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SOCIETA DI MARIA - MARIANISTI

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**LONGING
FOR A NEW PENTECOST:
KEY THEMES OF THE THIRTY-
SECOND GENERAL CHAPTER**

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Rome, October 12, 2001
Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar

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Dear Brothers,

You have already received, or will be receiving very soon, the Documents of the Thirty-Second General Chapter of the Society of Mary, held at Rome this past July. I believe that all participants found the Chapter to be a positive experience of shared insight and fraternal communion. The Chapter Documents contain a rich analysis and discernment of our current situation and a series of forward-looking orientations for the years ahead. I hope you will read them carefully, share your reflections about them in community, and find in them encouragement and guidance for your lives as Marianists.

Rather than repeating the content of the Chapter Documents themselves, in this letter I would like to share a few personal impressions and points of emphasis that I find especially meaningful. I hope you will find other points that particularly strike you.

A New Step in Post-Conciliar Renewal

Almost forty years ago, Vatican II called the entire Church to enter into a far-reaching process of renewal. For us religious, this process was first understood as an updating, a remodeling of outdated customs. Later we saw that it required a return to our founding charism, a revitalization, and even, in a way, a re-founding. The Papal document *Vita Consecrata* generalized the goal of all these processes as “creative fidelity.”

The General Chapter was future-oriented. Our main focus was on the next steps to take. We intuited many new things that are appearing in our lives, and we were convinced that some of them are the work of the Holy Spirit.

The process of renewal is not finished and perhaps never will be, but forty years provide a certain sense of perspective. Representatives from all Units of the Society were fully aware that the experience of the past four decades has transformed Marianist life. The Chapter was a chance to evaluate the journey we have already taken, as well as to ponder the challenges of “creative fidelity” and discern the next steps for the road ahead.

The process of change has been slow, much of it so gradual that we forget how we were before. Only when we look back over this lengthy period do we begin to notice the striking differences. If we compare today with forty years ago, we see that we have rediscovered the Marianist Family, reformulated spirituality, reexamined traditions, rethought priorities, redefined apostolic goals, adopted new programs of formation, refocused the living of the vows, made significant innovations in structures, ministries and community life, in order to adapt our charism to a new moment in history.

The Chapter members were convinced that, despite our many faults and missteps, the process has been marked in many ways by “creative fidelity,” God’s fidelity to us above all, and also our attempts at a response. The hand of the Lord has been guiding us through this time. The Lord, his Mother, our Founder will be with us in the next steps as well.

As a key text, the Chapter chose Isaiah 43, 19: “See I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?” Written towards the end of the Babylonian captivity to encourage Hebrew exiles, this text lent a hopeful tone to our reflection. It led us to hope that we too may perhaps be moving to the end of a time of special testing and transformation. Are we perhaps on the verge, poised to move ahead into a new era, to realize a new form of religious life?

Finally the outcome will not depend so much on our own efforts and insights as on the Providence of God and the guidance of Mary.

New Faces at the Chapter

Two aspects of God’s “new deeds” were evident in the Chapter participants themselves. In the Chapter hall we saw, more than ever before, new faces coming from the other branches of our Marianist Family and from new cultures in which our charism is taking root.

A dynamic communion with the whole People of God is one of the great gifts of the post-conciliar renewal. Even our personal search for holiness is a service and witness for the whole Church. We exist for God’s entire people, and we pray and go on mission with them. Pope John Paul II emphasized these points in his letter to our Chapter and again, on September 21, in a letter sent to the plenary meeting of the Vatican Congregation for Consecrated Life.

For us Marianists, this great intuition has taken concrete form in the burgeoning of the Marianist Family during recent decades. More and more, we are coming to realize that we religious men are part of a much broader family that shares Blessed Father Chaminade’s charism. We are starting to understand our spiritual life and our mission as something shared with the rest of the Family and at its service. The Chapter recommitted us to intimate partnership with all branches of the Family.

