



Circolare del Superiore Generale

SOCIETA DI MARIA - MARIANISTI

CIRCULAR N° 15

TO ALL MARIANIST RELIGIOUS UNDER THE AGE OF 40

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Superior General of the Society of Mary,
Missionary Apostolic

**Rome, 2 October 2005
188th Anniversary of the
Foundation of the Society**

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

TO ALL MARIANIST RELIGIOUS UNDER THE AGE OF 40

Dear Brothers,

During the past nine years, working in Rome and visiting the different Units of the Society around the world, I have been struck by the key roles played by the various generations in the Society. Each age brings different graces, different needs and challenges.

This year, as I come toward the end of my service in the General Administration, I hope to complete three circular letters: this one especially to you our younger members, another (already published) to those over 70, and a third one to those in mid-life. If you are interested, perhaps you may want to read the letters addressed to the other groups as well. In this way, I hope to stimulate some reflection about our life-tasks and some dialogue among the different age-groups in the Society.

It is a pleasure to write this letter, to you, all our members under the age of 40. Looking at you, we get some idea of the Society of Mary of the future. There are 254 of you in the Society, 18 % of our total membership, coming from all the continents where we are present: 93 from Asia, 91 from Africa, 29 from Latin America, 26 from Europe, 15 from the USA.

188 years ago today, Blessed Father Chaminade began the history of the Society with a group of seven men in your age-group. All of them were Frenchmen, but, like you, they were varied in temperament and education. Today's Society of Mary is the outgrowth of that small but fervent beginning.

Not everything I write can apply to each one of you. Those who have just made first vows and are in initial formation programs are quite different from those with perpetual vows who already have a solid experience of Marianist life. Many of you are not so very young: a person in his thirties is already approaching mid-life! You have a variety of educational and work backgrounds. Still, you have certain common characteristics that allow me to speak to you as to a single generation of Marianists with some shared experiences.

I am writing to thank you for your witness of faith and hope in dedicating your life as Marianists. Your energy and spontaneity are a treasure for us. Your idealism and your closeness to young people today bring special gifts to the rest of us. I want to assure you that Marianists around the world believe in your potential and rejoice in your deep aspirations.

I also want to assure you that we older Marianists believe, from our own experience, that our vocation is worth the gift of a lifetime. A lay researcher who interviewed many elderly Marianists in one of our larger Provinces told me that not one of them expressed regret for his life. Every year I am privileged to receive a personal note from many of the men who celebrate jubilees of fifty or sixty years or more. Again and again, their conviction comes through like a refrain: “no matter what difficulties I have experienced or limits I now feel in old age, I feel happy about my life as a Marianist, thankful for it. It has been worth it!” Your older fellow-brothers are convinced that you, too, can find joy and fulfillment, holiness and happiness, purpose and meaning, in our way of life.

I am also writing to invite you again to join with all of us in a style of life and mission that responds to today’s world. In this letter I hope to share some thoughts about the rich and distinctive contribution you make to our life as a worldwide community.

Cultures, Globalization and Inculturation

You exhibit greater cultural variety than any previous group of Marianists in history. In the past our members came overwhelmingly from Europe and the United States. But among you the largest numbers come from India (88), Kenya (26), Togo (26), Congo (22), Spain (21), Ivory Coast (17), Colombia (17), and the United States (15). Your ranks are growing with more young people entering the Society, especially in the countries just listed. By your presence you are contributing powerfully to the processes of inculturation and globalization of solidarity among us.

Inculturation is a special task for your time. Most of you come from non-dominant cultures with a relatively brief experience of the Marianist charism. In many of your countries Christianity has always been a minority religion. In others, there is a Christian tradition, but the majority are no longer active in Church life. By searching with us in deep respect for your own cultural heritage, you can help us all know what it means to implant or renew our charism as a living presence and a challenging gift in your time and place. You can help us see the implications for the way we live, for our relationships with those around us, for our thought-patterns and ways of communicating with others, and for our forms of prayer and ministry. We count on your help in this key domain.

Like other members of your generation, you have grown up in a globalizing world. Wherever you live, in many respects you resemble your peers in most countries of our world today. You have similar experiences, perhaps wear similar clothing, probably enjoy similar music and films. Many of you are skillful in using new technology to obtain information and to maintain wide-ranging friendships with people in different places.

