



S.M. 3 OFFICES

MARIANISTI – AMMINISTRAZIONE GENERALE – Via Latina, 22 – 00179 Roma – Italia

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Rome, January 10, 2018

To: Directors of the Centers for Marianist Studies
To: Zonal Presidents
To: Unit Superiors and members of their councils.

THE CENTERS FOR MARIANIST STUDIES TO KNOW OUR CHARISM AND TO MAKE IT KNOWN, LOVED AND LIVED

*Our charism, which has the spirit of Mary as its source, is a gift that God for his people. Therefore, the members of the Society seek every opportunity and use all means to spread this charism.
(Rule of Life, 5.4)*

This issue of *SM 3 Offices* aims to retain and share some of the fruits of the recent meeting of the eleven Directors of the *Centers for Marianist Studies* in Rome, November 27-30. Nine of them work in the service of a Zonal Center and the other two, in the service of a Unit Center, in collaboration with their Zonal Center.¹

Also present at the meeting were the four members of our General Council, Sister Ana Lúcia de Góes, Assistant General for Religious Life of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and Brother Jack Ventura, former Director of the International Center for Marianist Formation (ICMF/CIMF).

The activity of the Centers is important for the life of our Units and our Zones. It is carried out by the Director and his team in consultation with the Unit Superiors and the Zonal President and under their supervision. The quality of the collaboration among these three agents is one of the keys to the success of the Centers. This assumes, in particular, consistently good communication and mutual information sharing. By communicating to Unit Superiors and Zonal Presidents a part of the reflection led by the Directors during the meeting in Rome, this issue of *SM 3 Offices* contributes its own small part to the project.

This *SM 3 Offices* also comes as a support to the *Handbook for the Animation of Zonal Centers for Marianist studies*. The *Handbook* was discussed and amended during our meeting. It therefore comes into force in its present form. It is addressed to you now so that

¹ Every year, the complete list of Centers and leaders is at the end of the *Personnel of the Society of Mary*. For the 2017-2018 edition, see pages 133-134.

It should be noted here that not all Centers have a specific central location; the address indicated is then that of the Director; this is currently the case for Latin America and Europe.

each one of you might read it carefully, understand its spirit and find in it the points of reference for the joint work and collaboration among all, as already mentioned.

Still as an introduction, let us mention that one of the decisions resulting from our meeting is to call now our old "Marianist Formation Centers", "Centers for Marianist studies ", these terms expressing more precisely the purpose of the Centers and avoiding confusion with the houses of formation for the religious life. So this is how they will be referred to in this document and henceforth. Each Zone or Unit involved could see if it is appropriate to change the name of its own Center accordingly.

1. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The first day of the directors' meeting allowed us to get an overview of the life of the Centers. Most of them have originated in the last ten years, with the exception of the North American Center, NACMS, which has been in existence for more than 30 years and already has extensive activity in the service of resource production, animation, and formation. The other Centers are still in the development phase, at the service of research or dissemination. Nevertheless, they have already undertaken some significant projects: publications, online courses, the setting up of documentation centers, organization of courses, symposiums, etc.

In addition to the Directors already mentioned, Fr. Antonio Gascón, in charge of AGMAR, the General Archives, was also present with us, as well as his Assistant, Mr. Massimiliano Vidili. They presented to us the resources they preserve and the work they are doing. This has enabled us to better understand the immense documentary riches preserved in this institution linked to the General Curia and the interest there would be in making them more accessible to a greater number.

These encouraging aspects, however, must be complemented by another observation: much of what is being done is still fragile. What is usually lacking is experience, personnel, finances. In each place it is necessary to see how these weaknesses might be gradually overcome so as to prepare the future, because without the means, nothing can be done. The Directors must work with the Superiors concerned and/or with the Zonal President. What is also important is that the role of each Center be better understood, appreciated and supported by the greatest number: not only the Superiors, but also the brothers and all the members of the Marianist Family. The responsibility of the Directors, in this respect, is the communication and information that is essential to make the activities and proposals of the Centers widely known and to ensure that as many people as possible can be reached. Another part belongs to the Superiors; that will be explained now.

