



Circular
of the
Superior General

#6

TO KNOW, LOVE AND SERVE
OUR FOUNDER'S
INSPIRATION

Manuel José Cortés, SM
XIV Superior General
Society of Mary
(Marianists)

October 2, 2016
Anniversary of the Foundation of
the Society of Mary

PRESENTATION

Dear Brothers,

The *Circular* of the Superior General, which you have before you, is not a simple exhortation, but rather, a document for careful study and action, specifically geared toward ongoing formation in the Society. Its purpose is to provide fundamental points of reference for rethinking Marianist religious life at the present moment, two hundred years after its foundation, and open it up toward a more secure future.

As you can see from the Table of Contents, it discusses various aspects that should be kept in mind during this reflection. Each of these can be treated separately, although it is always important not to lose sight of the overall message. The *Circular* always treats these aspects in depth. It does not give prescriptions, only considerations which should provoke reflection and may inspire concrete personal or communitarian initiatives. The purpose is to help these reflections and initiatives develop from strong roots that justify and sustain them, upon which are built, not superficial considerations, but that which is fundamental to, what is the basis of, our life and our mission.

Therefore, it is not a document that can be assimilated by a simple reading. We exhort you, dear brothers and communities, to dedicate time, reflection and dialog to this task. The best way to make the *Circular* fruitful is to create communitarian space for sharing what it provokes in each one of us, whether regarding our personal lives, the life and mission of the community in which we live, or those of the Unit to which we belong.

We hope that, in this way, the *Circular* helps to lay the foundation for the preparation of the next General Chapter.

The General Council

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.- EXPLORING OUR ORIGINS.....	8
1.1 The need to return to our origins in order to successfully undertake the future	8
1.2 Religious life in the life of Fr. Chaminade and in his missionary vision	11
1.3 A religious life, although new in its forms, authentically radical in its nature	14
1.4 An “inclusive” religious life, with different degrees of consecration	20
1.5 An apostolic religious life, at the service of the Marianist missionary plan	24
II.- SCRUTINIZING THE PRESENT	27
2.1 The call of a Church in need of the prophetic witness of authentic religious life	28
2.2 The call of the laity in a shared mission	38
III.- OPENING UP THE FUTURE	47
3.1 Some temptations to overcome	47
3.2 The necessary “re-foundation” of our personal religious life	49
3.3 “New wine in new wineskins”: the necessary re-foundation of our structures	56

TO KNOW, LOVE AND SERVE OUR FOUNDER'S INSPIRATION

Dear Brothers:

The *Circular* you have before you is an old project that I had in mind when, in 2010, I wrote *Circular #4: To Know, Love and "Follow" the Founder*. I invite you, therefore, at the outset, to re-read that *Circular* beforehand, because this new one presupposes a familiarity with that one, and is intended as a continuation of it. Thus, from the beginning, I had intended to follow that one with another entitled: *To Know, Love and Serve Our Founder's Inspiration*. In *Circular #4*, I wished to encourage our getting to know Fr. Chaminade, appreciating him and above all, imitating and following him, by showing his vision and role in all Marianist vocations, and especially, in our own personal vocation. This new *Circular* is also dedicated to him, and, in particular, to his role as the Founder of our dear Society of Mary. My wish is that these ponderings might contribute a deeper perception and understanding of the scope of his inspiration as he founded Marianist "religious life," such that this inspiration might then serve as an impulse for our re-founding it today, in this new age, in the new circumstances of the world and Church, in which we live. *Circular #4* was intended as a contribution to the 250th anniversary of the birth of our Founder, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade. This one is being offered in conjunction with the initiatives for reflection and formation on the occasion of the celebration of the **second century of the foundation of religious life within the Marianist Family**, as presented in the convocation and orientations given in the joint *Circular* of the two Superiors General: *Celebrating the Bicentennial of Our Foundations* (March 25, 2015).

One hundred years ago, in the midst of a Europe ravaged by the First World War, the Society celebrated the first centennial of its foundation.¹ Today, at the very start of this *Circular*, I reiterate, and make my own, the words of Fr. Hiss, Superior General at that time, with which he exhorted the religious to take advantage of this event:

"But a centenary does not merely revive souvenirs more or less effaced from memory. It necessarily provokes thought, reflection, and thus becomes a source of enlightenment both for the present and the future. Allow me, therefore, to suggest to you the lessons evoked by this anniversary.

Should not the Jubilee celebration, the program of which we are considering, become instrumental towards our spiritual gain and interior sanctification? In fact, the desire uppermost in my heart is not that you may be able to give the greatest publicity and splendor to the celebration in question, but it is rather that the commemorative solemnity should reanimate in us all, in the first place, gratitude to God and to our predecessors in the works of the Society: then the conviction of our own

¹ Cfr. GASCÓN ARANDA, SM, A., *Historia general de la Compañía de María*, vol. III/I, *De la muerte del P. Simler a la segunda guerra mundial (1905-1939)*, t.1, *Generalatos del P. Hiss y del P. Sorret*, SPM, Madrid 2013, pp. 747-756. Fr. Antonio Gascón, after having offered a synthesis of the celebrations and initiatives that the Society undertook on the occasion of the Centennial celebration, concludes: (Translation from Spanish) "For the first time in their brief history, the Marianist religious went beyond their quiet work in the school in order to make themselves known to the public outside, raising publicity about their Founder, the history of the Institute, their Marian spirituality, their mission in the schools, and the worldwide expansion of the Society of Mary." (p. 756).

unworthiness, as also sorrow for the imperfections that have crept in during the century: and, finally, a growing esteem for our vocation together with a determined will to profit in action by all the graces of which it is the pledge....

