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SOCIETA DI MARIA - MARIANISTI

CIRCULAR NO. 9

WITNESSING
TO THE HOPE
THAT IS IN US

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Feast of the Holy Name of Mary

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Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that is in you. (I Peter 3:15)

Dear Brothers,

During the year since the past General Chapter, with the other members of the General Council, I have begun a new series of visits to the differing Units of the Society. This year has seen us present in all the continents where Marianists live and work, in Provinces and Regions as diverse as Saragossa and Korea, Ivory Coast, five Units in South America, and the new Province in the United States.

We have shared with many Marianists their horror at traumatic events like those of September 11 in the United States, their sadness in the face of war in Afghanistan and violence in the Middle East, Colombia and elsewhere, their consternation at the growth of fundamentalism and racism, and their shock and sadness at ecclesiastical scandals.

Everywhere we see Marianists dealing with the theological virtue of hope, regarding the world of their experience with varied mixtures of optimism and discouragement.

Like all human beings, we naturally look to the future. This scanning of probable or possible futures can be a response to grace, prompting us to creative fidelity, helping us recognize the “new things” that the Lord is doing among us (as the General Chapter reminded us) and strengthening our faith in the fullness of eternal life.

But projecting the future can mean infidelity and obstacles to growth if it lulls us into false confidence, excessive satisfaction in our human achievements, or if it immobilizes us into fear or discouragement.

Whatever our concrete situation, we are always called to recognize that God is at work in our experience, inviting us to place all our trust in Him.

In this circular I would like to reflect on the hope that is in us today. I will begin by sharing some impressions of the morale or mood that we find in the different parts of the Society, then suggest some spiritual attitudes that seem particularly important at this time, and finally propose a possible future that might help us all move forward in hope, on the global level.

Varying Moods across the Marianist World

Even though we live in a “global village” and are aware of one another more than ever before, the basic mood among Marianist religious differs drastically according to cultural contexts.

In several countries, Marianist *life is just beginning*, coming to birth. It has all the

uncertainty and adventure of beginnings, full of hope but without much sense for the kind of future that lies ahead. This is the case in our new foundations in Eastern Europe; in outreaches to Guatemala and Bangladesh; in efforts still in the planning stage, like Cuba, China and the Philippines; and in two slow-starting foundations, Brazil and Mexico, which now seem to have moved into periods of growth. Between 40-50 Marianists live in these nascent situations around the world.

Elsewhere, in relatively recent foundations, Marianist religious life is in a *period of expansion and creativity*, characterized by good numbers of young local religious who are growing in experience and by declining numbers of the founding foreign missionaries. Members of these recent foundations often feel a certain fragility, but they are heartened by a healthy vocational picture and by opportunities for embracing new ministries. Sometimes they feel that circumstances are forcing them to move rapidly into action, without all the preparation they would desire. In this group we can number about 250 religious in such Units as Colombia-Ecuador, India, Korea, Eastern Africa, Togo, and Congo-Ivory Coast.

One or the other Units of the Society are living a *robust moment of adulthood*, characterized by seasoned, active religious maintaining a vigorous mission. However, the largest number of religious - more than a thousand - live in Units characterized by *numerical decline and aging membership*. There are many new initiatives and zones of energy within these Units, and they continue to offer much appreciated apostolic service to many people. But a good number of the members experience a gnawing insecurity about the future.

Reactions to decline and aging tend to follow a certain pattern of successive steps. The American psychologist, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, has devoted her life-work to research on this topic, and has identified five stages:

1. *Denial*: At first, people tend to ignore the difficulties, go on acting as if nothing were changing. This may have characterized some of us in the past, but today hardly any Marianist living in such a situation fails to feel and acknowledge the existence of a crisis.

2. *Anger*: A second step is to assign blame, angrily alleging that the fault lies in some person or institution. We might blame the Second Vatican Council, inconsistent ecclesial leadership, faulty formation programs, negligent superiors, etc. Happily, I do not believe that any Unit of the Society is now characterized as a whole by such an atmosphere of recrimination and polarization.

