



# Circolare del Superiore Generale

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SOCIETA DI MARIA - MARIANISTI

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## **CIRCULAR NO. 12**

# **MARIANIST LIFE IN COMMUNITY**

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Dear Brothers,

From the very first days of the Bordeaux Sodality and throughout the history of all branches of the Marianist Family, we have stressed community. We have sought to give the witness of a “people of saints,” to work as apostolic teams at a common mission, and to develop that “family spirit” which creates personal bonds and strong mutual cooperation among us, whether in humble tasks like washing the dishes or in the most visionary ones, like working at the transformation of society.

Even though this community dimension is deeply ingrained in our experience and understanding of Marianist life, it is a bit paradoxical. Most of us work as teachers, preachers, pastors, youth leaders and pioneers in ecclesial life. These professions favor colorful personalities with a talent for creativity, innovation and improvisation. They offer abundant room for interesting eccentrics and individualists. People who excel in these forms of service are not always those who “fit” most easily and harmoniously into standard common norms. We might not be the first group where you might expect to find a powerful community witness.

Yet this kind of witness is surely what our Founder and his associates intended. A privatized spirituality or an isolated way of life is incompatible with our heritage. Despite the far-reaching changes of the French Revolution, the family, the village, the parish, the neighborhood, and (for religious) the local convent or monastery remained at our beginning the self-evident glue that bound people together.

Earlier Marianists took community so much for granted that they felt little need to talk about it. Chaminade himself develops the theme of community mainly when he feels the need to explain or defend his foundations to authorities (like the Pope) or to critics (like certain clergymen of his time and place). But otherwise little was said on the subject. It is surprising today to realize that successive Marianist Constitutions up to Vatican II had no separate chapter on community; it was a self-evident theme that permeated everything.

In contrast, at the present time we have to talk about community because it so often seems lost and challenged. Heidegger said that people never talk about a hammer unless it is broken. On our visits to Marianists around the world, we members of the General Administration find that most Marianist communities are in search, looking for richer and deeper life at the service of mission. In most places, our members struggle with the fact that they must leave behind some familiar community styles of the past, including many large communities, all-embracing institutions, and self-evident cultural patterns. We know that the 1950’s style of community is no longer appropriate, but we are not so clear about what should replace it.

At the same time, we are discovering new desires and opportunities for authentic community among us. Today our missionary dynamism, the attraction and perseverance of new vocations, and our capacity to collaborate with lay people are closely related to the experience of community.

Recent General Chapters have tried to emphasize our communitarian heritage. But it has not been easy to find something meaningful and motivating to say. The problem has not been disagreement, but a sense that we still need to discover how to move through the current time of transition.

In what follows I will not try to touch everything that is important about our living of community today, but simply analyze some key challenges of community life and suggest a few ways in which we might enhance our living of this essential aspect of our heritage.

### ***Community in a Time of Transition***

When people of my generation first entered Marianist formation programs, community life in the Society of Mary was an intense experience. Most of us treasure our happy memories of community life and community accomplishment as the most characteristically “Marianist” parts of our lives.

Still today, Marianist communities are generally characterized by kindness, charity, and a spirit of mutual support. Marianists who are sick or aged, as well as those who are young and learning, usually receive a warm welcome in our communities.

Yet there are major differences from the past. Fifty years ago, most of our members everywhere were young, with the energy and gregariousness characteristic of youth. Today we are living much longer. A great proportion of our members, nearly all of them in some Units, are older, more seasoned, less spontaneously in tune with a community approach. Age is a great individualizer.

Fifty years ago we deliberately put rather narrow limits on outside influences that could affect our experience. Today, in contrast, we consciously seek to be open to many others. This is how we have understood the call of Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* to share in the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the people of our time. In the midst of so many concerns, it is not always so easy to focus on the local religious community.

Fifty years ago the media – radio, television, films, press, internet – had not yet made a decisive impact on our lives. Today they pervade everything, fostering a vicarious, globalized, consumerist consciousness. We still need to learn how to be more discerning in their use. As a result of their influence, the experience of the local community suffers.

Fifty years ago the demands of professional excellence were rather less stringent than today. We more easily found time, sustenance and enthusiasm for community activities. Now new professional demands diversify us more than ever.

In some sense, each of us now has the capacity to live within the confines of a self-chosen world, isolated like travelers with a “Walkman.” “My world” may be rather different from that of the fellow brother who lives next to me in community. It takes effort, asceticism, generous self-forgetfulness, to go out to the other.