At this Chapter, for the first time, we invited seven representatives, from all the other organized branches of the Family and from all continents, to spend an entire week with us, to speak to us, reflect with us, and share in the development of guidelines for the next few years. We were inspired by their wholehearted commitment to our common Chaminadean charism.

Inculturation has been increasingly recognized as a key dimension of renewal. At the beginning, few understood the far-reaching implications for the Church of a rapid shifting of its center of gravity from Europe and North America to the Third World or for the Society of Mary of the integration of many varied cultures, with rich and distinctive ways of expressing the mystery of Christ, the spirit of Mary, and the charism of Father Chaminade.

At this Chapter, one-fourth of the membership came from Latin America, Africa, and Asia - a number in proportion to their growing presence in the Society. They brought fresh and heartening insights. Through them, the implications of inculturation began to have quite a significant impact in our Society-wide thinking. We came to take a broader world view and to understand ourselves better, as a community that is called to share its charism in ecclesial situations that are quite rich and very diverse.

The Presence of the Founder

Probably no previous Chapter was so permeated by conscious reference to the example and teaching of our Founder. The beatification of Blessed Father Chaminade just one year ago was an occasion for “rereading” his meaning to us. It gave rise to a number of inspiring, sometimes surprising, interpretations of the charism he gave us.

In the homily at the beatification, Pope John Paul II characterized our Founder as a man of apostolic creativity, ingenious in reaching out “to those who are far from the Church and who lack the ordinary means to know Christ.”

Time and again, we were helped to see our Founder as a “prophet of the laity,” as the Founder of a Family embracing many states of life and many cultures.

We learned to see him more clearly as one deeply involved in the religious and social transformations of his time, a person committed to greater participation and equality in ecclesial life, a spiritual guide with creative intuitions about spirituality, a theologian with a deep and original view of Mary, and a Missionary Apostolic on fire with the desire to work for a “new evangelization” (*nova bella*) in his time and place.

We have come to know him better, to see new dimensions in his charism; we now appreciate him more as a patron saint and an intercessor for our needs. All these dimensions of our Founder had a special impact at the Chapter. We understood our work as a prolongation of his, and we prayed for his guidance.

A Marian Model of Church

The Chapter stressed our Marian vocation. In particular, it urged us to internalize Mary's spiritual attitudes and translate them into a distinctive way of being and acting in the life of the Church. As Marianists, we find our illumination and inspiration for our style of ecclesial life in the figure of the Virgin Mary. We seek to accept people with her “warmth of welcome” (Rule of Life, art. 8) and invite them to grow in her characteristic attitudes.

Pope John Paul II and many other Church leaders have called for a “Marian model of Church.” What is such a model?

It is a Church that lives the Gospel in Mary's style. The Marianist Family, as conceived by our Founder, aims to exemplify this style of being Church. A beautiful prayer written by

Father José María Arnaiz for a meeting of Marianist Lay Communities summarizes key aspects of this Marian ecclesial style:

“**OUR FATHER**, we pray for our Marianist Family with all its weaknesses and all its wealth. Look upon us with kindness; it is our mother and our family. Give it your grace so that it may become what it longs to be.

“**A family** which fosters life and enthusiasm, in which all can express what they think and feel, what they believe and desire; a community of freedom.

“**A family** where people listen long and hard before speaking, welcome others before judging them, forgive much more quickly than condemn, focus more on announcing the Good News than on denouncing the bad; a community of mercy.

“**A family** in which the simplest brother and sister understand what others are saying; in which the leaders are highly educated and experienced, but still know that there is much they do not know; in which everyone is allowed to be himself or herself: a family in which we learn wisdom.

“**A family** in which the Holy Spirit will feel at home, since everything will not be pre-planned, regulated and determined: a community that fosters creativity and growth.

“**A family** in which the courage to risk the new is more powerful than tried and true routines: a community that looks to the future.

“**A family** in which all can pray in their own language, develop and cherish their own culture, appreciate the heritage and history in which they feel at home: an incarnational community, one that knows the paschal mystery and experiences a new Pentecost.

“**A family** of which people will say: ‘See how they love one another’, rather than, ‘See how well organized they are’: a living and growing community.”