3. *Bargaining*: A third, much more positive, step is to take some decisive measures to alleviate the problem. Many Provinces and Regions seek to “bargain” with their vocation crisis, to maintain cherished ministries by restructuring programs and efforts at renewal, by collaboration with laity and programs for inculcating the Marianist charism in colleagues. These efforts are important and necessary, and they seem to be enjoying much success. The flourishing of many educational institutions with a Marianist identity and style, despite very small numbers of religious, is one example. The creation of new ministries among the poor is another. The extensive growth of Marianist Lay Communities and the development of a strong sense of sharing with others in the charism of Blessed Father Chaminade through the Marianist Family is another striking instance of efforts to respond creatively to the situation.

4. Still, quite a few live with some level of *depression*. Despite our best efforts, in many cases we do not manage to overcome the vocation crisis, experience rejuvenation and

numerical growth. We may settle into cynicism and fatigue, cling to our small securities, lose contact with the young, distrust anything that is new (cf. *Sent by the Spirit*, 18h-i). Recent Church scandals about sexual abuse have sharpened a sense of discouragement among many: how is it possible that a few clergy and religious have brought our commitment into such disrepute? Can we regain credibility? We may be haunted by fears about our future. We wonder what God has in store for us, and we are tempted to pessimism.

5. Despite all this, many religious who live in objectives situations of aging and numerical decline have moved on to a positive level of *acceptance and hope*. They live creatively and faithfully in the present moment, with a good level of satisfaction and energy. Even at an age when they might reasonably think of retirement, many of our members embrace new strategies and find inspiration in programs of spiritual renewal, restructuring, and shared mission. They trust in God and bear witness to a strong hope.

I invite each of you to meditate on your personal situation and on that of your Marianist Unit. Among these various moods and degrees of hope, where do you find yourself and your Unit? Where do you think God is calling you and your Unit? It would be good for communities and Units to reflect together on the same theme.

Elements of a Spirituality for Marianist Religious Today

Whatever the situation in which you live, whatever your feelings about this situation, I would like to recommend four attitudes that seem crucial to all of us, individually and collectively, in fostering a hopeful spirituality for the present moment.

1. First of all, it is important to *live in the present*. We Marianist religious are not always good at living with the grace of the present moment.

Those in situations of growth are tempted either to push too fast, to skip necessary steps of growth, or alternatively to hold back developments in fear of possible pitfalls.

Those in situations of decline may hanker fruitlessly for the past, seeking to recreate, artificially, the youthful *esprit de corps* they felt in the large and uniform communities of forty years ago, to reestablish the styles and practices of that time.

Others, in any situation, may let themselves be consumed with worry about the future, wring their hands over today's culture, but without any concrete projects for correcting its deficiencies and building on its strengths.

When we succumb to any of the temptations just mentioned, we end up in frustration and, often, immobility. These temptations lead to a depressive flight from the realities and potentials that God has placed in our hands today.

The fact is, the Lord has given each of us the graces and challenges of this time and no other. In His loving Providence, God has placed us here and now, given us a certain co-responsibility with Him for our particular time. Even if we hark after the undeniable beauties of the past or long for some clear new pattern in the future, these gifts are not given to us. Whatever our past may have been, whether we have our vision about the future right or not, we are called now to respond to the grace of the present moment.

Blessed Father Chaminade was no longer young when he returned to France in 1800, and he did creative and enduring work consistently until a very advanced age. He saw his foundations grow rapidly and prosper, but he knew how to combine boldness and prudence in his leadership. He longed to revive what he thought to have been the vibrant faith of a past era, but despite his age, he did not seek to turn back the clock. He held a rather dark view of his time and its probable future results, but he is for us an example of a man who knew how to build faithfully and creatively on the graces and opportunities of his moment. To the many who consulted him as a spiritual director, he radiated a spirit of faith in Providence and a beautiful serenity. He did not allow himself to be immobilized by any view of history. He set himself creatively to work in order to respond to the grace, “and all the grace,” the opportunities and challenges of each moment.

Marianists through the years have carried on his work. We never start from zero. We inherit and continue the efforts of those who have gone before us and shown us a model of commitment and fidelity. With their legacy and with the graces that the Lord gives us today, we try to respond, with discernment and creativity, to the new missionary needs of the present time. Marianists who come after us will benefit in turn from our experience and commitment as they face the needs of the future.

But our challenge is simply to be fully present here and now. Being fully present to our times means meeting them with passion and hope, with energy and a missionary outlook. The present time and place is what God has assigned to our labors, and we should love it, admire its gifts and strengths, struggle against its defects and weaknesses.