We live in a state of “liminality,” at a threshold between a past which is no longer reproducible and a future that we can at best dimly glimpse. Such a time of transition does not favor stable patterns of community life. It leaves us feeling vulnerable and anxious, with heightened potential but also with diverging visions of the road ahead. Religious community should be a support for the common journey and for common creativity in facing the future.

But often such community withers, one of the first things left behind as we cross the threshold between old and new.

### ***What do we Expect of Community?***

In the face of high ideals and frequent disappointments, perhaps we need to ask ourselves what we really expect of community life. The images and expectations of contemporary Marianists are, in fact, quite diverse.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the ideal community of Jerusalem, where all was shared in common. Scripture scholars, pointing to signs of tension elsewhere in the text, suggest that Luke's picture is somewhat romanticized and idealized.

Our traditional Constitutions, approved by the Holy See in 1891, pointed to the Holy Family of Nazareth and even the Blessed Trinity as our models of community (art. 303). The Constitutions nuanced this high idealism by noting that community life is also our "penance *par excellence*" (art. 179).

Social activists and proponents of radical change want community to be a center of creative experimentation and communal risk-taking.

Some, following St. Benedict, expect community to be a *schola dominici servitii*, "a school of divine service." We may enter this school ignorant of the ways of God and untrained in holiness, but we come to be formed and to learn. Community thus becomes an environment for spiritual transformation.

Other Fathers of the Church spoke of Christian community as a "great infirmary." Each of us is a patient, sick with our sin, weakness and egoism. Each is also a healer, able to offer a bit of remedy or at least some alleviation of pain. In such a community, compassion and patience are necessary conditions for happiness.

A few members claim to have lost all expectations of community beyond basic comfort and security - no small things in themselves.

Most of these images and expectations express a part of the truth. It might be that some of us expect too much of community, others too little.

### ***Longing for True Community: Opportunities and Disappointments***

Whatever the precise form of their expectations, everywhere today people long for an experience of genuine community. In an age of skepticism and narcissistic individualism, they yearn for like-minded people to stimulate and support them, to share their ideals and their journey. Committed Christians want to take risks to incarnate the teachings of Jesus in today's circumstances, but they feel the need for groups of people to accompany them and for solid leadership to guide them in the process.

This is the secret of those new types of Christian communities and movements that are enjoying great success in some places. For our part, young people who join us today, in whatever part of the world, come because they are attracted by a dynamic and sustaining experience of community.

Still, our problems, pains, anxieties, and tensions also focus most of the time on community. The greatest problem is simply the tendency of each of us to withdraw into his own solipsistic and narcissistic world, without real communication or real fraternity with those who share our Marianist journey.

Another problem flows from our high expectations: "I am doing fine, but my fellow-Brother is the problem." We feel embittered, angered, betrayed when our expectations are not met. Often we become over-sensitive, interpret others' actions in an exaggerated way, and neglect the honest and kindly level of communication which alone makes the restoration of real communion possible.

Even worse than this kind of hostility is a passive indifference to one another. Some of us feel we have been hurt, disappointed too often. We withdraw into a secure and comfortable, unchallenging world, lose interest in all but a limited circle of those who seem more or less supportive, and avoid the rest as much as possible. Year by year our personal bonds with other members of the Society grow thinner, weaker. We do not take the trouble to appreciate the gifts each has to offer.

Yet, when we give ourselves to community life concretely, accepting one another as we are, without imposing unreal expectations, we will probably begin to feel great thankfulness. Despite our collective weakness and inadequacy, the Lord has given us some great people as companions.

It is the Holy Spirit – not our attractive personalities or our perfect structures – who bonds our unity.

If we adjust our unreal expectations but look to community life as a unique gift from the Lord, we will discover a new humility: we are just limited, flawed, very human individuals, and triumphalistic pride has no place. But we will also discover a new source of gratitude for what the Lord has given, and a new freedom to work together as best we can, without unreal pretense or unreal fear.

### ***Some Aims of Religious Community***

Community life is designed to be a support and stimulus for holiness. The grace of Jesus is concretely at work in each of us. When we share our living of that grace, we all become enriched. Our prayer, our living of the vows, our faith, hope and charity thus develop new dimensions. When we accept the challenges of community as occasions for grace and conversion, when we overcome hostility by sympathetic understanding and indifference by interest and concern, we all support one another in our common call to holiness.

In particular, our experience of community life usually goes hand in hand with our experience of prayer. If we want to sense of temper of a religious community, the simplest way is to come to pray with it. If the community is stiff, inhibited and formal, its prayer will reflect that. If it is warm and welcoming, we will feel that in its way of praying. If there are tensions and hostilities among some members, we will sense them at prayer.