I do not believe you have let go of the identity of your home culture, but at times it tends to blur into something more homogenized, trans-national. Try to resist such homogenization. At the same time, make efforts to understand and be sensitive to human experiences that are very different from your own. Don’t try to reduce everything too quickly to a common denominator. Ideally, your home culture can be melded with the trans-cultural identity of your generation into a new harmonious whole. Out of your cultural experience, you can make your own characteristic contribution to our Marianist life. This is a major challenge for all of you.

Developing a Deep Spiritual Identity: Ongoing Spiritual Growth

Your generation is characterized by a search for spirituality. A few years ago, spiritual life and practice all too often met with skepticism and critical rejection. Today it evokes fascinated interest among quite a few of your contemporaries. This phenomenon varies greatly from country to country. In many places, scholars and journalists speak and write about a revival in the search for spiritual identity. This search often seems to happen beyond the bounds of any organized religion. Anyone who has a convincing, experiential spiritual message receives a respectful hearing. Yet today's people, your contemporaries, as a whole, seem to know next to nothing about our Christian spiritual heritage.

As Marianists committed to formation in faith, it is our task, with you playing a major role, to introduce today's people to the deep Christian heritage, to offer solid and thoughtful spiritual and theological foundations for still unformed longings, to help bridge the gap between individualistic, idiosyncratic spiritual experience and the heritage of the Christian community. This means that you need to keep deepening your roots in the gospel and in the Marianist charism, so that you become convinced and experienced, persons who know and practice Christian and Marianist spirituality and are able to share it meaningfully with others. You are called to become genuine persons of prayer, full of what last year's World Congress on Consecrated Life called "a passion for Christ and a passion for humanity."

A key step is to get to know yourself and your own vocation better. God has a plan for you – that is the fundamental conviction of every genuine vocation. This plan is unique, and the role God has for you is deeply personal. You probably still have much to learn about God's personal plan for you. You need to contemplate this plan, to see how it has been molding you for a long time and how it continues to mold you today. This means that you need to get to know yourself deeply, to appreciate what are your characteristic strengths and pitfalls. It also means that you need to understand how God calls you to form part of a living and growing community, reaching out to people who need God's love and mercy.

Dwell on self-knowledge, not to indulge your curiosity or satisfy your ego, not out of narcissism or obsession with self, but to be grateful for God's gifts, to be aware of the challenges He gives you, to deal honestly with your feelings, not to live any lies, to give yourself more fully to those around you, and to dedicate yourself with integrity, as you truly are, to God's service.

People of your generation, like all others, can easily fool themselves or twist their insecurities and deficiencies into real obstacles. In contrast, as you get to know, accept and love yourself as you really are, you can fulfill, realistically and humbly, the role God has for you.

Your identity as a Marianist, if it is to be meaningful to others, has to be anchored in a deep sense of God and Mary. You need to make the link between the personalized love of God for you and the rich heritage we share through our identity as Catholics and Marianists.

Our Catholic and Marianist heritage can no longer be merely taken for granted, unexamined. Today's people will call on you to "give a reason for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15). It is important to keep growing in the sense of your Catholic tradition, in being a convinced and articulate Christian, a conscious part of the great community across time and space that is our Catholic Church. Some of us too quickly think we know all the answers or adopt a quasi-indifference to the heritage of our faith, living off it externally without going deeper. It is important to keep learning, keep plumbing the wealth of our heritage, penetrate into its

implications for religious sensibility today. You will probably find you keep discovering important insights that make a real difference for your life.

Every Marianist needs to penetrate, appropriate in a personal way, the wealth of our Marianist heritage. A few favorite concepts and slogans superficially recalled from the novitiate are not enough. Blessed Father Chaminade was one of those great founders in Christian history, who gave us a charism that is a gift to the whole Church, rich for personal spirituality as well as for missionary dynamism. Marianists of your generation need to reappropriate and develop our understanding and living of this charism; we need in your time a new generation of people like Simler, Klobb, Domingo Lázaro, Neubert, and so many others, living and dead, who have passed on that charism and enriched it. It is encouraging to see that some of you have already begun this task, through books and papers and participation in seminars like Horizons.

