not first become aware of their distress, of what causes it and of what hinders the improvement of that situation. Among the necessary changes is the need to truly recognize the equal dignity of every human being, without exception. It is also necessary to renounce the immoral domination of money and abandon unjust economic, social, and political systems. A collective commitment is essential, but it relies on the awareness and collaboration of each individual in this evolution. The reflection opened by the encyclical reminds us that the action of God proclaimed by Mary is waiting for our collaboration to bear fruit.

There is no shortage of obstacles to change.²⁷ There are many ways to be "proud thinkers" today (Luke 1:51b): by disregarding the historical roots of peoples (FT 13), their cultural diversity, or their minority status (FT 15, 51-53); or by any form of racism (FT 20). At the root is the "deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful" (FT 30), "our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists" (FT 34).

Many also continue to side with the "powerful" (Luke 1:52a): through economic (FT 12) or cultural (FT 14) colonization, when forms of exploitation, discrimination, or domination of women persist (FT 23), when human beings are reduced to the status of objects (FT 24) or mere passive consumers (FT 12), and when those who are considered unprofitable are discarded or ignored (FT 18).

We can also continue to act like the rich (Luke 1:53b) by unlimited exploitation of the resources of our "common home" or by allowing ourselves to be dominated by the "obsession with a consumerist lifestyle" (FT 36).

In response to these obstacles, the Pope invites every human being to develop a "universal fraternity" and "social friendship" based on the equal dignity of all, recognizing together that "God 'has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters.'"²⁸ "The mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less

²⁷ ". . . I intend simply to consider certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity," Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 9.

²⁸ *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi (February 4, 2019), in Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 5.

dignity. . . ”²⁹ We can recognize that “only when our economic and social system no longer produces even a single victim, a single person cast aside, will we be able to celebrate the feast of universal fraternity,”³⁰ or the *Magnificat* will remain a purely ideal description, unfulfilled in reality,³¹ provoking skepticism and irony.

But fortunately, we know that we can count on the positive help of Mary, who herself actively collaborates in the birth of a world renewed by the Gospel.

For many Christians, this journey of fraternity also has a Mother, whose name is Mary. Having received this universal motherhood at the foot of the cross (cf. John 19:26), she cares not only for Jesus but also for “the rest of her children” (cf. Rev 12:17). In the power of the risen Lord, she wants to give birth to a new world, where all of us are brothers and sisters, where there is room for all those whom our societies discard, where justice and peace are resplendent. (FT 278).

Our Marianist tradition allows us to easily accept this conviction and to find in it a particular strength to act, not only according to the words of Mary, but also with the help of her assistance. She invites us, by her words and by her example, to resolutely commit ourselves to this path.

3. THE FEAST

The need for profound changes in our world should not make us forget the overall tone of Mary's canticle, which is one of communicative joy. Mary sees all that is lacking in the realization of what she proclaims, but she also observes that the power of God is already at work in her and in the world. Because God is already fulfilling what is announced, she rejoices. This rejoicing cannot be lacking among those who work with Mary, it is a sign of faith and it encourages a deeper commitment.

The feast flows from praise and leads to it. In a beautiful little book, Cardinal Martini, then Archbishop of Milan,³² wrote:

The feast is born of attention to the presence of God that operates in history and that implies listening to the wonders of God. From the attention to this presence and from listening, happiness is born, joy explodes because God is so great in our midst.³³

For the people of the Old Covenant, this joy is linked to the experience of the crossing of the Red Sea and the exit from Egypt; for the Christian, to that of the Passover of Jesus.

Mary of Nazareth who sings the *Magnificat* is the soul of Israel, she is all her people, it is to all humanity that she lends her voice, the humanity humiliated but surprised by the real tenderness of God, the poor and suffering humanity. It is all this humanity surprised by the tenderness of God, listening attentively to the action of God in her.

Mary is therefore the school of the feast of humanity, she is the place where we learn the delicacy, the attention, the clarity and the luminosity of the feast. In her

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, No. 190; quoted in *Fratelli tutti*, 2021, 106.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Message for the "Economy of Francesco" event* (May 1, 2019); quoted in *Fratelli tutti*, 110.

³¹ “. . . Sadly, politics today often takes forms that hinder progress towards a different world” *Fratelli tutti*, 154.

³² Martini, Carlo-Maria, *La donna de la Riconciliazione*, Milano, 1985, 61 p. [Eng: *Women and Reconciliation (Cathedral S.)* Paperback – (Dublin: Veritas Publins, December 1, 1994), 70 p.].

