



S.M. 3 OFFICES

MARIANISTI - AMMINISTRAZIONE GENERALE - Via Latina, 22 - 00179 Roma - Italy

#156

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Solemnity of the Annunciation

*... to serve him in holiness and righteousness,
in his presence all our days* (Lk 1:74-75)

1. Ongoing Formation to Serve More People and in a Better Way

*"The Lord asks everything of us, and in return, he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence."*¹ With this quotation from the Pope our last Chapter document begins,² and serves as a reference, as a backdrop, for the rest of the Chapter document. It is a call to holiness common to all Christian faithful (LG 11). This call is deeply rooted in our Marianist vocation and acquires a specific character in our religious consecration. The same Chapter document makes this explicit further on:

*We are called to be what we are, with increasing clarity and radicality. (...) Our contribution is to be "icons" of Jesus' lifestyle: chaste, poor and obedient, totally devoted to the Father and his plan for humanity, the Kingdom. It is our duty to focus our whole life on the Father and in the service our brothers and sisters, as well as on the quality of our fraternal life which generates communion in all things.*³

The Chapter is reminding us of some essential aspects of our life. This call is in our *Rule of Life* and, in one form or another, in the Chapter documents of the last 40 years.⁴ In rereading these

¹ FRANCIS, *Gaudete et exultate*, 1

² XXXV GENERAL CHAPTER, *A Man Who Does Not Die: In Mission with the Marianist Family*, 1

³ XXXV GENERAL CHAPTER, 6

⁴ The time of the pandemic has given me the opportunity to take time to reread the documents of the General Chapters and the *Rule of Life*, looking at everything that refers to formation and especially to ongoing formation but also at the calls that are made to live a more authentic and committed religious and spiritual life, which is one of the objectives of all formation.

documents it is striking that we repeatedly have to remind ourselves about and insist on the root of our vocation. They call us to be what we are, ever more clearly and radically.

We are speaking of being, not of doing. We are talking about a process, not a static condition. This process, by which we become ever more clearly and radically what we are called to be, is what the term *ongoing formation* means to me.

I think that, erroneously, we too often reduce ongoing formation to only theological courses (or psychological, or spiritual...), reading "pious" books, having a sabbatical year, annual retreats... despite all of this being very healthy and holy, and part of the formation process. Perhaps, however, we lose sight of the fundamental horizon: our daily living, the search for God's will and the desire to live our consecration more fully every day. Hence, the title of this article, taken from the Cantic of Zechariah that we pray every morning.

With this Cantic, we bless God who has raised up a saving power... who delivers us from our enemies...

*To set us free from the hands of our enemies,
free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous before him,
all the days of our life.⁵*

There is a perspective that looks towards doing: Serving God.

There is also a perspective that looks towards being: free from fear, and from the hands of enemies... in His presence, all our days.

All our days - Lifelong Formation

In rereading the documents of the General Chapters it is clear that our *raison d'être* is mission, and that, in general, we "do" many things, and we do them well. We serve. However, it seems that we have not yet fully succeeded in finding the dynamics and processes that will make us "become more and more what we are called to "be." Or rather: the dynamics and processes are there (in the *Rule* and in the *Guide for Formation*), but it seems that we find it difficult to enter into these and to allow ourselves to be renewed and converted through them. I have no doubt (because I am a witness of it) about the growth in faithfulness and holiness of many of our brothers, but not everybody, and not always. That is the reason why we repeat the call over and over again. The present article is such a call, which I make to myself, and which I share with you. Why? Because the world needs us to be what we are called to be. It is our vocation:

In calling us to be Marianists, God asks us to follow in a special way Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all. Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to work for the coming of his kingdom. (RL 2)

⁵ Lk 1:74 -75

We are here for the salvation of persons and to work for the coming of His Kingdom. However, that is only done by following Jesus Christ... and in becoming more conformed to Him. We must allow the Spirit to make us sons in the Son. When considering what we bring to the mission, we ask ourselves if it just our own talents (which are quite abundant), or do we need to bring more? The world needs the salvation of Jesus Christ. There is already a Savior. What is asked of us is that we allow ourselves to be transformed by Him and thus make Him present in the world, with His salvation. Our call asks us to allow ourselves to be transformed: *The consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the "new creature" who, in every circumstance of life, reflects the very mind of Christ. Initial formation, then, should be closely connected with continuing formation, thereby creating a readiness on everyone's part to let themselves be formed every day of their lives.* (VC 69)

So, once again, we remind ourselves of this call to be renewed and converted; to let ourselves be formed. Because the world needs it.