Those who live in the present enjoy serenity and confidence. They neither minimize nor exaggerate their role or their ability to influence the march of history or the life of the Marianist Family and the Church. They know that God does not demand of them success, but creative fidelity. They accept the world about them as it really is, with its potentials and limits, its splendors and its miseries. They admire the goodness of God that overcomes so many defects, and find joy and satisfaction in doing their best. They are eager to face today’s world in creative missionary projects. They are flexible and open to surprising developments. They feel peace when they leave the rest in God’s hands.

2. A *contemplative outlook*, an inclination to ponder and discern, is basic for us today. Contemplation and discernment are always necessary in Christian life, but even more so when we meet much that is unfamiliar and unsettling. Throughout his life, Blessed Father Chaminade, who also lived in an unsettled time of change, slowly and prayerfully looked for what he called “the indications of Providence.”

To cultivate such a contemplative outlook, we need to pay special attention to the “five silences” that are unique to Chaminade’s teaching. In our modern world, we are so bombarded by noise and information, so subjected to constant messages from without, that it is difficult for us to take a calm and profound contemplative attitude that can authentically discern the signs of our times.

Marianist contemplation has an essential community dimension. We are called to walk at the side of others, ponder, pray, and discern with them as we seek to be faithful to the vocation and mission that we share. Our pondering and discerning should be done in communion with the rest of the Marianist Family and with the entire People of God.

If we succeed in attaining interior silence and a contemplative outlook, we will begin to recognize how, time and again, God surprises us, as individuals and as communities. He often confounds our calculations, projections, expectations, dreams and plans. Often He raises up new life where we least expect it. At other times He shows us that our attempts to plan and control are pointless. We all too easily run the risk of letting our limited views set the standard for our evaluations and actions, trusting in ourselves more than in Providence. As people of prayer, called to “see how God is at work in human history and in the events of our daily lives (*Rule of Life*, arts. 4),” we need to pray over what is happening to us, dialogue with the prayerful insights of others, submit our reactions and moods to the light that comes from God’s revelation, let Him heal whatever is rebellious or resentful in our hearts.

3. As we grow and evolve in a rapidly changing world, we need also to *collaborate in mission with others*, to be bridge-builders with those from other walks of life, other cultures and experiences. We need to believe that we can learn from everyone.

Gone are the days of the rugged individual apostle, working in his unique, unchallenged, idiosyncratic way, without consulting or working in close association with others. This style, though common, was never the Marianist ideal. Sharing and networking with others is a key theme of our time. Despite our pervasive individualism, precisely in order to counter it, more than ever before, we have the possibility and the necessity to enter into partnerships for the sake of mission.

The disposition to collaborate requires a spirituality, even an asceticism. It involves availability for the common good, patient listening, the capacity for dialogue, a sense of humility, a certain detachment from our own ideas and preferences, a readiness to learn, the freedom often to let others do things their way. The virtues of preparation, purification and consummation taught by Blessed Father Chaminade soften our hearts so that we are ready to work with others rather than dominate them.

4. As the General Chapter told us, we need to internalize the *attitudes of Mary*. These attitudes certainly include the three points just mentioned.

In my last Circular, I tried to sketch some traits of the “Marian model of Church” which I believe to be part of our characteristic contribution as a Marianist Family. Many of you have sent me creative reflections and developments of this theme. I return to it now because of the interest it has awakened, and because I believe that it is especially timely.

What are the attitudes of Mary? Drawing on suggestions I have received from Marianists around the world, I offer here a short list of some attitudes that seem relevant to us today:

- a capacity for dialogue and active listening, so characteristic of the quiet Virgin who heard God’s surprising word, willingly surrendered herself to his mysterious plans, and let them be realized in her even without knowing all the details (the Annunciation: Luke 1, 26-38).
- prayerful pondering in one’s heart (see Luke 2, 19 and 2,52).
- respecting the unique gifts of each person, accepting his or her particular rhythm of growth, responding to the needs of each moment (Jesus’ years of growth and human maturation: Luke 2, 40-52; Cana: John 2, 1-12; the early Church: Acts 1,14). Today we might say that Mary was a formator, an educator, who knew how to adapt to the

real needs and the evolving stages in the life of her Son, his disciples, and the community He founded.