³³ Martini, C-M, *Op. cit.*

we find the means to understand what really gives joy to the world, what makes life full of divine joy. By penetrating her words, we grasp what it means to be a festive people: it is a people that recognizes, in wonderment, the greatness of a God who cares for the poor, for the one who is nothing, the God who, from that nothingness, makes a strong and powerful people, an entity capable of generating strength, beauty, and truth.³⁴

Thus, despite the presence in the world of many limitations and obstacles to the realization of the words of the *Magnificat*, Mary invites us to express our joy and gratitude to God for the greatness of what he is doing today. This festive confidence is the antidote to the discouragement and skepticism that could affect us in view of the immense resistance to change present in ourselves or in the world. It is an encouragement to a more vigorous and persevering commitment.

A happy Marianist tradition

Celebration has always been part of the Marianist spirit. Mary encourages every feast that is a celebration of fraternity, of communion, of God's love, of solidarity among all, of simplicity. The Marianist feast resembles that one which inspires us. It has no need of great artifice and luxury; it is not a pompous celebration influenced by worldly conventions; its vigor is not nourished by overabundance; on the contrary, it loves simple ways of doing things. No one is left out, no one lacks the wine of friendship and joy. God, who created us all brothers and sisters, is its origin and support, Mary is its spirit. The poor cannot only be the reason, they are also the actors.

Our communities are enriched by such celebrations, lived in this spirit. They are celebrated through song, dance, stories of our traditions or cultures, games, sports. Depending on the culture, the place or the ages, it takes various forms. In the Marianist tradition, it is often celebrated around the table: Cana is not far away! We must be careful to avoid all excesses and any seeking of luxury, because that distances it from the Marian simplicity that should be a characteristic note. The feast is the occasion to show attention to each brother for a birthday, an event, a jubilee, . . . All these opportunities to experience our fraternity are important and deserve to be cared for in a special way. It is our antidote to the individualism and sadness that camp at our door, always ready to strike at us. To the usual reasons for our feasts, let us add especially those mentioned by Mary, when the humble are lifted up, the hungry are satisfied, when God remembers his goodness and shows us his mercy.

And now?

We have received from Mary a rich and ambitious call: to practice praise as a way of liberation, to participate in the construction of a new world, to show our confidence in God's victory through celebration. In their diversity, these invitations complement each other. Praise without commitment would be an escape, commitment without praise could turn into ideology or cause discouragement. Without a celebration, the effort made to work towards the birth of a new world would run the risk of closing in on itself, generating anxiety and aggression. None of them is sufficient on its own; among these three aspects, we are called to find the balance appropriate to each situation, here and now. Because of the influence of the circumstances of time and place on the living interpretation of this hymn, we are also invited to admire the infinite variety of ways in which the *Magnificat* can be proclaimed with Mary and, whenever possible, to add our voice to the chorus that proclaims it. This is how we will be able to expand our hearts to the dimensions of the world, like Mary, and become little by little the *Men of the Magnificat*.

³⁴ *Idem*.

IV. MARY STAYED WITH ELIZABETH FOR ABOUT THREE MONTHS AND THEN RETURNED HOME (Luke 1:56)

Here we are at the end of Mary's visit to her cousin and of our presence at her side. In this quick tour, what a wealth of riches were mentioned! However, we must finish and I would like to end with two concluding remarks.

Let us remember these events and meditate on them in our hearts (cf. Luke 2:19)

Mary's three months with her cousin took her just to the birth of John the Baptist. It seems logical to think that she was present at that event, even if Luke is silent on the matter.

We do not know anything about the content of her stay either. Its duration, “about three months,” reveals that she wanted to serve her cousin until the end by assisting her with her thoughtful presence. There is no doubt that these weeks will have been marked by her joy, her spontaneity, her enthusiasm, her faith, and her active generosity. There is no doubt that there were many conversations between the two cousins and that the main topic of their conversation was their children and the grace granted by God to each of them for their conception. The Holy Spirit could not fail to enlighten them on the nature of the events they experienced and their profound meaning in the eyes of God. How many other *Magnificats* could have been proclaimed!

As Luke writes later in his gospel, Mary must certainly have “remembered all these events and pondered them in her heart” (cf. Luke 2:19). This is a typical attitude on her part, partially repeated in Luke 2:51. Mary is an expert in internalizing events and discerning. Far from making her inactive and passive, it is on the contrary the source of a firm and sustained commitment. At Cana, after observing the situation carefully, she not only invites the servants to listen, but also to act. In other circumstances, Jesus would comment: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it” (Luke 8:21).