“**Marianist Family**, you are small but growing,
fragile but full of hope,
hesitant but believing.
Lift up your eyes and see:
Jesus and Mary are always with you. Amen.”

Mary was the daughter of a colonized, humiliated, and impoverished people. In her Magnificat, she expressed her longing for freedom and justice, in solidarity with the “little people” of her world, those who are excluded from power and influence. A Church modeled on her will be in tune with the dynamism of the poor and will know how to use simple means, available to everyone, to proclaim the freeing message of salvation. A Church that lives in her style will be characterized by solidarity, justice and social responsibility.

Mary was a woman who knew how to be herself, fully human, fully feminine, fully Jewish, in solidarity with the deep values of her oppressed people, in contrast to the Roman “globalizing” and homogenizing tendencies of her time. The Marian style of being Church will value and respect the service of leadership and authority in the Church, treasure communion among all and cooperate with directives of Church leaders. Still, it will avoid servility and merely blind obedience, any over-emphasis on hierarchy and uniformity.

We see Mary as a formative, educative Mother, one who refuses “to reject as bad what is not absolutely good” (*Constitutions* of 1891, art. 267). She magnifies the Lord for the unique and varied gifts granted to each of her children. In contrast, today we sometimes experience among some earnest Christians an almost totalitarian spiritual dynamism that bowls over everyone in its wake, is impatient of human processes, seeks to suppress human questioning and human variety in the name of a universal sovereign and triumphant spiritual ideal. A Marian stance within the Church contrasts with such an aggressive, evangelistic stance. It leaves everyone lots of room to grow.

The image of Pentecost, where the disciples were gathered with Mary in prayer and were sent in mission by the Holy Spirit, summed up the Chapter’s sense of our call at this time. The same image inspired the leaders of Marianist Lay Communities in their Third International Meeting shortly after the Chapter. This image inspires us to live a Marian style as the People of God. The Chapter was convinced that such a Marian style is a special, much needed contribution we are called to make, along with others who share similar yearnings, at this moment in the life of the Church.

“The World He Loved”: a Hopeful Style and a Dynamic Mission

We came to realize at the Chapter, better than before, that Marianist life today exists in strikingly different situations. In some places we are beset by “temptations to cynicism, fatigue, and lack of apostolic zeal” (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 18i). In others, we are just getting started, with exuberant creativity and the growing pains of youth (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 20).

Whatever our local situation, we are all called to love the world in which we live, as our Founder did (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 2). We belong to our world, we know its splendors and miseries, and we are apostles sent to it, with a vision, spirit, mission and strategy (*Sent by the*

Spirit, pars. 23ff.). We cannot look at the world from the outside, as if we were not part of it, or as if we could make little constructive contribution to it. We are called to be signs of hope, because there is a hopeful style implicit in our charism (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 24).

It is important to see the seeds of God's Word that are growing up among us. Many people are thirsting for spirituality. There is a longing for peace and justice, and a growing awareness of the need to respect God's creation. More than before, people are striving for solidarity, brotherhood and sisterhood. Many are willing to contribute their time and resources to help the needy. Women are assuming new and fuller social and ecclesial roles. Races and cultures are mixing more than before, learning to tolerate, respect and love one another, cultivating dialogue. Respect for each person and equality of rights and duties is a widely shared aspiration. (See *Sent by the Spirit*, par. 15.) All these positive aspects are part of today's world, and they make it more easily loveable.

Yet we must also be critical of those elements of our varied cultures that contradict the Gospel. During the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation, Catholicism set the tone for popular culture in much of Europe. That time is long past, nor do most of us want to return to it. But in the West our cultures tend to be very far from religious values. In Africa and Asia, we often experience bitter conflicts between Christianity and other religions or new movements. Almost everywhere, an aggressive secularism dominates much of public entertainment and public discourse, often with a haughty and dismissive attitude toward the Church and the Gospel. The tension between secular and religious visions led during the twentieth century to many martyrs, who suffered for justice and peace in the spirit of Christ. A number of Marianists were among them.