2. Harvesting from Our Own Fields

As I began this reflection, I realized that the fundamentals of ongoing formation are already very clearly stated in the *Rule of Life* and in the *Guide for Formation*. So, in order to begin, we need not go looking for other sources. These are the fundamental references:

- *Rule of Life*, Chapter IV, in both books (especially 59-62 and 4.4-4.6 and 4.11-4.17), and articles 39-43, 90, 3.7-3.11 and 6.17-6.20.
- *Guide for Formation*: Chapter IV, which corresponds to n. 185-207. It would be good to also look at the final numbers of the *Guide* (208-210) which give a good orientation concerning the spirit that guides our formation.

That is why I suggest that you re-read and meditate on these citations. Listen to how and where the Lord is calling you to walk. Recognize where your resistances are. See what things are written there and consider why you may have not embraced them.

It should be noted, however, that this journey is done together. It is not a process of the individual, but of the person. That is to say, of a being in relation. For this reason, most of the proposed means of growth are communal (liturgy, community meetings, retreats, annual exercises...) or relational (spiritual direction, interviews with the superior...). In an increasingly individualistic world, we have the great gift of community. However, we cannot ignore the fact that individualistic tendencies are indeed present, and we can allow ourselves to be carried away by them. That is why I think it helps us a lot to "act against" these tendencies. "Naturally" (in today's culture), we tend to isolate ourselves; we have to work at being together. We often find it difficult. It does not come instinctively. When we have to arrange common activities, we often make sure that they are well timed and affect our personal "agenda" as little as possible. Although I have already talked about this in *SM 3 Offices* (#152) on self-referentiality, I thought it was worth mentioning it again.

Bearing in mind the above, the fundamental thing is to make oneself available; that is, to be ready and willing to choose to embrace this process. It is an act of our will, of our freedom. So, the first question is, do I really want to grow and develop? Perhaps a preliminary question is necessary:

do I even think that I need further "formation?" During visitations, we often find that people associate formation with the initial stages, up until perpetual profession. Unconsciously and too often, we think that, with this event, formation is closed. For some, there is an even more dangerous idea behind this type of thinking: once perpetual profession has been made, there is no need to be so "faithful" to community things, to prayer...; "there is no longer any need to fear formators and superiors who can "correct" or even reject me. Now I can do what I want."

Indeed, now you can do whatever you want. The question is: what do you want to do? You have consecrated yourself for life to serve the Lord; do you want to let Him continue to form you? Do you desire to be "conformed" to Jesus Christ? That is true ongoing formation. Everyday.

At the end of this paper, I offer some questions and guidelines for reflection - personal and communal - that will help us to review and recommit ourselves to our ongoing formation.

3. Free from Fear. Free from Our Enemies

It is not enough to simply have the desire. We have much baggage, and many enemies.

The quote from Zechariah's canticle says it perfectly: "in order to serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days" we must be granted freedom from fear and from the hands of our enemies.

There are enemies and there are fears. In addition, we must be set free. It is not in my power to free myself. Freedom is granted to us, it is a process of healing, of grace, of "ongoing formation." God "shapes" us in the image of his Son and frees us from everything that we do to oppose and resist this change.

Briefly I propose here a couple of themes and authors that I have read or reread recently and which can shed light on this subject:

- a) We begin with Fabio Rosini, a priest of the Diocese of Rome who works primarily in youth and vocation ministry. In his book *L'arte di guarire* (for now only in Italian), he proposes a healing path inspired by the Gospel story of the healing of the woman with hemorrhages. His proposal is that any authentic healing is a liberation of our capacity to love and to let ourselves be loved. To open or to close oneself to love, is the real issue. He gives a long description of the "pathologies of relationship" that reveal our limitations in loving. That is where we must take a close look at our lives. What prevents us from loving? His answer is that behind each of these "pathologies" there is always fear.

In fact, the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Fear is that whip, that scourge that beats inside and distorts attitudes, makes us aggressive or submissive, imposes securities, compensations and possessiveness, dictates the times of compulsions and extinguishes or hurts the love in our heart.⁶

⁶ Rosini, Fabio. *L'arte di guarire*. p. 46. San Paolo Edizioni (Kindle Edition). My own translation.

Fear, therefore, is what limits us (sometimes a lot) in our capacity to love, that is, to serve the Lord.

In the same chapter, the author reviews a series of fears that grip us (without pretending to be exhaustive) and ends up linking them to the vices or deadly sins. The whole book is worth reading for those who know Italian. This theme of vices or capital sins leads us to two other authors.

- b) Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian. Two classics. Two masters of the spiritual life and of "formation" in consecrated life. "Formation" as a process of transformation of the person. We can turn to either of them to guide us in this process of liberation from "our enemies." It is the classical presentation in Eastern Christianity of the eight vices, or demons, which in the later Latin tradition was formulated as the seven deadly sins. That is why Evagrius' presentation is interesting (Cassian follows his line of thinking). He speaks of demons or spirits, those enemies that we encounter every day in our life and that oppose us in our efforts to live our vocation faithfully.