Community prayer is a "source and summit": it both expresses the life of the community and aims to deepen our sense of God and to enrich our practical charity for one another and for the world around us. A prayerful community immeasurably stimulates and deepens the spiritual experience of its members. We need to recognize that we can learn from one

another in our spiritual lives, from the different ways in which others pray and experience God. A reasonable diversity of styles and modes of prayer, corresponding to the religious sensibilities of the different members, should be an enrichment for everyone.

Marianist community is also a permanent mission, not a cozy atmosphere closed in on itself. To share in the mission of Jesus is to join in the company of his disciples, companions whom he sends to preach the good news and to heal. We find ourselves together in communities, not by personal choice, but in function of a mission we share in the local Church. Our community is meant to be less a refuge from apostolic battles than a source of creativity and strength for mission.

We are not meant to be individual free-lancers in our ministries. Our whole history as a Society teaches us that. Great Marianist success-stories, great times and places of grace, have always involved a vital and unified community. (Think of Saint-Remy, of Collège Stanislas, of our Martyrs of Ciudad Real and Madrid, of founders of new missions and great institutions.) The witness of a group of people – whether three or fifty – who truly work together in harmonious support is contagious, sometimes overpowering. It attracts followers.

Even if we may at times be called to work more individually, we need to consider our ministry as an outreach of our Marianist community, and ask for the support, guidance and evaluative discernment of the community (Rule of Life, 68).

A key element of our apostolic mission as Marianists is the discovering, building and maintaining of close community among us and the extension of such an experience of community to those around us. This is a deep way of understanding our ministry as religious within the entire Marianist Family – even within the whole Church.

The emphasis on prayer with and for one another, on trying to understand one another, on affirmation, on team work, on dialogue and a strongly felt community life is not navel-gazing or “nesting” in a warm, supportive atmosphere. It is an essential mark of our Marianist mission.

### ***Some Challenges for Marianist Community Today***

1. *Integration:* A first challenge is to integrate our emphasis on community with the entirety of the gospel message.

Many Marianists were impressed three decades ago when the Jesuit theologian (now Cardinal) Avery Dulles wrote an influential book describing five key ecclesiological models: Church as institution, Church as communion, Church as herald, Church as sacrament, Church as servant. Each of these models has its impact on the way we understand and live our community life. Dulles discovered great potential and some incompleteness, some blind spots in each of these models.

Marianists characteristically identified most with Dulles’ model of the Church as a communion of people. I vividly remember a meeting of Directors in St. Louis shortly after the appearance of this book, in which the participants unanimously underlined the communitarian model as characteristically Marianist, primordial for us. In so doing, they were in line with our founding charism.

Yet our very conviction about this aspect of ecclesial life may tempt us to neglect some other important dimensions, such as evangelization, service to the needy, and the sacramental witness of holiness, to leave such aspects too much in the shadows. A genuine Christian community, as understood by our Founder, exists for the sake of others who are in greater need. A focus on creating warm and vibrant communities should not make us shy in proclaiming the Gospel, which sometimes shocks and stirs up discord and division. It should not turn us in on ourselves, but motivate us to reach out to the suffering and marginal people around us. We should never compromise our call to holiness for the sake of maintaining cheap harmony.

Jesus knew how to invite everyone to the peace and harmony of his Kingdom, but he also stirred up bitter opposition because his message was radical and uncompromising. Marianists need to learn to deal effectively, in charity and truth, with conflict. We are often tempted to avoid it for the sake of peace. We also need to deepen our readiness to leave comfortable and serene environments in order to reach out to those most in need.

2. *Personalization*: A second challenge is to foster individual growth within community. It is easier to homogenize everyone, to expect all to be the same. But a rich community is the result of a concern and respect for each person in his own style and his own needs for growth and development.

The Rule of Life reminds us that “community life is not the same as uniformity. Marianists should be understanding of personal differences which arise from temperament, age, health, the needs of varied apostolates, or cultural background” (art. 3.3).

Personalization does not mean indifference, non-interference, lack of communication, merely passive toleration. These attitudes may be the greatest enemy of real Marianist community today.

We have made great progress in the personalization of our formation and charism in recent years. The positive results have been evident in happy and creative religious who are effective in a variety of ministries. We must keep growing in this direction.

3. *Diversity*: It is usually not good for Marianists to live solely with people of their own age, mentality and outlook. The kind of community that results is too monolithic, uncongenial to anyone but those who come from the same background.

One source of diversity is age. We need to learn to listen and learn from people of different generations, with different experience and a different formation from our own. We need to respect their life-processes, the characteristic tasks appropriate to their time in life (formation, apprenticeship, full maturity, or retirement). The richest kind of community is multi-generational.