In some places, it is easy to feel powerless before the juggernaut of a culture that seems indifferent and unmoved by the faith to which we have committed our lives. A culture of indifference and suspicion is especially alluring to youth. It enters ever more deeply into the minds and hearts of those around us through the overwhelming power of the media and the worldwide, globalized means of communication available to people at the flick of a wrist. We may feel like its helpless victims.

At the same time, we know that we ourselves are part of today's culture, that it is deeply embedded in our own impulses and spontaneous reactions. Can we carry out a meaningful mission that makes any difference in such a world? Is our role no more than helping people settle into a comfortable collusion with secular culture? We may come to doubt our mission, lose our vision and spirit, despair of strategies for forming in faith.

Chaminade: Missionary Apostolic with a Sharp Focus

We find a key to the stance we need in the example of Blessed Father Chaminade. Like us, he lived amid a troubling and powerful culture. He could have taken refuge, as many of his contemporaries did, in ineffectual lamentation about the evils of his time, or abandoned the effort to make a difference, or settled into the pursuit of a career in the Church that was being re-established after the Revolution.

Instead, like Jesus Himself, he loved the world and the people of his time and he felt a passionate sense of mission toward it. He was not content with merely analyzing the situation. He saw his apostolate as much more than an ecclesiastical career. He was first and foremost a Missionary Apostolic. With unremitting energy he reached out to his contemporaries, and he was sure that the struggle to make a difference was worth the effort. He had a deep faith in his mission as a gift of God.

As the Chapter noted (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 23ff.), he adopted a dynamic vision, spirit, mission and strategy for his time. He urged others to join hands in this project, and he was ingenious in developing and focusing their best talents and energies. He was no victim of the culture of his day - rather an active agent committed to its transformation in the spirit of the Gospel.

Our Founder was open to a multiplicity of means in the mission, but his work had a sharp focus, a clarity of purpose that confounded contemporaries absorbed in institutional concerns and transitory preoccupations.

In the generations since his time, we Marianists have sometimes lost that sharpness of focus. We may have emphasized the means more than the ends. We have frequently misused his breadth of vision as a specious excuse for frittering energies away in centrifugal, individualistic projects and matters that have little to do with the formation of persons and communities in faith.

Only by a return to the passionate and focused intensity of purpose that characterized our Founder, for the sake of a world we truly love, will we attain the renewal and revitalization, the creative fidelity for which we long.

New Frontiers in Marianist Education

The Chapter was encouraged by some interesting new developments in our key work of Christian education (*Sent by the Spirit*, par. 33 and passim).

On the one hand, the number of Marianists working as classroom teachers in our long-standing schools has diminished a great deal. We have been obliged to withdraw from a good number of these institutions, sometimes because we lack the manpower, sometimes because of changes in legislation, birth-rates and soaring costs.

Yet we note an exceptionally positive response to our Marianist educational heritage. The work of education in schools provides an excellent platform to reach out “to those who are far from the Church and lack the ordinary means to know Christ” (as Pope John Paul II characterized the work of Father Chaminade).

It has become ever clearer that Christian education is a work of partnership between religious and laity, a work in which the apostolate of the laity can flourish. We share in the educational task with a generation of Catholic laypeople, many of whom are impressively aware of the educational ideals developed by Fr. Chaminade, Fr. Lalanne, and the generations of Marianist educators that have succeeded them, and creatively committed to living them out.

The project on the “Characteristics of Marianist Education” has awakened widespread interest. Most Units of the Society have some significant programs to educate administration, faculty and staff in these characteristics. Many principals, teachers and staff members in educational institutions have demonstrated their understanding and commitment to these ideals.

We need to foster the slowly growing consciousness that all Marianist educators, religious and lay, belong to a worldwide educational network, and that there exist many possibilities for collaboration and exchange.