... And how will a religious body live, if not according to the thoughts and mind of its Founder, who, incarnate, so to say, in his disciples, becomes the effective mainspring of their action, the inexhaustible source of their enthusiasm and of their generosity?.... the entire future of the Society exists within its bosom. This future is not to be shaped by extraneous influences.... No better school can we follow than that of our Founder. Only thus have we an assurance of remaining true to ourselves. From one period to another the same ideas, the same design will unite our various works, and we shall perpetuate the soul and the physiognomy of our Institute. ”²

I have divided the *Circular* into three parts:

- I) Exploring our origins.
- II) Scrutinizing the present.
- III) Opening up the future.

I – EXPLORING OUR ORIGINS

1.1 The need to return to our origins in order to successfully undertake the future.

Permit me to begin with a brief *excursus* about the threat which some scholars have called “presentism,”³ a typical attitude in modern society regarding history, the contagion of which, we are not exempt. It is characterized by a posture which reduces the experience of history to only what is lived in the present, without reference to the past, nor with an eye towards the future.

We live in an age in which, owing to such great, deep and rapid transformations, touching all aspects of life, we are tempted to think that, given how all is new and so different, the past is of little use to us, nor does it have anything to teach or say to us. On the other hand, we look with little confidence towards plans for the future because the reality of the present has deceived, or at least disappointed us. The signs of progress, of a better world, of justice, of liberty, which encouraged the second half of the Twentieth Century, have vanished before the present reality of a world that is more violent, more insecure, more unjust, and, which is of utmost concern to us as missionaries, ever more indifferent to the Gospel. Mired in these circumstances, the future becomes obscure and uncertain. The experience of history as an ongoing reality, before, during and after our own lives, thus vanishes in our societies (we

² Circular #34 (January 29, 1917), pp. 10-11; 26 (Collection of Circulars J- Hiss, pp. 638-639; 654).

³ Cf. HARTOG, François, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)* Columbia University Press (February 24, 2015).

recall the famous book by Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992), taking with it, in its wake, all discourse about the future. What counts is the present moment, the necessities that it generates and the immediate desires it provokes.

This is happening in our world. It also happens among us, often in a very subtle way, but nonetheless real. We are also immersed in that “presentism” which, without realizing it, is closing the door to our future. With regard to personnel, it is evident in the many requests for dispensations that, unfortunately, we must handle. Based on what one feels “here and now,” there is no regard for the past, so that it may serve as a reference point, motivation, or assistance for perseverance, despite having vowed, freely and with conviction, before God and the Church, on the day of religious profession. Neither are future consequences, for one’s self and others, taken into account. In order to make the decision to abandon religious life, one need only care about the immediate present. It has to do with one fleeing, in the short term, the frustration or disappointment that, in this precise moment, one is experiencing, and not going beyond that. In community life, whether on the provincial, regional or local level, “presentism” is also evident, in the way we govern our lives and our mission, and in the policies that we employ in this regard. Our tendency is first to organize the present moment, and maintain what we can, “here and now,” over and above the introduction of changes that can open up the future. Although in some aspects the present deceives us, and we can criticize it rightly, we feel safe in it – more safe the older we become – and we fear leaving it to go beyond it. As a result, many proposals from Chapters, changes suggested in the visitation reports from the General Council, various suggestions about restructuring of Units and Zones, necessary for confronting the future, have fallen on deaf ears. These are only two examples of the active presence of “presentism” among us. Surely, though, we could find others by only going a little deeper into our lives.

How do we get beyond this *impasse*? The first requirement, of course, is to have the will to do so. It is not clear that we have such a will, but we must presuppose it, because if not, the discussion ends here. The second requirement is that there be a willingness to go beyond, go forward, be well-orientated, in such a way that it does not lead us down a false path. Therefore, as I will try to show below, it is essential to return from the novelty of the present, to revive the original roots that made us who we are, that formed our identity. Only as a result of the recovery of this experience, can we open ourselves up to a fitting future. Recovery of the original inspiration, and a correct orientation towards the future, go hand in hand.

Three years ago, Fr. Paul Valadier, S.J., renowned philosopher, published an article in which he echoes the comments I just shared regarding the “presentism” in which our society is mired, and he reflects on some of the consequences it holds for the future.⁴ The author begins his article with a very striking image:

“While it was not too long ago that children were placed in a stroller facing the person pushing it, today just the reverse seems to be the practice: the child sits facing the open space in front of him and no longer has a face to look at.... According to the more usual practice (up until now), the child rode in a reassuring face-to-face position, setting him in an affective relationship that allowed

⁴ VALADIER, Paul, *A Present Without Substance*, Études (juillet 2013), t. 419, pp. 53-62.

for smiles, frowns, tender or menacing gestures, conversational exchanges; thus the child could be situated in a relationship with another person. According to the new practice, the child faces a void, his eyes see nothing but anonymous passers-by, he is left within his own solitude, open to the world, say those who favor this practice, and no longer a prisoner within the family circle, but in reality, he is delivered over to the unknown, a possible source of anxiety. That “revolution” is actually symbolic of a typical relationship in our era to reality, to the other, to the self, and therefore also to time, which presents itself as an infinity without limits. For although apparently open to the unknown, the child has perhaps no more of a horizon than a present that is formless, and therefore troubling to him. A present without substance.”⁵

Without reference to past experience, embodied in the image of the adult who pushes the stroller, today’s society lives in the illusion of the “self-made man,” that is to say, the person who is only indebted to himself, as if he surged into history by a sort of spontaneous generation. Such is a delusion because, as the author rightly affirms,