2. THE SUPERIORS' AND ZONAL PRESIDENT'S IRREPLACEABLE SUPPORT

The existence of each of the Centers manifests the interest of the respective Units or Zones vis-à-vis the task they assume. This is a very encouraging sign.

However, for them to grow, specific support is needed. Without this, since Superiors or the President are faced with many more urgent matters, the Centers risk being relegated to a secondary place in their concerns, which will inevitably limit their expansion.

Since the Centers operate for the medium or long term, the importance of what is at stake may not be clear. The deepening of the charism could easily be considered as an optional supplementary activity for only those who have the taste or the time for it.

A quick observation of the situation can easily show us the contrary:

- a. The Marianist studies carried out before and after the Second Vatican Council by a series of passionate and well-prepared experts are at the origin of major evolutions in our life and our mission. To cite only a few, we can mention the drafting of our current Rule of Life, the revival of the Marianist laity, and the new understanding of the Marianist Family, three elements that today have a major impact on our life and our activity.
- b. A reflection on our charism or on the thought of our Founders is always present at important leadership meetings; at the international level, this was recently the case for meetings on formation (July 2014 and January 2015) or education (July 2017).
- c. Important topics require reflection that springs from our sources, for their continuous updating (mixed composition, 3 offices, Marian mission, pedagogy, ...) or because they are presented to us in a relatively new way (Marianist Family, lay persons' interpretation of the Marianist charism, the Marianist charism and inculturation, ...).
- d. As several recent official Marianist documents mention, the development of our collaboration with the laity in the works and the growth of the young Units requires an important work of explanation and dissemination of the charism. The current major cultural changes in the world are also pushing us in that direction: our charism is a gift for today.

Thus, far from being an optional supplementary activity, the study and the dissemination of our charism are indispensable for our life, our mission and their appropriate adaptation to the current times. Taking the means that permit that work is therefore an important act of leadership that the Superiors must respect for its true significance.

3. FROM STUDY TO DISSEMINATION

During our meeting, an important talk by Father Manuel Cortés, Superior General, reminded us that the study and the dissemination must go hand in hand, but in logical order: we must start from the study in order to commit ourselves consequently to the dissemination.

An updating project without an underlying study may present the Founders as saying something they had never thought and turn them into spokespersons of my own personal opinions. According to this method, if they are modern it is because they seem to say what we like to think today. But do they really say it? A serious study would help to recognize that it is more about my interpretation and my ideas than theirs. That would bring a salutary clarification for all.

To avoid this, Father Cortés called us to carry out an exegesis of the texts of our Founders, to read them in the light of the historical and theological context of their time. For this, the use of a suitable and rigorous methodology is necessary. It is from the results of that kind of work that possible interpretations, updating, and dissemination can come.

This is an important message for us to understand today. Just any form of dissemination is not profitable. To bear fruit, it must be based on a serious, thorough and objective study of the thought of our Founders and our tradition. The study of the charism, done according to this spirit, is therefore an essential activity today since it prepares the foundation for all successive activities. It is the responsibility of the Center Directors and Superiors to give due consideration to this activity, according to local possibilities. Where it is not possible to do so, since it requires an appropriate preparation, it is always possible to rely on those who do provide or have provided this service; let us be forever grateful to them.

4. TRAINING NEW SPECIALISTS AND DISSEMINATORS

The foregoing point can be realized only if it is possible, now and in the future, to have persons capable of carrying out both activities. This must be a priority point of attention for the Directors and Superiors. The way to promote these vocations was one of the points of discussion of our meeting.

At the beginning, a passion certainly has to be awakened. Formation communities play a big role in this first step. The chance to be in contact with specialists is another opportunity. It is also good to entrust work and presentations to young brothers and members of the Marianist family who have prepared for this task; in the Center itself one might entrust a responsibility to a researcher who is still a beginner. Some Centers have projects carried out by pairs composed of a new participant and an experienced elder; one Center published works by younger brothers, who were helped by supervision; some Centers are involved in one or more presentations in a formation house or in service to members of the Marianist Family; ...