Many of the other key objectives of the Chapter can be well integrated into our educational work, by religious and lay educators working together. Some examples:

- the concern for understanding and dialogue among cultures,
- the need to stand with parents in the task of nurturing the lives of their children,
- the desire to inculcate greater respect for all of creation, for good stewardship of our environment,
- the need for justice and solidarity with the poor,
- an attitude of reconciliation and peacemaking, overcoming the violence in our world.

In these “growing edges” of mission, we religious have a major role to play, but we must do it above all by working with our lay colleagues.

A particularly noteworthy development in Marianist education during the past few years has been the rapid development of centers of non-formal education - alternative educational schools, programs for job-training, for street-children, for development of youth at risk, and the like. The common denominator of such programs is that they are aimed at delivering value-driven education to those who normally cannot have access to schools of the traditional type. Our educational heritage combines with today’s option for the poor in inspiring such efforts. Often these programs struggle to find necessary finances, and the commitment of religious with a vow of poverty can make a significant contribution to their success.

In the statistics prepared for the General Chapter of 1996, Marianist religious were working in only six such non-formal centers around the world. Today, we are present in 28 of them, many of them directly under our sponsorship. They can be found in the United States and in Europe, as well as in the poorer countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In the time of Father Chaminade, getting basic education to the masses, particularly in the countryside, was a truly missionary project. Many were still illiterate. Others had no choice but a school led by militant anti-clericals. Today, at least in developed countries, practically everyone has some access to basic education. Perhaps many Marianist religious may recapture the sense of education as an urgent missionary work through their commitment to non-formal programs.

The Chapter asked us all to reflect more on this phenomenon, to develop a set of Marianist guidelines for non-formal education, and to continue increasing our commitment.

Youth Ministry

Young people were the principal beneficiaries of our Founder's efforts. Throughout our history, they have been our primary focus. Yet in recent years, this focus has been somewhat muted. In many places, Marianists as a group have aged, and contact with youth is not as easy as before. Semi-autonomous "youth cultures" have developed, and they sometimes seem alien to us, opposed to values for which we stand. Besides, we have often opted more for administrative work or adult pastoral programs. These need not limit our contact with youth but sometimes do so.

Without denying the value of other kinds of work, the Chapter asks us to refocus directly on youth. It tells us "to cultivate a youthful spirit within ourselves," and to regard the authentic values of youth today in a positive light.

Just as we are urged to inculturate ourselves positively in new parts of the globe, appreciating ways of thinking, acting and celebrating different from our own, so we are also called to reach out positively to today's youth cultures, welcome their many authentic values, use their methods in communicating the Gospel. Only if we do this will we be credible when we want to correct errors incompatible with the Gospel.

Schools and educational centers are a prime place for dynamic youth ministry. Some of our Units already have extraordinarily good programs for youth ministry in their schools.

Parishes and spiritual centers also offer rich opportunities for youth ministry. We need to work more at using these opportunities to the full.

Marianist Lay Communities are normally aimed at adults, people ready to make a serious life-commitment, but the Chapter urges us to be ingenious in developing youth groups, inspired by Marianist spirituality, that will permit us to share the riches of our charism with the young.

Vocation ministry goes hand in hand with excellent youth ministry. All ministry has an important vocational dimension; this is doubly true of the ministry to young people, which necessarily focuses on fundamental life choices, including that of sharing a commitment to our Marianist charism. I have written about this topic extensively in an earlier letter. The Chapter re-enforced a number of important recommendations about our vocation ministry. We must work as a Marianist Family at this crucial topic.

In the near future, meetings in each Zone or continent of the Society will be convoked to focus on our ministry to youth and also on good vocation ministry. These concerns must pervade our work as a Society, not be left to a few specialists.

Some Organizational Questions with Far-Reaching Implications

When there is new life, new structures naturally follow. Structural and organizational matters do not of themselves bring vitality and renewal. But when we are well along in a renewal process, new organizational questions need to be addressed.