“Nothing can be built, individually or collectively, that does not rest upon what is already there, upon a past and its structure-controlling traditions. There is no such thing as a beginning without precedents.... For there are nowhere any absolute ruptures: we are always set within traditions that we have received, indeed biologically and genetically, but also through language and the rules and standards handed down by society.”⁶

To explain the consequences of denying the past, of forgetting those “structural traditions,” Paul Valadier returns to the image with which he inaugurated his article and thus concludes:

*“Handed over to the unknown, the child cannot but panic in the absence of a face-to-face encounter through which he becomes gradually **conscious of himself and constructs himself**. One cannot prepare the future except by relying upon the past **in order to go beyond it**, the present being merely the passageway between the old and the new. No progress, scientific or artistic, can occur without relying upon what has already been acquired, so as to reshape it **in a creative way**.”⁷*

More than forty years ago, and almost a decade before being nominated bishop by Paul VI, the then-priest and professor of Theology, Dr. Joseph Ratzinger, broadcast a series of talks on a radio program in his country. In 1970, a German publisher compiled these under the title *Faith and the Future*.⁸ In the fifth chapter, the professor wonders: “*What will the Church be like in the year 2000?*” And he responds:

*“Precisely in times of violent historical upheavals, in which what has happened so far seems to vanish, and open up something that is completely new, human beings need **to reflect on the history, in order to be able to correctly see in perspective what is exaggeratedly unreal about the present moment, and re-frame that moment, understand the uniqueness of it, but also not losing its unity and its context**. Now you might say: “*Have we heard correctly? Reflect on the history? But this means a glance at the past when, in fact, we were hoping to set our sights on the future.*” Yes, you heard correctly, but I think that the reflection on the history, if properly understood, comprises both*

⁵ id., p. 53s.

⁶ id., p. 59s.

⁷ id., p. 60.

⁸ RATZINGER, J., *Glaube und Zukunft*, Kösel-Verlag, München 1970. (The book was published in English as *Faith and the Future* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, March 30, 2009).

things: a retrospective glance at what came before and, from there, the reflection about the possibilities and tasks of the forthcoming, which can only be clarified if it encompasses a gaze upon a greater stretch of the road and one does not naively enclose oneself in the present day. The retrospective glance does not allow predictions for the future, but it does limit the illusion that what is happening in the present moment is completely new, and shows also that, in the past, something comparable has existed, although it may not be exactly the same. In what is unequal between then and today, the uncertainty of our statements and novelty of our tasks are based; in what is the same, is based the possibility of an orientation and a correction.

More recently, on Sunday, July 31, of this year, 2016, during a meeting with volunteers for World Youth Day in Cracow, Pope Francis said to them:

“... you are the hope of future, and that is true. But with two conditions. Do you want to be the hope for the future or not? [“Yes!”]”

Two conditions that cost nothing. The first condition is to remember. Trying to understand where I come from: the memory of my people, my family, my whole history...

Memory of the path I have taken, memory of everything I have received from those who have gone before me. A young person who cannot remember is no hope for the future. Is that clear? ...

Second condition. If I am hope for the future and I have memory of the past, then what about the present? What must I do in the present? Have courage, be strong, don't be afraid.”

This is the purpose of this first part of the *Circular*: to gaze upon our Founder in order to try to capture what it was that moved him to found us; to return to the original thought of Fr. Chaminade, that which he dreamed when he founded the Society of Mary, how he imagined we would be, why and for what purpose he wanted us to be religious. As we will see, this entire plan, which he carried inside his mind and heart, did not take full form in that moment, but through a series of particular historical and ecclesial circumstances. But, beyond the structures, he tried to instill this plan in our genes, with the hope that the structures would develop as circumstances permitted. I believe that, for our part, it is a filial obligation to know this, not for the purpose of repeating it in a literal way, but in order that it might continue being the inspiration of a future that is in continuity and consonance with this plan.

1.2 Religious life in the life of Fr. Chaminade and in his missionary vision.

We know the history well, and we know that the foundation of religious life deep within Fr. Chaminade's missionary vision came to pass sixteen years after his first foundation, that of the Sodalities, those communities of the faithful from both sexes and all ages and walks of life, with whom, under the patronage of Mary Immaculate, he attempted to sustain its members and form them in the faith. In this way, he intended to spread this faith “by contagion,” in the image of the first Christian community. This “delay” has led some to think, at various times, that, initially, the Founder did not intend to found religious life and that it only happened by pressure from the “stubbornness” of Adele de Trenquelléon and the wishes of Fr.

Lalanne, who, after concluding the famous mission of Bordeaux, offered himself on that first day of May, 1817, to join with Chaminade, as a religious. However, when we look closely at his life, his intentions and his plans, we realize that such an assessment is erroneous. A yearning for religious life was always present in the mind of Fr. Chaminade and he constantly maintained it as necessary in his plans. In the profession of religious vows, he saw the apex of one's consecration to God and, therefore, he considered it an essential element in any plan to re-establish Christian life in France. We will try to follow his footsteps in order to demonstrate this.

To start, we cannot overlook some biographical data that helps us understand the importance that consecrated life had in his own life. He was the "Benjamin" of a family that already included two religious and a secular priest among the brothers. His older brother, Jean-Baptiste, had been a Jesuit until the suppression of the Society of Jesus in France.⁹ When in 1771, at the age of ten, Chaminade enters the school of St. Charles de Mussidan, his brother is teacher/treasurer of the same. He will be William's spiritual director. Accompanied by his brother, William will make private vows, at the end of his Latin studies, becoming part of the "Congrégation des Prêtres Ecclésiastiques et sous le titre de Saint-Charles" with its corresponding Rule of Life. Those who ran the school were part of this congregation. Since that profession of vows, Chaminade always considered himself a religious, without needing to make any other profession.