- collaborating with others, responding to their needs (the Visitation: Luke 1, 39-56; Cana: John 2, 1-12), sharing their mission (Pentecost: Acts 1, 14).
- maintaining a trusting, hopeful attitude, not being conquered by difficult circumstances (solitude and misunderstanding in her pregnancy: Luke 1:38; poverty and anxiety at the birth of Jesus: Luke 2:1-7; suffering in the mission: Luke 2, 35; accepting misunderstandings and a secondary role, when Jesus was lost in the Temple and again when he began his public life: Luke 2, 48 and Mark 3:31-35; “standing” at the foot of the Cross: John 19, 25-27)
- remaining in solidarity with the poor and the forsaken, knowing how to be with others and to offer a loving presence even in times of great suffering (the Magnificat: Luke 1, 46-55; the Pietà: John 19, 25-27).

As I understand it, a Church and a Marianist Family that lives the gospel in Mary’s style will be a dynamic community of love, service, freedom, hope and compassion.

It will know how to be present to others in their joy and hope, their grief and anguish; it will be a people of the Magnificat (cf. *Sent by the Spirit*, 26), a servant Church with a missionary dynamism.

Like a good parent or educator, it will foster new life, rejoice in the slow and laborious process of human growth, be content “to sow and not to reap,” “not reject as bad what is not altogether good” (*Constitutions* of 1839, arts. 261-262).

It will encourage creativity, recognizing that it always has more to learn, looking with trust to the future and the Lord’s paschal promise of new life.

It will be a Church and Family that is simple and close to the poor, seeking to serve them.

When it exercises the authority given it by the Lord, it will seek to serve rather than to dominate, fostering communion among people, seeking unity but not uniformity, and avoiding personality cults.

It will not pretend to have all the answers, but will join with others in the search for what is true and right. It will know how to trust in God, not think that it must bear in isolation all the problems that surround it. Thus it will avoid laying impossible burdens on itself or on others.

It will welcome valid human differences and the variety of people’s complementary gifts.

It will recognize the equal dignity of all in the eyes of God, inviting all to share in the brotherhood and sisterhood of the followers of Jesus.

It will be a Church and Family that prays and hopes, is open to the Spirit and faithful

to the Spirit's inspirations.

It will live the spirit of communion in love, unity, and sharing, as the Lord willed.

Understood in this way, the figure of Mary, to whose mission we have consecrated our lives, clearly motivates us to a stance in our corporate and ecclesial life that can regenerate our Church and world today.

A Possible Future

I would like to go a bit further in the effort to give a “reason for the hope that we have.” After reflecting on the varied moods that characterize us today and on the spirituality we need for this time, I venture to sketch what seems to me to be a likely future for us, a new form of Marianist life that is evolving, more rapidly in some places, slowly in others. I believe this new form of Marianist life has the potential to energize our hope and sustain our missionary dynamism long into the future.

I believe that the Marianist charism can and will flourish, focusing the efforts of many Christians and offering a missionary spirituality to undergird ministry in many contexts, old and new, in our traditional strongholds like Western Europe, the United States and Japan, and in many more recent foundations as well. Naturally, it will take on many local variations in accord with the culture and spirit of each group of people.

This hopeful Marianist future is inextricably tied to the development of Blessed Father Chaminade's most original innovation, the Marianist Family. As we saw at the moment of his beatification, his idea of a multi-faceted spiritual Family is highly attractive in the Church of our new millennium.

We can flourish in the future precisely as a Family, in many different cultural and ecclesial contexts around the world, integrating people from all walks and states of life, varied backgrounds and cultures and educations, into a common commitment to be missionaries of Mary.

I do not know how many religious brothers, sisters, and priests we will have in the future. I suspect their numbers may continue to depend largely on social and ecclesial circumstances in each cultural area. Their presence will always be essential, but the continuation and the vitality of the Chaminadean charism will not depend on them alone.

For a long time it has been clear that Marianist spirituality offers a solid support and stimulus to lay Christians. Now this spirituality is also prompting increasing numbers of lay people to make bold decisions and sacrifices for the sake of mission. . Marianist Lay Communities are more than groups of devout Christians whom we religious gather to share the spirituality that motivates us. This spirituality remains fundamental and indispensable, but it also leads to mission. The missionary dynamism of the Family is no longer borne exclusively by the religious, but is actively shared by all the branches.