Evagrius' *Practical Treatise* is a jewel of spirituality containing great psychological insights. However, it is a book that requires a good guide, because our anthropological, spiritual, and theological context is very different from that of the author, and it can be very difficult to read.⁷

John Cassian, in the second part of the *Cenobitic Institutions*, also has a presentation of these eight evil spirits and how to combat them. It is more didactic, although an annotated reading always helps to better understand these works from such a different time and context. However, the themes he treats are very much up to date. The demons of pride, vainglory, anger, envy, acedia, greed, lust, and gluttony still threaten and wound us.

If you really want to go deeper into this subject, Jean Claude Larchet's work, *Thérapeutique des maladies spirituelles*, is a splendid analysis of the diseases of the spirit, and the possible path towards their healing.⁸

Free from fear. There are internal realities within us that bind us and limit our capacity to love, our will, and our desire to serve. We can group them into "fears" or "concerns." I think we are all more or less aware of this... but we have to keep working on this, desiring, and asking to be liberated. - **Lifelong Formation**

Free from our enemies. There are realities that oppose the life of God. There are "evil spirits" that lead us away from the good and deceive us. Not recognizing them is the first great defeat. Ongoing formation also means growing in the discernment of spirits, in being accompanied and

⁷ Gabriel Bunge's edition provides a helpful introduction and commentary. I think it only exists in the original German with translations into French and Italian.

⁸ The French edition in Les Éditions du Cerf, 2000. Spanish translation: *Terapéutica de las enfermedades espirituales*, Sígueme, 2020. English translation: *Therapy of Spiritual Illness*. Alexander Press, 2012.

allowing oneself to be led by a good guide, as well as by the brothers of the community, so that each day we may be freer: *free from fear and free from our enemies.*

4. With Holiness and Justice

The term "holiness" is not very frequent in our vocabulary. Neither the day-to-day nor the official one.⁹ Yet, the last General Chapter and Pope Francis, remind us of this call, already present in our *Rule*: *We know that, despite our imperfections, the God who loves us and calls us to holiness can make our personal and community lives into a witness of a people of saints.* (RL 33)

The *Benedictus* makes it explicit that this service to God, to which we are called, is *with holiness and justice*. The preparation of this reflection coincided with the publication by Pope Francis of the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* (December 8, 2020). It seemed to me that the figure of St. Joseph, so important in our tradition, can exemplify better than anything else this service carried out *with holiness and justice*. Therefore, I also invite you to meditate on and pray with that particular text.

As Pope Francis points out at the end of the *Letter*, we live in a world and a Church that needs fathers. But no one is born a father, they are made. Because of our educational tradition and because of the role we are often assigned (or assign ourselves), we are very used to being teachers. But to be truly fathers we must assume the responsibility we have towards others (justice) and be able to make ourselves a gift (holiness).

That is why we are invited to learn from Joseph how to be fathers with tenderness; how to live in obedience to the will of the Father, serving directly the person and mission of Jesus. We can also learn from him how to welcome life as it comes: *Joseph's spiritual life does not show us a way that explains, but a way that welcomes*. All this is done with creative courage, hard work, and accepting the fact that we do not need to have the leading role.¹⁰ We can learn a lot from Joseph, as our founder knew well.

5. In His Presence, All Our Days

One of the calls most often repeated by the Chapters is that of being faithful to the hour of meditation, as the *Rule* indicates in #55:

*We are convinced that the essential is the interior.
In order to be faithful to our calling as Marianists,
and to grow in the life of faith,*

⁹ In the Chapter documents since 1981 there are hardly any references. Practically, we have to wait until 2001 for the idea of holiness and the call to be saints to appear. Later, it appears in the Chapter of 2012. In the last one, it appears as an initial call and acquires a certain weight in the document. I think we have often preferred to speak of "consistency" or "fidelity;" these are certainly very important values, but they put the emphasis on our part (what we do) rather than on God's action in us. Perhaps one more example of self-referential culture.

¹⁰ The quotations in this paragraph are taken from numbers 3-5 of *Patris corde*.

*we devote an hour of each day to personal meditation.
In this form of prayer,
we allow the Spirit of Christ to take possession of our lives,
filling us with faith, hope, and charity.*

If we have to remind ourselves every so often, it is because this practice is difficult for us, and because we do not do it in full, or regularly. We resist God, we resist letting the Spirit of Christ take possession of our lives. Consciously or unconsciously, we resist. This applies to both those who have decided that such practices do not serve or help them, and those who do sit for an hour every day to meditate. Some of us resist more, others less. There are times in life when we resist more or simply ignore these things, and others when we seek and desire them (and yet still not without some resistance). That is nothing new. It is simply part of the journey.