According to later testimony of Fr. Lalanne, and other testimonies from outside the Society, Fr. Chaminade thought about the foundation of a new religious institute much earlier, including before the Revolution, ever since the time he was teacher and treasurer at the same Collège St. Charles in Mussidan.¹⁰ From that time, dates his relationship with his disciple, Bernard Dariès, who edited a first draft of what could become a new institute that was, curiously, called the "Society of Mary." We have this draft in our General Archives.¹¹ Although, except for reference to Mary, it has no parallel with what would later become the Society of Mary, founded by Fr. Chaminade, his personal involvement with this primitive project, at this early date, is interesting.

In this tour of Chaminade's early commitment to religious life, we cannot overlook the fact of his active collaboration in the re-establishment of some religious institutes, during the years immediately after the Revolution. We cannot forget that, in 1806, he was named ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Bordeaux and, from 1807 to 1811, he lent them his Saint Laurent estate, on the outskirts of the city, to be their Novitiate.¹²

⁹ As is known, in 1761 the Parliament declared the Constitutions of the Society to be opposed to the laws of the state and, in 1762, decreed its dissolution throughout the entire country.

¹⁰ cf. VERRIER, J., *Jalons d'histoire sur la route de Guillaume-Joseph Chaminade*, t.4, 167s.

¹¹ AGMAR 12.1.23.

¹² Regarding this relationship between Fr. Chaminade and the Brothers of the Christian Schools, there are various interesting documents in our General Archives (AGMAR 4.6.1-25). (Cf. VERRIER, J., *La restauration des Écoles Chrétiennes à Bordeaux sous le Consulat et l'Empire*. L'Apôtre de Marie XXXV (1953-1954) 105-124).

Yet, the most obvious proof that Fr. Chaminade always had in mind the necessary presence of consecrated life in his missionary plan, derives from his promoting the profession of private and secret vows of chastity and obedience among the most fervent sodalists.¹³ There emerged, in this way, a nucleus of consecrated people within the Sodality itself, the “State.” This “central” nucleus of the Sodality, entirely dedicated to the mission of sustaining it and spreading it, was conceived by the Founder as a true “**Religious state** embraced by youth spread throughout society.”¹⁴

It was a first step on this path which, logically, caused the consecrated to think about and desire to go further in their commitment to a more explicit religious life. Moreover, as we well know, since 1808, Adele de Batz de Trenquelléon and a group of friends had been incorporated into the Sodality. Within this group, little by little, the plan to form a religious community grew.¹⁵ The Founder observed all these developments as signs of the Spirit, but responded to them with prudence and calm, giving time for more precise discernment.

Given this kind of reluctance – or caution – on the part of Fr. Chaminade, the question arises: if, as it would seem by his personal history, he thought about religious life for quite some time, to what do we attribute the slowness by which it came about, to the exasperation of those who were interested? Without a doubt, in great measure, it was his manner, but not only that. There were always objective reasons which induced him to prudence and to exercise extreme discernment regarding the most opportune moment and mode. I take notice, above all, of these two reasons, which seem to me to be particularly instructive, when trying to understand the kind of religious life he bore *in mind*.

- a) First of all, he was convinced of the importance of the Sodality, a key and essential element of his missionary plan, and he feared that the creation of authentic religious institutes within it, would end up denaturing it. How to assure that these institutes would not harm it, but on the contrary, that they would be at its service? On October 8, 1814, he wrote to Adele de Trenquelléon:

“Right now several would like to live a regular community life, abandoning all temporal concerns. This inspiration ought to be acted upon, yet care must be taken that it does not essentially change the work of the Sodality, but that it rather helps it along. A few sodalists have entered different religious communities. We noted this with pleasure. When the women officers informed me of it with a certain feeling of regret, I told them, for their consolation, that we are playing “losers-winners.” But here we have something quite different: these are sodalist religious, or rather, sodalists who,

¹³ Inspired, most probably, by the associations created by Jesuit Pierre Joseph Picot de la Clorivière (1735-1820), as Fr. Chaminade himself recognized in a letter to Adele de Trenquelléon: “*While the Revolution was going on, an excellent man had engaged in the formation of men and women religious, all of them living in the world. He had the principles guiding these institutions printed in Latin. Their regulations have remained in manuscript form. I succeeded in procuring a copy of the printed publication. I am going to read it very thoughtfully...*” (Letter #55).

¹⁴ That is the title of the first manuscript signed by Fr. Chaminade about this plan (*The Chaminade Heritage*, vol. 1, doc. 78). (Cf. VERRIER, J., *La Congrégation mariale de M. Chaminade*, t.5, 69-81; GARCÍA DE VINUESA, F., *Relaciones de la Compañía de María y de la Congregación-Estado*, Madrid 1970, 117-159)

¹⁵ Cf. The letters of Fr. Chaminade to Adele de Trenquelléon, in which he speaks to her about all these tendencies within the Sodality, responding to her desires for religious life: *Letters* #51 & #52.