Imagination and possibilities must not be lacking to create opportunities and to foster a passion for this work. In parallel, it is necessary to provide a good understanding of the technical requirements of the task to be performed, soundly and according to professional criteria.

5. TO KNOW, LOVE AND LIVE THE CHARISM

An intellectual knowledge of charisma is not enough. The charism is not a theoretical program, but a way of life that is understood by experiencing it personally and collectively by following the Founders and their companions who were its first practitioners.

When the Centers promote the study of the Marianist charism, the intention is that it might be translated into concrete experience, so as not to remain at the stage of theory. The charism is a present-day experience of the Spirit that happens in the line of a Founder, within the Church and the world of today, and for the good of the greatest number.

A first condition for achieving this is that the planned program be **rooted** in the local context: that it respond to concrete local needs, and that it find areas of application in the situations faced by the participants.

Another condition comes from the methodology. That **methodology** should be careful not to limit itself to abstract remarks but to propose paths of application during the course of the formation process or as a follow-up.

Finally, appropriate attention must be given to the **conditions** that favor this knowledge. I am thinking in particular of the good preservation and classification of Marianist materials and documents in the communities; or the care taken to preserve archives in each place. Treasures are sometimes right at hand; if we ignore them, they are in danger.

6. A FAMILY CHALLENGE: WITH AND FOR THE WHOLE MARIANIST FAMILY

To know, to love and to live the charism is an issue for all the Marianist Family. If we think that our identity is especially defined by our belonging to this Family, then for all within it to grow into a better knowledge and a better experience of our own identity must be a concern common to all of our members.

All that concerns the deepening and the dissemination of the charism can and must be considered according to this criterion. If it is possible to think about it together, as a family, solutions and proposals will arise for the benefit of all.

The goal should not be to do everything together and in the same way because contexts differ from one branch to another. Dialogue must enable us to discern what to do with each other, for each other, or as some acting independently of the others.

The Center can become a common point of reference for the local Marianist Family, a space where, as a family, it is possible to:

- have various persons receiving formation,
- call upon the skills of formators of the entire family,
- encourage new vocations of experts and disseminators in each branch,
- help each other to strengthen the life and organization of the Center, to provide one-time or more important services,
- think of a program that meets one another's needs, either jointly or separately,
- contribute to supporting the economic wellbeing of the Center,
- ...

If this were the case, each of our Centers would benefit from a great dynamism and have a sure impact.

7. THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHER STUDY CENTERS

All the participants in the meeting were struck by the meeting organized with the head of the *International Center for Lasallian Studies* in Rome, Bro. Diego Muñoz, a Mexican. His presentation compared three simultaneous evolutions experienced by the brothers during the last sixty years: the transformation of the view of their Founder (and the studies that accompanied this change), the discovery of the role of the laity and a new type of association with them and, finally, the evolution of the way of considering the study of the charism, in its method, its objectives and its actors (in particular because of the increasing integration of the laity in this task).

Brother Diego also told us about the research areas that emerged from this experience. Since it seemed to me very enlightening for what can be the areas of activity of a Center and for its influence in Marianist life and mission, I mention them here as they were described to us:

[The office of Lasallian Studies] has experienced these processes promoting three very different types of research: basic research, almost archaeological, on the Holy Founder; an applied research, in dialogue with the mission of the Institute; and investigation-action, attentive to seeking answers to the urgent challenges of the institutional dynamic.

And of the six challenges he left with us, I would like to mention two:

(a) continuing to produce Lasallian [Marianist] thinking in dialogue with the living tradition of the Institute and the context of the 21st century.

(e) continuing to train researchers who not only make known but produce new thinking in the face of the challenges of the mission.²

Half a day was too short to profit from all the possible fruits of that meeting. However, it has allowed us to perceive that we are facing the same challenges and are looking along similar paths for responses to them.

It is, of course, possible that you too might be in contact with other local Study Centers similar to ours. If you could get in touch with their leaders, this could enrich your task and, ultimately, that of our entire network, while respecting the particulars of each spiritual family.

8. STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

The Directors' meeting made it clear how important it is to strengthen collaboration, exchanges and a common vision among the Centers. All participants felt encouraged and reinforced in that task after being able to do so during the four days of our meeting.

On this occasion, some common decisions were taken, especially at the level of the communication of information among the Centers. Regular meetings will be held to enhance opportunities for exchange and collaboration. The use of the current means of communication can also be of great help to reinforce the synergy among the Centers, their animators and those in charge.

The appointment of Fr. Robert Witwicki, SM, as International Coordinator of the Study Centers is specifically aimed at strengthening the links among the Directors and the possibilities of exchanges and mutual support (see the announcement in *Via Latina* 22, no. 265, December 2017, p.4). He has an important role to play in that. He will regularly publish a newsletter for the Center Directors, Unit Superiors and Zonal Presidents. Each of you will be able to follow the evolution of this project. Do not hesitate to send him your reactions or suggestions whenever you wish; contacts are always a help to carry out this kind of responsibility. The International Coordinator is responsible for certain specific areas. They are indicated in the *Handbook for the Animation of Zonal Centers* (§§ 3.3 and II-3.3) but, for convenience, they are also included in a box at the end of this *SM 3 Offices* (see Appendix 1).

² At the time of its foundation in 1956, the Lasallian Studies Center defined as one of its sectors of action: "the understanding of the Lasallian thought from the dialogue with pedagogy, education, catechesis, and spirituality."

Within each Zone, it is important that both the President and the Unit Superiors closely monitor this issue. It is an opportunity to strengthen our identity of life and action, for the benefit of the entire Marianist Family.

The General Council also wishes to support this process. Their full presence during the four days of the meeting was an explicit sign of that support. The Assistant General for Religious Life is specifically designated to deal with this matter within the Council, enlightened by the support and advice of his colleagues. The annual meeting of the Extended General Council provides an opportunity to evaluate, with the Zonal Presidents, the evolution of the life of the Centers. This allows us to help them in their task of supporting the Centers, but also, through them, to promote collaboration among the Centers.

9. HAVE A GOOD JOURNEY!

It is up to each of us to continue this adventure on which many of our brothers have already set out. Some have offered us - or are still offering - admirable examples as pioneers, explorers, organizers, disseminators of the Marianist charism. Others, without having acquired any fame about it, have also rendered great service by their patient study or enlightened teaching. Let's hope that today and tomorrow many might grasp hold of this torch. Let us also wish that, in the image of the evolution that we are experiencing, these new specialists of the study and the dissemination of the Marianist charism can serve not only the whole of the Marianist Family, but also reflect all the diversity of its four branches and its multiple cultures.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "A. Fétis, SM". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

André Fétis, SM
Assistant General for Religious Life

APPENDIX

DOCUMENT 1

TASKS PERSONALLY ASSURED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COORDINATOR

(Extract from the *Handbook for the Animation of the Centers ...*, § II-3.3):

- he monitors the **activities common to all Centers** ;
- he ensures contact between the Superiors (or Assistants for Religious Life) of the Units and the Marist leaders of the **program for the third age** ("Manziana"): registration; monitoring the smooth running; collaborations; administrative matters; ...
- he can play a similar role for other programs at the request of the Extended General Council;
- he keeps the Directors informed about Marianist Formation programs being done by **e-learning**;
- he ensures that the Society of Mary be informed, via *Via Latina 22*, of the most outstanding activities carried out by the Centers.

DOCUMENT 2

Documents from the meeting of the Directors of the *Centers for Marianist Studies* (Rome, November 27-30) are available at this link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/fu2ec0xs4cnhnp3/AADihLloePjMY9ZPbV4vXD5ra?dl=0>

DOCUMENT 3

Attached document: *Handbook for the Animation of Zonal Centers for Marianist studies* (January 2018 version).



Logo for the International coordination of the Zonal Centers for Marianist Studies

(by Br. Bertrand Bouger, SM)