A great teacher in the way of prayer is St. Teresa of Jesus (of Avila). In Chapters 8 and 9 of the *Book of Life* she recounts her difficulties with prayer, how she gradually gave it up and how the Lord brought her back to this relationship, to this "friendship," as she defines it. Reading and meditating on these chapters can do us much good in recognizing the difficulties we have with prayer, and with our desire to confront them. Just one example:

That was all my prayer, and had been, when I was in this dangerous state, (...) and very often, for some years, I was more occupied with the wish to see the end of the time I had appointed for myself to spend in prayer, and in watching the hour-glass, than with other thoughts that were good. If a sharp penance had been laid upon me, I know of none that I would not very often have willingly undertaken, rather than prepare myself for prayer by self-recollection. And certainly the violence with which Satan assailed me was so irresistible, or my evil habits were so strong, that I did not betake myself to prayer; and the sadness I felt on entering the oratory was so great, that it required all the courage I had to force myself in. (...) In the end, our Lord came to my help.¹¹

Each day we strive to be able to live more and more, in his presence, and to serve him better. Because, as St. Teresa says, "if we do not recognize the gifts received at His hands, we shall never be moved to love."¹²

All our days. Our formation is permanent only if it is something we ordinarily do every day; if it touches our daily life and is not reduced to extraordinary actions. The CIVCSVA document *New wine in new wineskins* (#35) insists on this dimension of ongoing formation: *formation is truly continuous only when it is ordinary and carried out in the reality of everyday life. (...) Each individual is called to let himself or herself be touched, educated, provoked, and enlightened by life and by history, by what he or she proclaims and celebrates, by the poor and excluded, and by those near and far.*

The same document (#36) will insist on the community dimension: *The fraternity is, in fact, the place of eminent continuous formation.*

¹¹ St. Teresa of Jesus, *Book of her life*, VIII.7.

¹² St. Teresa of Jesus, *Book of her life*, VIII.X.4.


Conclusion: To Serve

In the conclusion of SM 3 Offices #152 on self-referentiality I said: *We need to be “taken out,” because the urgency of salvation is great. There are millions of suffering and needy people. God urges us to let ourselves go out. There is a great need for salvation to avoid spending our lives looking at what He has not given me or what I have not received.*

Once again, at the conclusion of these reflections, the call is similar and nothing more than an invitation to take our ongoing formation seriously, that is to say, to allow ourselves to be *formed* by the Spirit according to our vocation, to allow ourselves to be *conformed* to Jesus Christ. Because that is our life, our calling. We do that in order to work for the coming of His Kingdom, that we may do it for the sake of the Kingdom, and not for ourselves.

The world needs salvation – the salvation of the Lord Jesus. He has asked us to be His disciples, to become like Him. This is the action of the Spirit and Mary in us: to conform us to Jesus Christ. That what the world so desperately needs.

Let us serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness, in his presence all our days.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Rambaud', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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For personal reflection:

- Take some time to read quietly through this document, and the texts of the *Rule* and *Guide for Formation* mentioned as references in point 2. From everything you have read, what things are already part of your daily life? Which ones are the least familiar to you? Are there any points that stir up rejection or resistance in you?
- Examine your life in relation to the aforementioned articles of the *Rule* in Chap. IV of Book II (4.4-4.6 and 4.11-4.17). They refer to our inner life. Looking at your current situation, in what areas do you perceive the Lord calling you to grow?
- To what extent does community life help you to grow? Do you perceive community life as a limitation or as a stimulus? In particular, what things help you the most, and what things help you the least?

For community reflection:

- You can spend some time in community sharing the reflections from the previous (personal) part if you have not done something similar recently.
- The weekly community meeting (*Rule of Life* 6.18), daily interactions, fraternal dialogue, and corrections... All these contribute to our growth. In our community, are we making good use of the means at our disposal?
- The times of shared prayer, the daily homily, *Lectio Divina*, reconciliation, all celebrated in community... The community can take time to evaluate these practices to see how they help each one to grow.
- Another topic to review and share in community concerns interpersonal means of support:
 - Interviews with the superior (6.19)
 - Spiritual Direction (40, 61 and 4.14)
 - Our relationships as brothers in community (39-41 and 3.7)
- Also, regarding the mission: do we accompany each other and help each other to grow? Do we evaluate with some frequency the missionary commitments of each one of us and of the community? Do we help and accompany the youngest in their incorporation into the mission?