*while remaining active sodalists, wish to live the regular life of the religious. This is why I told Father Laumont that your constitution was to be carefully drawn up and that I should be very glad to see it.”*¹⁶

- b) Secondly, although the restoration of religious life entered into his plans, he had to find a “new formula.” His missionary plan was already novel and, furthermore, the historical circumstances had changed. Traditional forms of religious life were no longer fitting. He had to look for new forms, new styles, a truly difficult task. What should religious life be like when, while conserving its most radical identity, it responds to the needs of the times and is adaptable to new times?

Here is the big question, that of the necessary novelty that he sought, whose response required time and prudence. But the time came to found religious life and the Founder faced it decisively. Unfortunately, he had to accept that the “plan for religious life” which he had *in mind* could not be carried out completely, as I have already pointed out, and we will try to look at it in more detail, because of canonical hesitations within the Church following the French Revolution. But, he tried to do so with all his might. It is precisely here, in exploring these intentions, where we find his own, distinctive and original features of his inspiration. Among these features, I highlight three, which seem to me to be particularly cogent and inspiring for our situation today. For Fr. Chaminade, Marianist religious life should be:

- 1) a religious life with all the radicality of its being, a true new “Order,” that recovers for new times the essential role that this state of life has always had in the life and mission of the Church;
- 2) a “global” religious life, “inclusive,” capable of embracing all types of consecrations;
- 3) an apostolic religious life, at the service of his “Marianist” missionary plan, already initiated with the foundation of the Sodalities, prolonging in the present age the mission and role of Mary in the history of salvation.

1.3 A religious life, although new in its forms, authentically radical in its nature.

Let us recall, for starters, the testimony of the foundational moment pointed out in the document *Notice historique sur la formation de la Société de Marie*,¹⁷ in which the first Marianist religious articulated the five basic intentions of the new foundation.

“It was October 2, 1817, the Feast of the Holy Guardian Angels, that those who first decided to embrace the religious life in a new institute gathered for the first time at M. Chaminade’s Villa Saint

¹⁶ *Letters*, # 52.

¹⁷ AGMAR 17.1.1. Fr. Verrier thinks that this document is the foundational act, solicited in a council meeting of the recently founded Society on Thursday, September 2, 1819 (*Jalons d’histoire...*, vol.4, p. 195).

Laurent. On that day, MM. Auguste Perrière, Clouzet, Lalanne, Daguzan and Collineau¹⁸ declared that their minds were made up and that they believed themselves called by God to renounce the world, but still to work with all their might to establish the new project.

Some basic principles came out of the first weekly meetings that began at that time:

- 1. that this project was a truly religious group, with all the fervor of primitive Christianity;*
- 2. that this group would be mixed, that is, made up of priests and laymen;*
- 3. that its principal work would be the education of middle class youth, missions, retreats, the establishment and direction of sodalities;*
- 4. that it would not go public at first but would take precautions as the circumstances required;*
- 5. above all, that it would be under the protection of and like the property of the Blessed Virgin.”*

In these five points we find the charismatic identity of the Society of Mary perfectly condensed. Naturally, the new foundation emerges from the Sodality founded by Fr. Chaminade, but it does so with its own identity, clearly differentiated from what the Sodality had been, and was. On the one hand, in its consecration to Mary and in its intentional mission to spread and educate in the faith, the new foundation extended the inspiration of the Sodality, and historically, through its first members, will be indebted to its roots. But, on the other hand, in its purpose of giving the Church a new religious Order, adapted to the times, it stands apart, and is distinguished from the Sodality as something radically different. Here, no longer is it an association of laypeople, nor is it a “religious state embraced by youth spread throughout society,” which was, as we have already mentioned, the definition of the “State,” but rather as a **“true religious body with all the fervor of primitive times.”**

This expression should be understood in the ecclesial context of that era, that is to say, in a Church that only recognized as religious life that which included the profession of solemn vows, that type of vows which make acts contrary to them not only illicit, but also invalid. In addition, at that time, this invalidity, besides being recognized within the Church, was also recognized by civil society. In a real and concrete way, men and women religious were civilly disqualified, among other things, for marriage and for any act of ownership. The profession of solemn vows brought with it a real “death to the world.” Therefore, as we read in the foundational document, the first Marianist religious declared themselves to be determined to “renounce the world.” Hence, Chaminade, from the beginning, always had in mind a Society in which solemn vows were professed, an authentic religious Order,¹⁹ and not a “secular congregation,” as those groups with simple vows were canonically called in those days. While recognizing that this latter type of life was *more religiosorum*, they were

¹⁸ To these five points it is necessary to add M. Cantau and M. Bidon, who were added later, completing the group of seven first professions, made on September 5, 1818. Curiously, Fr. Chevaux, in a chronology of the Society, which he prepared for Cardinal Mathieu in 1868, traces the origins if it to a year earlier, 1816, at the moment in which M. Bidon made private vows in the hands of Fr. Chaminade. The first date of the chronology is this one: « 1816... M. Bidon fait en particulier des vœux de religion entre les mains de M. Chaminade. And in his explicit notes for the chronology, he adds: « Quand M. Chaminade reçut les vœux de M. Bidon, il songeait déjà à la Société de Marie ; mais il n'avait rédigé aucun plan. » «When Fr. Chaminade received the vows of M. Bidon, he was thinking about the Society of Mary, but, as yet had not edited a plan.” (AGMAR 57.4.8). Also, Fr. Lalanne recognized, in the vows of Bidon, the beginning of what he considered a sort of remote preparation for a future foundation on the part of Fr. Chaminade. (Cf. Lalanne, J.-Ph.-A., *Notice historique sur la Société de Marie de la Congrégation de Bordeaux*, Roma 1996, p.14s).