May Mary help us to meditate, discern, and decide

May Mary enable us to understand the events of the present world through our meditation and inner confrontation. May she help us to grasp reality in all its truth: its positive points, its riches, its negative or dangerous aspects. May she guide us in this complex and uncertain time of pandemic: what to do, what decisions to make, and how to carry them out in fidelity to her message and her witness? Through this meditation, may she enable us to make the decisions that are necessary personally and collectively to put into practice the calls we have received. We will achieve this by confronting, as she did, past or present events with the Gospel - especially now that of the Visitation - and with the specific call that is addressed to us, Marianist religious, members of the Marianist Family. Without personal and collective meditation, we will not be able to reach the unceasingly new proclamation provoked by the Spirit; without decisions the Gospel will remain a dead letter.

We need time to achieve this result. A quick and superficial reflection will not be enough. Like Mary spending three months with Elizabeth, let's take the time to think about it. Like her, let us be ready to “return home” (Luke 1:56b) to incarnate these choices in our daily lives, with humility and perseverance, sure that they will bear fruit, just as they did for her whose life and mission never ceased to widen and deepen until reaching every time and place.

May the meditation on the Visitation continue to lead us in the footsteps of Mary:
ready to set off in haste;
ready to incarnate a new evangelical style in the community and through the
encounters that take place there;
praising God for his wonders;
and being available to work for the new world of which he is the inspiration.

This is the path that Mary shows us and where we must follow her today.

*Mary, Mother of the Church, generously shared
in the work of her Son
And is actively present in the history of salvation;
She is our inspiration and model. (RL 65)*

*Like [Mary], we wholly commit ourselves
To the mystery of our vocation. (RL 8).*

Rome, April 8, 2021,
Thursday of the Octave of Easter,
260th anniversary of the birth
of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade

TO FOLLOW UP ON ALL THIS...

The purpose of this *Circular* is not only to provide elements for personal reflection, but also to help us personally and collectively to enter into the Marian enthusiasm of the Visitation. For this reason, I propose that the week from Monday, May 24, Memorial of *Mary Mother of the Church* to Monday, May 31, 2021, be lived in the spirit of the Visitation:

- by living in community, a time of sharing on the Visitation. How does Mary's example inspire me to get started? How can we live this spirit of the Visitation in community or in Unit?
- by giving a special place to the *Magnificat* during the Office of Vespers,
- by celebrating, as our own proper calendar requires, the Marianist Memorial of May 25, *Mary, Help of Christians*, anniversary of the foundation of the Daughters of Mary (in 1816) and of the favors granted by Pope Pius VII to the Marianist Family (1819),
- by making May 31 a day of thanksgiving for the protection of Mary over the Society of Mary and the Marianist Family, asking her to help us to set out as she did and with her, “wherever she calls us,” entrusting to her all the humble, the hungry, the sick of our time, especially in this time of Coronavirus. May it make us men of praise and service; *Men of the Magnificat*.

Since the Visitation is also the patronal feast of the *Alliance Mariale*, we will entrust to Mary in a special way our sisters who will celebrate this year for the second time their patronal feast since their official recognition as a Secular Institute.



Visitation – Zambia

Circular No. 2

Mary rose and went with haste into the hill country (Luke 1, 39)

Led by Mary on the paths of praise and service

I. IN THOSE DAYS MARY ROSE. SHE WENT WITH HASTE INTO THE HILL COUNTRY, TO A TOWN IN JUDEA (Luke 1:39)

1. MARY'S ENTHUSIASM

Mary rose and set out with haste into the hill country (Luke 1:39)

She set out in haste (Luke 1:39b)

She went to a town in Judea (Luke 1:39c)

Mary on the move

2. ENTHUSIASM FOR OUR ROAD

Get up and go!

A gospel-inspired race.

The enthusiasm of humility

The eagerness of zeal.

And now?

II. THE ENCOUNTER

1. A NEW FAMILY

Two women and two babies

An experience of freedom

2. THE ACTION OF THE SPIRIT

3. MARY'S VISITS

Receiving visits from Mary

Visiting as Mary did so as to extend her maternal charity

4. OPENING THE DIALOGUE

What's next?

III. MARY'S *MAGNIFICAT*, PRAISE AND PROPHECY, TOWARDS A NEW WORLD

1. A CALL TO PRAISE (LUKE 1:47-50)

An explosion of joy

Inserted into a long history

The fruit of humility

A victory over darkness

2. A NEW WORLD (LUKE 1:51-54)

The victory of the poor and the little ones

In our Marianist tradition

The experience of Blessed Chaminade
An inspiration for our Family
Fratelli tutti

3. THE FEAST

A happy Marianist tradition
And now?

IV. MARY STAYED WITH ELIZABETH FOR ABOUT THREE MONTHS AND THEN RETURNED HOME (Luke 1:56)

Let us remember these events and meditate on them in our hearts (cf. Luke 2:19)
May Mary help us to meditate, discern, and decide.

TO FOLLOW UP ON ALL THIS . . .