The past few years have seen the creation of a World Council of the Marianist Family and the establishment of about fifteen national and Zonal Family Councils, grouping together representatives of the Society of Mary, the Marianist Sisters, Marianist Lay Communities, and the Marian Alliance. The beatification of our common Founder was the occasion for an intense and fruitful collaboration led by the World Council, and we seemed to be successful in presenting to the wider Church the image of a vibrant and multicultural spiritual family. The Chapter insisted that we continue to make collaboration among all branches of the Marianist Family a point of emphasis in all plans and decisions, and urged us to continue developing the work of the Family Councils. The development of all the branches of the Marianist Family is undoubtedly the most important “restructuring” in the Marianist life of our time.

In all branches of the Family, initial and ongoing formation are keys to strong Marianist life. We have a responsibility to be creative in sharing the riches of our charism. The Chapter asked us to make explicit a clear Chaminadean methodology for formation in faith, an approach to spiritual growth that can be readily shared with people in search of spirituality. It also called for a concerted effort to prepare new “experts” in Marianist research and study. Finally, it asked for the establishment of an international center for ongoing formation. From such a center, we hope to offer programs and courses involving face-to-face meeting among Marianists, religious and lay, and also to use new technology that can link people together without extensive travel. We hope you will be hearing many more concrete details about formation, as these projects get underway.

During recent years, we have merged some Units of the Society, changed a number of them from Provinces to Regions, and created new Units, with the aim of inculturating the charism, building strong mutual support, simplifying structures and collaborating in mission. At the same time, within nearly every Unit, there have been significant programs for reconfiguring communities and refocusing our works. The Chapter urged this process of internal restructuring to continue, and to be carefully evaluated at each step of the way.

A particular development of recent years has been the increasing importance of collaboration among Marianist Unit Leaders on the continental levels. Four “Zonal Conferences” (CLAMAR for Latin America, the Marianist Conference for North America, CEM for Europe, the Asia-Africa Conference) are playing a significant role, setting directions for formation, for spiritual renewal, for educational and pastoral apostolates, and for sharing of personnel and financial resources. These Conferences allow us to collaborate, while remaining sensitive to the cultural differences present in each large geographical area, and without centralizing everything in Rome. The Rule of Life does not mention such Conferences, and we need to become clearer about their role. There is general agreement that

they offer important advantages to Marianist life today, in a time when we must aim for mutual understanding and collaboration, for a “globalization of solidarity” among us.

The Chapter called for a Governance Commission to study the implications of new Marianist structures for our Rule of Life. Our governance structures were designed for a Society of Mary that was much more numerous and concentrated in fewer countries and cultures; today, these structures need to be adapted to reflect new realities. This Commission is asked to reformulate Chapter 7 of Books I and II, in view of such developments as the increase in the number of Regions and the growing role of Zonal Conferences. Four Chapter members - Javier Anso, Manuel Cortés, Raymond Fitz, and Leo Pauels - have already agreed to serve on this Commission. You will be hearing more about it in the months ahead, and you will be consulted as its work develops.

In addition, the Chapter encouraged Units and Zonal Conferences to work with the General Administration toward making some foundations in countries where we are not yet present. We want our charism to be shared more universally, and we want the Society to be present in places where the Church is most vital today. Making new foundations is a difficult challenge in a time of smaller numbers. Many of our Units are aging, while others are full of young religious who still need to deepen their spiritual and cultural roots. Still, the Chapter felt that in a number of cases foundations in new countries would be possible and desirable. Appendix II of the Chapter document details the Chapter’s thinking on this point. We already have plans involving Cuba, Albania, and one or the other country in Asia. Please pray that all involved may see clearly and move wisely and courageously in this vital matter.

These organizational matters are means, not ends. But each of them may have significant and beneficial results in shaping Marianist life and work for the future.

Conclusion

After the Chapter, we members of the newly elected General Administration feel that we have our work cut out for us during the coming five years. But the fulfillment of the Chapter’s aims will be possible only if all Marianists work together.

Let us pray that we will all believe, deeply, that “the Lord is doing something new” among us. Let us ask Mary, in whose mission we share, to give us the energy, hope, and wisdom to move ahead in creative fidelity to the charism shared with us by our Blessed Founder.

Fraternally,

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