¹⁹ Cf. the excellent and detailed explanation of this: *The Spirit of Our Foundation* vol. 2, nos. 473-481; ARMBRUSTER, J.-B., *L'état religieux marianiste. Étude et commentaire de la Lettre du 24 août 1839*, Paris 1989, pp. 64-71.

not regarded as so-called “regular.” They were not governed by the common law of religious life in the Church, but rather by their particular proper law, approved by means of the so-called “privilege.”²⁰

Faithfully following traditional theology regarding religious life, Fr. Chaminade considered vows to be a sacrifice in themselves, an authentic oblation offered to God. As a result, by means of one’s profession, the person was introduced into a new “state of life.”²¹ In order that these effects might take a real form, and not only be intentional, he wanted, from the beginning, vows which were perpetual and solemn. But the ecclesiastical and civil circumstances of those days in which he lived would not permit the fulfilment of this desire. The French Revolution, applying the principle of equality among all citizens, suppressed the recognition of the civil effects of vows. Now, civilly, all citizens, including clergy and religious, become equal under the law; the same rights and duties for all. This “revolutionary” resolution quickly spread among the states, shocking the traditional approaches regarding religious life in the Church. As a result, in light of the uncertainty generated by these social and political changes, the Holy See made the decision to not permit the foundation of more religious orders, “resurrecting” the resolution that had been promulgated on this, although for other motives and without much effectiveness, by the IV Lateran Council (1215) and the II Council of Lyon (1275). For the avalanche of foundations of new congregations, which occurred in the XIX Century, the Church adopted the practice of only accepting simple vows, which was a more flexible and less binding legal modality.²²

Fr. Chaminade encountered this difficulty from the outset. Mons. D’Aviau, Archbishop of Bordeaux, raised it immediately, delicately and respectfully, when he began to dialog with Chaminade about his plan to found an Order.²³ Faced with this obstacle, the Founder had to fold, by force, to the only “Canonical” possibilities that the Church offered at that moment. He had no other choice. Yet, he never renounced, within himself, his “ideal” of an “authentic” religious life for his Marianist religious. Therefore, when he set upon writing the draft of the *Constitutions*, he continued to regret not being able to give the Society the desired status of a religious Order, with solemn vows, and he never gave up insisting on his

²⁰ For more on these historical and canonical circumstances, see: BOUIX, D., *Tractatus de Jure Regularium ubi et de Religiosis Familis quae vota solemnia, vel etiam simplicia perpetua non habent*, t.1, Paris 1857, pp. 116-118 ; CRAISSON, D. *Des communautés religieuses à vœux simples. Législation canonique et civile.*, Paris 1869, pp. 19-24 (Reprinted in English in Charleston S.C. by Nabu Press, 2012); ALVAREZ GÓMEZ, J., *Historia de la Vida religiosa*, t.III: *Desde la “Devotio moderna” hasta el Concilio Vaticano II*, Madrid 1990, pp. 387-394.

²¹ Cf. *The Spirit of Our Foundation* vol. 2, nos. 464-472.

²² Cf. SASTRE SANTOS, E., *El ordenamiento de los institutos de votos simples según las “Normae” de la Santa Sede. Introducción y textos*, Roma 1993, pp. 72-94; ARMBRUSTER, J.-B. *Armbuster*, o.c., pp. 327-332.

²³ In a letter of June 3, 1816, Mons. d’Aviau made a proposal to him regarding his foundational intentions: “Just as there are reasons for them—and you will know how to make the most of them—there are also disadvantages that have more than once embarrassed me at the height of the revolutionary crises. Are we to consider ourselves sheltered from similar storms, as long as we are without and authentic and stable agreement between the two Governments? If it pleases the Lord finally to grant us this tranquility, this assurance so greatly desired, would that not be the proper time to inquire in what way a new religious Order would be useful to the Church? You probably know, Father, what two ecumenical Councils, the Fourth Lateran Council and the Second Council of Lyons decreed on this point, namely: Let no one in the future found a new religious Order: but let him who desires to enter religion, join one of the Orders already approved. Nevertheless, I do not deny that several beautiful Institutions are of a later date. What I wish to say to you is, that this matter calls for mature counsel and authority.” *Letters*, #69.

desire that the simple vows be practiced as if they were solemn vows. Thus, for example, in his letter of December 13, 1830, he wrote to Fr. Charles Rothéa:

“The vows made in the Society of Mary are only simple vows, because to confirm them, there is no authentic authorization on the part of the Roman Church. Nevertheless, we act generally, as if they were so solemn: 1. because, from the beginning, the Sovereign Pontiff was indirectly informed about it in telling him of the formation of the Society and in asking for various favors, among others that of a plenary indulgence at the time of the profession of perpetual vows; 2. in view of the constant intention maintained, of asking Rome for an authentic authorization and the manifestation to the apostolic nuncio that we had delayed making this request only to not compromise the Holy See with the French government.”²⁴

This is why, when, in 1838, he began his efforts to submit the first *Constitutions* to Rome, he always referred to the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary Immaculate as “Orders,” although in the respective *Constitutions* he did not formally treat them as such. Specifically, with regard to the Society of Mary, he wanted his thinking in this matter to be very clear, as expressed in a series of articles which constituted a sort of small catechism about religious life, based on questions and answers, intended for the formation of the novices. The purpose of this unique fragment of the *Constitutions of 1839* was to offer the Novice Master an aid for forming the novices in the necessary detachment from the world, including their own families, an indispensable basis for being able to live the religious life to its fullest meaning. Although the citation below is a little long, it is worthwhile to recall those articles that Chaminade left us, because in them we find, in condensed form, the radicality with which he conceived and intended for us to live our Marianist religious life, beyond the mere satisfaction of legal demands of the profession of simple vows, the only type permitted at that time.