The willingness to deepen and grow in our Catholic, Marianist identity is a key part of that virtue of preparation Chaminade named “preparatory obedience.” It is the disposition to keep learning, to let ourselves be molded and grow in experiences that flow from our heritage.

In fact, all the preparatory virtues taught by our Founder are especially important for your time in life. By growing in them, Marianists become more thoughtful, reflective, patient, calm and focused persons, able to communicate a spirituality of real worth to those around them.

Situating Yourself as a Post-Vatican-II Catholic

Your generation is among the first group of Catholics and Marianists that has grown up in the post-Vatican-II Church. You take for granted many of the aspects of Catholic life that were introduced by Vatican II and that still remain innovative for those of us who are older: a liturgy in your own language, a creative engagement with the social problems of our time, a concern for participation of all in Church life, an invitation to dialogue with other believers, heightened awareness of psychic and social realities, a commitment to the active role of the laity in Christian life. All these things still seem new and fresh, sometimes exhilarating to me, but you have never known anything else. What a privilege!

You have lived most of your years during a pontificate that has reasserted Catholic identity and struggled against secularism. I notice that some of you are concerned with visible signs of faith and enjoy traditional devotional practices. Like a certain number of serious young Catholics today, you may feel an intense desire to know and experience those things that foster traditional Catholic identity and devotion.

In every age, we Marianists are ecclesial people. We find our life and meaning within the great communion of the universal Catholic Church, and in dialogue with other religions and all people of good will. It is good for you to think and pray about what it means to be a faithful Catholic, in communion with fellow believers around the world, and about how you can share the spiritual richness of your life with today’s people in search of spirituality.

Developing a Rich Web of Relationships

Many of the friendships you are making now will stay with you through a large part of your life. One of the key tasks of young adulthood is developing the capacity for intimacy,

learning to share in a rich and meaningful web of human relationships. Now is a time to come to a deeper and more personal way of relating to others.

The community of those who share the Marianist charism should have a special place in these relationships. The Rule of Life invites us to give a “preferential place”(21) to our communities and to make them “centers of fidelity” (2.3). In community with others who share a similar vocation, we experience realistic support and challenge. The community of relationships in the same charism begins with other members of the Society, but it also goes much beyond, to the members of other branches of our Marianist Family. Together with them, we grow in that sense of being a spiritual family which is fundamental to our charism. Blessed Father Chaminade was convinced that union with others gives consistency and strength to our vocations and to our mission (*vis unita fit fortior - Spirit of our Foundation*, par. 690 ff.). Many of you already have the experience of such rich family relationships. Such experience should be a grace for every Marianist.

As a person vowed to celibacy, you have to learn a special style of sharing with others. Celibacy is bound to be painful at times, yet it also has great potential for self-giving. I have written elsewhere about the need for cultivating an open heart, anchored in God, in the life of community and in mission. We need to be ready to let people in, to share with them at very deep levels. At the same time we must become free enough to let them be themselves, not to demand any specific response in order to please us. The ideal is to become channels for God’s grace flowing through us, transforming us and reaching out to others.

The Rule of Life speaks beautifully about cultivating an “undivided heart,” about becoming a “rich source of life and of unselfish, universal love” (18), about being free “to work for God’s Kingdom on earth” (22), and about seeking “honesty, simplicity and interior freedom in our relationships”(2.4). These wonderful ideals shape many struggles throughout a lifetime; but such struggles to live celibacy in mission and with the community are worth it. Learning authentic celibate loving is a special task of your moment in life. This should be an ongoing theme of everyone’s spiritual direction.

A personally felt, experiential love for God and a generous, creative outreaching love for many other people are necessary. Without them, you will never succeed in developing that rich web of relationships that is a channel of God’s grace in our communities and in our mission. Recent sad events in the Church underline how hard it is to love people in honest chastity and celibacy. Yet how important that witness is! Not many in today’s world understand the meaning and value of our celibate commitment. There is probably nothing more important at your time of life than learning how to love, to relate meaningfully to others, but also to be freeing rather than controlling.

A Positive, Affirming, Incarnational Style

In some Church circles it is fashionable today to speak in condemnatory terms about the world in which we live. A recent article I read characterized today’s culture as one of “banality, vulgarity, mediocrity, and even exhibitionism.” Regularly condemnations ring out against the world’s evils: secularism, individualism, consumerism, relativism, hedonism, narcissism, irrationality....