Already in the Bordeaux Sodality, Blessed Father Chaminade knew how to respect the needs of young people while still keeping them in frequent contact with elders, creating a fluid and vital trans-generational movement.

Today it is sad to see a few groups of Marianists riven by sterile conflicts based on natural differences between old and young, to see them engaging in mutual accusation or indifference.

Another source of diversity is culture. Most Marianists live in communities side by side with people coming from their own ethnic and cultural groups, or from very similar ones. But increasingly we are called by our mission to create culturally varied communities. Many of our formation programs are now international and inter-cultural, and we are growing most in areas of the world with cultural presuppositions that are vastly different from those in our past.

The last General Chapter (no. 40f) called us to develop “a formation that is more intercultural, where all partners are open to change” and to make every effort to know the culture in which we work, “value it and, when necessary, be able to adopt a critical stance toward it.” Sometimes we are unaware of the great cultural differences among us. Many of our communities could profit by a “cultural audit,” a process of reflection on cultural pluralism. We might discover that we are taking too much similarity for granted, that apparently similar signs and actions have different meanings according to the cultural context.

Our different occupations and assignments also foster legitimate differences among us. Teachers see things from a different angle than social workers. Priests tend to view everything through a more pastoral and ecclesial lens. Those who serve in technical and manual labor, those who work as administrators and treasurers have other experiences and points of view. Those who are fully active in ministry naturally have a set of interests and needs different from those who are partly or fully retired. Different rhythms of life are the natural and valid result.

Temperament is still another source of diversity. There is nothing new in this realization, but still we have a hard time dealing with those who characteristically approach problems from an angle different from our own, with greater feeling or more analysis, intuitively or concretely, rapidly or slowly, more expressively or more quietly and internally.

Our communities can grow if they recognize the valid and rich diversity among us, respecting and honoring the needs and the style of each member. Often we are not patient and understanding enough with one another.

*4. Province and Local Community:* As Marianist religious, our lifelong commitment is not to any local house or work but to the Society and its mission as a whole. We are especially committed to our own Unit: Province, Region or District. Such a Marianist Unit is normally a reference point for the whole of our Marianist lives, the network of concrete people given us by the Lord as companions for the long term. It is important to develop our Unit as a community of life, prayer and mission, seeing beyond the immediacy of the particular place and work where we find ourselves at any given time. Our commitment as Marianists may lead us to live at various moments of our lives in quite a variety of settings and places, with quite a variety of people. Usually our deepest and most sustaining friendships and relationships reach out beyond any local community and any momentary assignment.

Balancing the local experience and the life of the Unit is not always easy. Many people have difficulty looking beyond their immediate context, opening out to other Marianists who share

their life-commitment but in another assignment. Other people, common today, have a stronger sense of corporate belonging but find it hard to invest themselves totally in the down-to-earth strengths and weakness, the daily up's and down's of a local community.

5. *The Local and the Global*: We Marianists have a strong tradition of putting down local roots. In our history we have identified deeply and for a long time with persons and places. Such identification is part of our incarnational spirituality. When we reach a place, we come to stay, to form long-standing relationships, to settle into the local landscape.

Yet today we live in an era of globalization. Through television, internet and travel, we can have instantaneous contact with family and friends, colleagues, teachers and students, masters and disciples, in distant places. Our mental, spiritual and psychological world may exist as much – or more – in other places as in our local community.

The globalization of consciousness can offer numerous advantages for our life and mission. It can help us identify more deeply, participate more richly in living out the common charism, build up greater solidarity and mutual help. Members of the Marianist Family in any part of the world are now able, for example, to learn and dialogue through distance-learning courses offered under the auspices of the International Center for Marianist Formation. Marianists and like-minded friends on different continents have more capacity than ever before to know one another, to appreciate one another's insights and values, to work together and form networks of information, insight, support and challenge. Global solidarity and understanding is more possible than ever before. We can affirm more than ever the fact that we are a worldwide community with a global mission.

Despite its positive dimensions, globalization also has the potential to undercut the life of local communities. We can lose our local roots, become spiritual tourists and vagabonds. On the screens of our computers it is possible to live vicariously, to be somewhere else mentally, spiritually, ideologically, emotionally. Absorbed in a virtual world, we can remain oblivious or distracted or detached from those at our elbows. We may invest more time and energy in on-line chat than in the presence to God that is prayer, or in getting to know and love those around us.

Today, more than ever before, building the local community becomes a conscious choice. It is a commitment of solidarity based on an act of faith that God has called us to live together, in a communion that is genuine, to grow and learn, to serve and interact, to put down strong local roots and develop sustaining relationships with fellow religious of our local community and with God's people where we are. God's Providence is present for us at this place and time, connected to global realities but deeply committed and rooted in local ones.