Already we are beginning to see the results of the dynamic missionary potential of the Marianist Family. Lay Marianist missionaries are involved in many domains of education and social service which are appropriate to them as lay people.

Hundreds of lay Marianists are active in catechesis at all levels and in Christian education - specialties once practically limited to Marianist religious. Often today lay Marianists take leadership roles in these ministries and show genuine depth of insight and commitment to incarnating our charism, maintaining Marianist style and presence, and extending it to new areas.

A good number of lay Marianists are committed to selfless ministries with the poor, in rural programs that combine evangelization and development, or in social service to marginalized people in the cities.

Others are involved in pastoral roles open to lay people, leading groups of prayer and spirituality, coordinating ministries to youth and to the aged, developing shrines and centers for prayer and study.

In most cases, these lay Marianists work in mission side by side with religious. Sometimes they take up new missions entirely on their own, relying on the religious for support and advice. Thus they are able to break new ground in the Marianist mission. The ministry of lay Marianists is maintaining many traditional Marianist works and creating new ones across the world - even in new countries, like Haiti, Guatemala, and the Czech Republic.

We members of the General Administration have seen some wonderful examples of such lay Marianist ministry during our visits this year: a home for the aged organized, financed, and directed by the Marianist laity in Korea, a missionary center in the mountains of Peru, a job-training program in a seacoast town in Chile, programs for family retreats and youth ministry in the United States, the animation of a shrine during the vacation season in France, work with impoverished urban apprentices in Ivory Coast and street children in India, Brazil, Peru and Argentina, a center for missionary support and volunteer service in Spain. The examples could be multiplied.

If this is how Marianist spirituality and mission are to develop into the future, we may at some point need to consider new canonical structures. Such new structures are already evolving in other spiritual families in the Church, in which often laity, religious and clergy join together in permanent associations with a characteristic spirituality and a common mission. The nature of these structures is not yet clear.

Some are simply associations of lay people who work under the direction of a religious institute. Others are loose confederations or associations, closely networked and growing in interdependence, like our Marianist Family. Others have closer bonds, going as far to constitute a “personal prelacy,” a quasi-diocese with far-reaching canonical rights and duties. We may feel that some of the new spiritual families are characterized by a certain rigidity and reactionary style, but this feeling should not keep us from seeing that their structure and their commitment to close interaction of varied states of life may point a way forward in ecclesial life.

Blessed Father Chaminade is our example in creativity in fostering new styles of Christian life and mission and in finding appropriate Church structures to support them.

Already the four classic branches of our Family - the religious men, the religious women, the secular institute, and the lay communities - have official ecclesiastical status. Their representatives gather for reflection and planning on a worldwide basis and in national councils that exist in more than a dozen countries. Perhaps in the future we may need to

consider the possibility of a stronger collective leadership that is able to focus groups from varied branches of the Family to deepen our common spirituality, to work together, to support us in our growth and to send us on mission precisely as a Family.

Naturally, this must happen in full respect for the autonomy of each branch, according to the principle of “union without confusion.” And naturally, we would want the corporate action of the Marianist Family to be characterized by the Marian style described above, with an emphasis on listening, dialogue and pondering, respect for each one’s rhythm of growth, and solidarity with the poor and defenseless.

The Role of Religious

Whatever future structures we may develop as a Family, and whatever the relative proportion of religious and lay Marianists, the role of religious will remain essential within the larger Family. This role is illustrated by the very history of our origins, in which an active group of lay people slowly gave birth in its core to two religious communities.

Today we are passing from a time in which only religious were considered to be full Marianists to one in which the religious are a minority. But they remain an essential factor for the animation and vitality of the Family: collectively they constitute “the person who never dies,” to sustain and animate the ongoing vitality of the whole Family.