There is much truth in these analyses. The world in which we live is a great “theater of human history” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 2) in which collective and personal dramas are

enacted. The powers of evil and meaninglessness play a key role in these dramas. The Scriptures remind us of the ongoing conflict between God's kingship and our destructive human selfishness. Our new Pope's first homily reminded us that the world can be a desert, or a sea of bitter salt-water. Our Blessed Founder compared the world of his time to "pestilential smoke" and "a murky night" (letter of August 24, 1839). No one can deny the truth and importance of these assertions.

Still, I believe that you as younger people are especially well situated to help us see the other side of the coin: the goodness and grace that our Creator-God is also planting in today's world. One of my prime requests to you is to love this world in which you live and in which you are called to play a role for many years to come. We know that our world comes from the creating hands of a loving God, that he looked about at the beginning and "saw that it was good" (Gen.1,10), that "God so loved the world that He sent into it His only Son" (John 3, 16).

You are at a time in life when it is normal to make fresh discoveries about the grandeurs and miseries of this world of ours, to savor the beauties of nature and culture, to plumb the depths of wisdom and love around us as well as those of evil and savagery. I urge you not to lose your capacity for wonder and admiration, your passion for building up all that is good. God still loves the world, today, and so should you. The freshness of your perceptions and your closeness to the minds and hearts of young people in our time will help us all work together to strengthen and confirm what is good.

I believe there is something profoundly Marianist about taking a positive approach to our world. Our spirituality is based on the Incarnation, the coming of God into this world, the presence in full human, fleshly reality of a God who cares deeply for us. Marianists have always cultivated a fraternal closeness to those around them, sharing in their "joy and sorrow, their grief and anguish" (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1). From our beginnings, our educational tradition has predisposed us to "preserve and cultivate" what is naturally good, to discern the presence of Jesus Christ in all, "not to reject as bad what is not absolutely good," to understand our role as "to sow and not to reap" (Constitutions of 1891, arts. 262-268 passim).

Mary herself is a model of this kind of incarnational spirituality. She was not naively optimistic: in fact, she had a particularly powerful experience of the power of evil and the obstacles to the Kingship of her Son (the oppression of her people, misunderstandings of those closest to her, her poverty, her exile as a refugee in Egypt, her experience of the passion, and so much else). Still, she loved the world around her. Unreservedly she took the risk and said "yes" (*fiat*) to God's difficult plan for her, pondered events with love in her heart, served as attentive provider (Cana), as mother and source of wisdom in the early Church.

I invite you to let her be your model in a lucid and honest but positive and loving approach to the world around you. As the upcoming generation of Marianists, we count on you to transmit the positive and affirmative thrust of our charism.

Characteristic Challenges, Temptations, Opportunities for Growth

Every age and every generation has its characteristic challenges and temptations. They can be seen as opportunities for growth. I would just like to mention three that might merit your reflection.

Perseverance and permanence seem especially difficult to younger people today. Too many give up and abandon their ideals and their commitments to concrete persons and communities. Such temptations are in conflict with our Marianist vow of stability, which aims to help us “experience the creative power of permanent commitment,” to support us “in moments of weakness” and thus lead to “depth in maturity and fervor in love” (Rule of Life 1.6).

Post-modern thought exists in a culture of tentativeness and relativism, an unwillingness to accept anything as definitive. It is easy today to think that everything can be changed, to bind ourselves as loosely as possible in social, personal and institutional relationships. We are used to a world in which our wishes can be met instantaneously; if intractable reality gets in the way, we rapidly give up. Religious community life loses its solidity if we accept these attitudes.

People have always found perseverance and permanence difficult, but today it seems harder than before. The results can be seen in relationships with friends, in married life, in professional life, in the careers of students and workers, as well as in religious life. Many people want to keep commitments so open-ended that they can never be sure of anything. They often end up feeling anxious and very lonely, without any secure anchors for their life.

Joan Chittister writes: “Commitment happens on a daily basis, not once and forever. It is something we grow into, not something we come to full-blown” (*Called to Question*, Sheed and Ward, 2004, p. 79). It is certainly true that in time all of us change our motivations. We enter religious life with one set of motivations and dreams and gradually change to another set. We can hope that the new set will be more mature, deeper and wiser.