It would be good for all religious and all local Marianist communities to reflect on their way of integrating the local and the global at this moment of history. Some may be "too parochial," turned inward without sufficient interest or awareness of the broader context. Others may be too "global," gyrovague, rootless, living in a virtual world without sufficient attention to real needs around them.

6. *Witness, becoming "artisans of communion"*: It is a challenge for us to let community life form our hearts, to see it as a source of spiritual growth. Community still remains the best

arena for spiritual training, not only the “penance *par excellence*” but also a means to “rekindle joy, inspire love, and strengthen our apostolic dedication” (Rule of Life 38, *passim*).

The ability to see God’s work in ways we would never expect, the reality factor that is inserted into our unreal idealisms and our egotistic projections through the daily rubbing of shoulders – these are opportunities for growing in a holiness that is more real, more humane, and more truly in the likeness of the incarnate Jesus.

The daily interactions of community life, small and large, have the potential to accustom us to consideration for others and to the mutual sacrifices that create an environment of generosity and harmony. By living with one another, in patience and in respect, by willingness to learn and adapt, to share in each one’s joys and sorrows, struggles and successes, we become, as Pope John Paul II has told us in *Vita Consecrata*, “experts” or “artisans” of communion within a Church and world that desperately needs it.

*7. Freedom:* It is a challenge for us to find the right balance in community between freedom and fidelity.

The inalienable right to freedom and autonomy is the one quasi-absolute ideal today in most of the West. Recognition of the inalienable rights of each individual is precious, but it tends to create centrifugal societies. People take it for granted that the individual should be assured the greatest possible realm of choice, no matter what the consequences for human communities. A number of Asian nations have expressed a thoughtful critique of the Western concept of the “rights of man,” in favor of the dangerous but perhaps necessary idea of the rights of society as such.

On our concrete level, Marianist Directors sometimes are so sensitive to the autonomy of each member that they become only facilitators, organizers, taking it for granted that they can never ask a fellow Brother to reach out to do something he does not spontaneously choose. We have not found many ways to safeguard the rights of the community, and to spur one another to needed conversion and growth.

*8. A Marian style:* It is a challenge also to develop a distinctive Marian style for our community within a polymorphous Church.

I will not repeat here what has been written elsewhere, by myself and others, about this “Marian style.” But as we live it, turn it into reality, we make an effective contribution to a kind of Church and world that respects and welcomes all persons, invites them to growth, stands in solidarity with their legitimate needs and desires.

### ***Taking Time to Reflect on Our Life in Community***

Perhaps this Circular provides a good occasion for all of us to spend a little time reflecting on the local community in which we live. Just thinking about those with whom we share life helps us come out of self-absorption. Let us be honest and real as we reflect and pray about each of our Brothers. Let us look at them with real personal interest, not with a merely passive toleration.

Let us look them in the eye (spiritually, at least) and try to remove our unreal judgments about them – the impossible expectations they cannot meet, the cruel projections that exaggerate their faults.

They are all just human, with hopes and fears, needs and anxieties, gifts and limits much like our own. We must let them be human.

They would not be with us if they did not have vast reserves of faith, idealism and good will. It is possible to scratch the surface and tap those reserves.

We are together with these men for this year. We can achieve quite a bit together as Marianists. We may not quite reproduce the Holy Family or the first Jerusalem community. But we can point in that direction.

We can offer much to provide the basic atmosphere of security, care and support – physical and spiritual – for one another.

We will surely be challenged to take some risks together for God's people, very particularly in serving the poor and in working for peace and reconciliation in the conflicts around us.

Our community is a "school of the Lord's service." We can learn much from one another and grow together in holiness. In particular, our common prayer can help us deepen our sense of God, individually and collectively.

Our community is an "infirmary." Each of us has his own weakness or sickness, and each of us has a capacity to cure and alleviate pain.

This year together we may have some disappointments and some failures. But the Spirit of Christ will be with us, to bond us together and help us pick up the pieces. The Spirit is especially evident where there is need for pardon and starting anew.

As we look ahead together, let us remember that we are a "permanent mission" and that we can attain great things by working together.

Let us pray for the grace of living and working together with one heart and one soul. Let us pray for our local community, that it may grow in creative fidelity, in authentic witness to the gospel, that it may really be "a permanent mission."

Mary, who gave life and formed it, will help us discover the energy, peace and patience, the affirmative and healing presence that our community needs. It is her guidance and missionary dynamism that I wish for you and for each of our communities in concluding these reflections.

Fraternally,

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