Here are a few of the roles within the spiritual life and mission of our Family in which it seems to me that we as religious might have a special gift:

- *Being able to move, maintaining availability for mission:* “Do whatever He tells you” is a motto for all members of our Marianist Family. Because of our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, we religious should be especially available to go wherever there is a need. Availability for mission should be one of our hallmarks. Lay Marianists, like all lay people, remain characteristically tied by bonds of family and profession, by economic and social realities, to particular places and particular roles of service. This greater rootedness in place and society is their characteristic strength and gift at the service of mission. (Some of them nevertheless give us a rich example of willingness to uproot and open up to new horizons in mission. I think, for example, of lay Marianists who have moved to new areas, permanently or for limited periods as volunteers, often among poorer people, for the sake of our mission.)
- *Innovating, trying new initiatives in ministry:* Creativity demands a certain freedom. Our vows, our freedom from family ties, and our corporate sharing of resources make it possible for us religious to be present at the frontiers, to develop new forms of service, to contact new groups of people.
- *Devoting time and energy to in-depth study and theological reflection on the charism:* Few lay-people have the time, formation, and economic support to become specialists in researching, studying and teaching the spirituality and doctrine that is special to us. I can think of a few exceptions, lay people who are true specialists in our charism. Yet it remains true that we religious are normally freer to devote our lives to these pursuits, which are essential to the depth and well-being of the entire Family.
- *Developing a life of prayer and contemplation:* Lay life often limits access to the time

and environment that fosters a deep life of prayer and contemplation. Many of us joined religious life precisely in search of good conditions for deepening spiritual life. As true contemplatives and intercessors, in the style of Mary, we can become a source of strength for the entire Family, sharing with the other members our particular experience of prayer and contemplation, just as they share theirs with us.

- *Loving with an undivided heart:* The vow of chastity, sincerely lived, predisposes us to invest our energies freely, to reach out to many groups of people without clinging to them, to be free to let many enter into an unusual level of spiritual intimacy with us.
- *Accompanying and serving as resource persons for lay communities:* The life-long commitment of religious and their focus on the charism that shapes even the details of their daily existence makes them particularly suited to the role of advisors and spiritual guides for lay Christian communities. As Marianist Lay Communities multiply, we also see that many experienced lay Marianists can also serve in this important role. But I believe that this role will always remain a characteristic strength of the religious.
- *Preaching and spiritual direction:* these roles, which pertain typically but not exclusively to priests, require a level of study and training that lay people cannot easily attain.

This view of the role of religious in our future Marianist Family bears far-reaching implications for our initial and ongoing formation and for the development of our ministries as religious. We will need to develop ever more clearly that which is specific to us. We will not want to exclude a variety of professional roles for religious, since a key dimension of our vocation is the integration of faith with a wide-ranging and varied culture. But we will need to become, more than ever before, witnesses and “experts” (in the root sense: people with seasoned experience) in community life and in prayer, and creative innovators in mission.

We are surely not supermen, and we have again and again to recognize our inadequacies and limits. There is probably nothing which we alone can do, in which we may not sometimes feel surpassed by the dedication of lay Marianists. Lay people have a great deal to teach us, in every domain. But the focus of our efforts as religious and the weight of our characteristic contribution seems clear.

This viewpoint also underlines the importance of the ministry for promoting vocations in all countries and cultures. Every Christian has a vocation to respond with the gift of his or her life to the goodness of God. Membership in the Marianist Family is a response to a vocation, not simply the choice of a certain lifestyle. Lay and religious Marianists must work together to promote a generous response to God’s call among young people today. As regards the response of religious life, whether we live in situations where such vocations are plentiful or where they are rare, the role of religious remains critical for our well-being as Family. In particular, it is important for members of Marianist Lay Communities to take an active role with us in promoting religious vocations.

Conclusion

Scripture urges us to “give a reason for the hope that is in us.” Experiencing a great variety of historical circumstances in today’s world, we Marianist religious are called to bear witness to our hope by a deep spiritual life and by a creative missionary dynamism, expressing in our lives something of the Father’s love for the women and men of our work and working for the service of the Kingdom. We are beginning to experience the fruitfulness of a close sharing of spiritual goods and missionary thrusts with people from all walks of life, and this experience strengthens us in hope.

I would like to conclude with a blessing for Marianists in our time:

May the Lord, who has called us to live at this privileged moment of history,
show us the next steps to take!

May Mary, the Mother and Disciple whose mission we share, form us in the
likeness of her Son!

May Blessed Father Chaminade, whose charism has been especially confided to us, walk
with us in the path of creative fidelity!

Fraternally,

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