However much I grow and keep growing, by the time I make a permanent commitment like marriage or ordination or perpetual vows, with the help of a community and good spiritual direction, I should be ready to say that I will stand firm for life in the path I have chosen. I will be persistent, whatever changes and risks and challenges may come my way. I promise to continue in a path and in a community, in a social context I have chosen and experienced over some years as rich, beneficial and growthful, for myself and others. Joan Chittister continues: “Commitment gives me the chance to stay in place and grow. It is not about staying in place and going to seed.” Through fidelity to a permanent commitment I can develop and become “a deeply spirit-filled human being whose presence is a gift to the world” (*ibid.*, pp. 81-82).

Another characteristic temptation, strangely related to the foregoing, is a certain excessive, self-regarding caution. Many younger people are perfectionistic. They do not want to make any mistakes. Some find it hard to trust in the help and support of those with whom they live in community and work in apostolic teams. They never feel that they are ready to launch out and commit themselves to a particular service of some particular people in a particular place.

People can spend forever trying to decide, getting ready for living their lives. They prefer to keep preparing themselves for the big moment that might come sometime in the future. They want to be sure that their living and working conditions will be optimal and their individual uniqueness will be fully valued. Sometimes they focus too much on comforts and perquisites, and they can be authoritarian and demanding when they have some responsibility. They look excessively for the approval of everyone.

A third temptation concerns a certain lack of transparency. It is never easy to be open, honest and communicative about our inmost thoughts and feelings. The temptation to hide matters occurs even more frequently in inter-cultural situations, where there are notable differences of culture and background between younger and older members. Sometimes it seems easier to keep secrets, to hide difficult problems or important differences of opinion, to engage in inappropriate behavior known to peers but unknown to leaders, and to engage in backbiting. Such problems usually come eventually into the open and cause great pain, creating an atmosphere of distrust and resentment. It is important for all of us to learn to deal with one another openly and honestly, to confront problems and differences directly rather than to hide them.

Such attitudes - instability, self-regarding caution, lack of transparency - trammel apostolic courage and creativity.

A Few Characteristic Contributions to Mission

Overcoming such temptations, you will make a solid contribution to all of us in mission. For example, it is natural for most of you to be close to young people. Ministry to youth has been the fundamental thrust of our Marianist mission from the beginning. You can help the rest of us understand and appreciate the young people around us, respond creatively and with genuine concern to their hopes, aspirations, and fears. You certainly need to take a key role in inviting other young people to join us. Your closeness to youth is one of your richest gifts to the rest of us.

Most of you have received good educations, both before and after you joined the Society. You take professionalism and competence for granted. This is a real strength.

Because of your youth, it is more natural for you to be pioneers, to take part in new efforts in our mission. Often these efforts around the world are with poor people or others who have been marginalized and neglected. Many of you have a highly developed concern for justice, for peace, and a deep respect for God's creation. We have some significant new ministries focused on these concerns in almost every Unit today. You can help the rest of us be in touch with the "new things" that God is causing to blossom in our time (Isaiah 43, 19; cf. General Chapter of 2001).

Marianists are all missionaries. Whatever your task, you are not a custodian invited just to preserve, blindly and without creativity, some heritage from the past. You may be asked to add a new dimension to mission in one of the places and works where we have long been present, or you may be called to join others in founding a new "permanent mission" in some new place.

Of course you need to be ready to learn from others and to work closely with them, draw on their experience. As a Marianist, you are not called to be a "loner" in mission. But don't be

afraid to launch out into the deep, with creativity, because, as our Blessed Founder stressed, “you are all missionaries.”

When I wrote recently to our senior religious, I concluded the letter with an image of a wise and mature elder Mary created by Brother Joseph Aspell in California. I don't think I need any special image of Mary for you. The vast majority of our usual images of Mary show us a young woman, of your age or younger, open to the words of the Lord and to God's plan for her. She is usually seen in a position of responsibility, as a young mother bearing the Author of Life in the form of a small child in her arms.

I invite you to look toward Mary as you reflect on the challenges of this moment in your life. You will find in her a key to the ability to live God's plan for you, faithfully and creatively, in solidarity with the many people who need you, at this moment and for the rest of your life. May she walk with you as you advance in faith and in service to others!

Fraternally,

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