326. 1. *What is a true religious? Answer. He is a man who, having by solemn vows renounced the world and all that it contains, lives thereafter only for God and busies himself only with eternal matters.*

327. 2. *What does it mean to renounce the world by solemn vows? Answer. It means renouncing, by an authentic protestation authorized by the Church, the affairs, occupations, goods, honors and pleasures of the world. It means forever forbidding their use to one's self by the commitment that one has made with God [Who has] become the unique object of all one's thoughts, of all one's affections and of all one's desires, so that one may no longer make use of things (even of necessary ones) that the human condition [sic] prevents from giving up, except in relation to God and with the intention of pleasing him.*

328. 3. *Does the obligation of a religious differ from that of a Christian who has renounced the world by his baptism? Answer. It is true that a Christian, who has been buried with Christ by baptism and who by this sacrament has received a new life of which the spirit of Jesus Christ is the soul and the principle, should be dead to the world, its goods, its honors, its affairs and its pleasures; but in order to fulfill this duty, it suffices that he renounce them by the disposition of his heart; and although he be permitted to preserve the possession and the use of them, he can never-*

²⁴ Letters, #567.

theless, as it is his duty, be so detached from them by an interior sentiment that he is poor in abundance, chaste in marriage, temperate amid good living and intent upon God in the dealings that the necessity of his condition obliges him to have with men.

329. *But this is too little for a religious – he should not remain at that point. He must be actually detached from all sensible things; eternity, which alone is his share must be also the unique object of all the activity of his mind and of his heart. The counsels that Jesus Christ gives to men in general have become for him by his profession indispensable precepts; and he is not at all doing enough to acquit himself of the obligations of his state if his renunciation is not entire, if his abnegation is not real and effective and if he does not make the sentiments of his heart pass into his works.*

330. *Just as vessels destined to the service and cult of God could not be employed in other uses without profanation, so the religious, who by a special consecration has become the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit and the temple of God, should have this thought incessantly before his eyes, and he may no longer distract himself intentionally, in order to busy himself with visible and perishable things, without committing a sort of sacrilege (Cassian).*

331. 4. *In what does the perfection of the religious life consist? Answer. It consists in fulfilling all the designs that God has had in instituting the religious profession within His Church; namely, to establish men there who serve Him in spirit and in truth and who render to Him an entirely pure and entirely holy cult in a complete detachment from all sensible things.*

332. 5. *Is this perfection not contained essentially in the practice of the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience? Answer. If the three vows are considered in the entire extent that the saints have given to them, it is certain that there is nothing so great and so perfect [sic] in the religious life that they do not include. But if they are regarded in a literal gross manner, if by chastity is understood a simple curtailment of exterior well-being and by obedience a vulgar and common submission that is ordinarily reduced to not rising up against the superiors and to seeking a few permissions in needs and in encounters from those who govern – these three vows viewed in such a way are, it is true, necessary means for rising to holiness in the religious life and can be considered as the three columns of this spiritual temple. However, religious perfection tends to more excellent and more perfect things; it demands a separation [dégagement] and dispositions that are much more elevated – it is an angelic state that cannot be restricted within such narrow limits – and to pretend to contain them within this triple renunciation and within these three vows is to wish to reduce an edifice of rare magnificence and beauty to its simple foundations.²⁵*

I shall refer later to this important text. For the moment, let us keep it in mind as a testimony of the radicality of the religious life that Fr. Chaminade had desired for the Society of Mary upon founding it.

Why? What is the reason Fr. Chaminade wanted to found a truly new religious Order? It is often said among us that, with this foundation, he desired to assure the maintenance of the work of the Sodality, creating for its promotion and direction the “man who does not die.”

²⁵ *Constitutions of 1839 (Kramer version).*

It is certain that this had been a clear and beneficial consequence of the appearance of religious life within the Marianist Family.²⁶ But, its intention was clearly beyond that. In his mind it was not only about religious life **for** the Sodality. In that vein he had founded the “State.” But to him, that was not enough. Fundamentally, with the Society of Mary, he wanted to restore religious life for the Church of a new age. He expressed this clearly in conversations he had with his secretary while studying how to respond to the ban on founding new religious orders, in force in the Church since the XIII Century, and highlighted during the post-Revolutionary period, as we said previously. After seeing that this ban had not been observed, because new foundations were permitted after the XIII Century as a result of corruption of the old Orders and the needs created by the successive changes in the historical situation throughout the centuries, he concluded:

*“From all this, we have concluded that there is sufficient reason for founding a new Order from the holy examples of founders who had done the same thing in times and for reasons similar to our own; that the motive for founding was based on the total destruction of previous monastic institutions; that it is only a matter of approaching the holiness of former institutions by observing all that the example of various Orders has taught concerning monastic life, while taking into consideration the new relationships and new needs, as well as the new condition of civil or political societies within which the foundation needs to be formed. If God raises up workers, we must obey this clear sign; grace will supply for all the rest.”*²⁷

It is clear that, in his plan for the foundation of religious life, Fr. Chaminade considered himself along the same lines as *the founders who had acted in similar ways in the past*, times of profound change, which he considered *analogous* to his own times, in which, according to him, authentic religious life was found to be destroyed – *“the motivation for erecting it can be found in the total destruction of the former monastic institutions”* – by new historical circumstances. In founding religious life, therefore, Fr. Chaminade not only thought about the Sodality, but also about religious life in itself. He considered it essential for the life of the Church and, therefore, indispensable in his missionary plan, that it not be limited to the Sodality, but focused on the regeneration of the Church and Christian life in France. He expressed this to Fr. Lalanne on that day of May 1, 1817:

*“The religious person, he said, is to be to Christianity what Christianity is to the human race. This is as imperishable in the Church as the Church is imperishable in the world. Without religious, the Gospel would nowhere find its full realization in human society. It is therefore in vain that attempts should be made to re-establish Christianity without institutions which allow people to practice the evangelical counsels. But it would be difficult, and inappropriate today, to revive these institutions in the same forms which they had before the Revolution. Monastic forms are out of date, he added; they have greatly discredited themselves by so many scandals!”*²⁸

²⁶ Cf. the conclusion of the response to the sixth objection in the document “Answers to the Objections Usually Raised against Sodalities Established on the Plan of that of Bordeaux, or on the New Structure Given Them, and on Their Relationships with the Parishes” (Doc 154).

²⁷ The complete answer is found in the document *On the establishment of a new order*, belonging to the series of documents from the meetings Chaminade had with his secretary, David Monier, in August 1816, for the editing of the first rules, *l’Institut*, for both Marianist orders: *The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 5, doc. 3.

²⁸ LALANNE, J.-Ph-A, o.c., p.16.

And Fr. Lalanne, himself, commented on this:

*“Father Chaminade was profoundly penetrated by that idea, that Christianity could not really be re-established in France except by the restoration of the religious Orders. He saw the full and complete practice of the Christian virtues only in the religious profession, and he trusted firmly that, if Divine Providence wanted the re-establishment of Christianity, It would protect and grant success to an initiative, the purpose of which would be to re-establish for Christianity its essential institutions. Also, these ideas were not, with Father Chaminade, merely the product of his own profound meditations and his wisdom; a supernatural voice had inspired them, as he confided to some of his first disciples.”*²⁹

It is evident, therefore, that the Founder wanted the two institutes, the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary, in themselves, and not only in service to his preceding foundations. He also desired them as a response to the demands of a new age, with new forms, but always flowing from the traditional essence of religious life, without diminishing, in the least way, its radicality, and always with the purpose of preserving its essential function, as religious life, in the life and mission of the Church.

1.4 An “inclusive” religious life, with different degrees of consecration.

This is a little known and little studied feature in the foundational plan of our Founder, but it is very interesting and, as I see it, very revelatory of his mindset.

On August 27, 1818, Fr. Chaminade requested authorization from Mons. d’Aviau, Archbishop of Bordeaux, that the founding members could make their religious profession in the new institute.³⁰ He accompanied this request with the first part of a brief document entitled *Institut de Marie*,³¹ written in his own hand, in which he defines the goal, means and classification of persons who would compose it. In this document, we find, for the first time, if only in outline form, the organization and structure which the Founder initially contemplated for his new foundation. In the section about “the persons” we read:

“Members of the Institute may be divided into three classes: priests, educated laymen, and assistants.

The priests and lay members form two “colleges” which are distinct from several points of view. The assistants have their own rules for their novitiate, for the manner in which they are to observe the Rule, and for their relationships with the association.

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 14.

³⁰ Cf. *Letters*, #102.

³¹ *The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 5, doc. 27. This document, which is like the first draft of the *Rule of Life* for the Society of Mary, takes into account, albeit while adapted to masculine religious life, the *Institut des Filles de Marie* (*The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 5, doc. 4), which Fr. Chaminade presented to the bishop of Agen in September of 1816 for the approbation of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.

Some rules are common to all the members of the Institute; others refer to the members of a specific class."

We note, with some surprise, that, at first, Fr. Chaminade thought about an institute with "three classes" of members, with common rules for all, and specific rules for each one. The text suggests that the core of the institute would be formed by two "colleges," one of priests, and another of laymen, to which would be added another class, that of the assistants, with another type of relation to the Institute. This different way to belong or relate to the Institute, would follow different rules, among them, those relating to initial formation.³² But, who would form this class of "assistants" and in what way would they be different than the two core "colleges?"

A hasty identification of the "classes" which the Founder listed in this document, namely the "priests," "lettered laymen" and "assistants," with the three categories of brothers which have shaped what we traditionally call "mixed composition" of the Society, "priests," "teaching brothers" and "working brothers," could lead to the erroneous belief that the "assistants" mentioned here, in this very early document, are the "working brothers." But, an analysis of the handwritten notes which Fr. Chaminade wrote between 1824 and 1830, as he began to prepare the formulation of the *Constitutions*, demonstrates that this identification is not correct. What Fr. Chaminade had *in mind* was a Society with two types of members: some with solemn vows, those "authentically" religious, whom, at the beginning, he called "professed," and others with simple vows. The first group would truly be the soul of the Society, the second, its collaborators ("assistants") in all types of work or mission, be they spiritual or temporal:

*"The entire Society is divided into two sections, those who would be like its soul, who would direct the main thrusts, who would be, or could be priests; and all the rest would form the body of the Society, and would assist the others in their spiritual or temporal functions, etc. The first group would have solemn vows; the second, simple vows, which the Superior General could dispense."*³³

So, we can see that the distinction between the professed and the assistants was not thought to be, initially, based on their tasks or ministries, but rather on the degree of their commitment in their religious profession and, therefore, based on its consequences, in their personal life, as well as in their relationship to the Society. In the two "sections," whether it be that

³² The *Institut de Marie* foresaw a novitiate of two consecutive years for the actual "professed" (solemn) and only six months for the "assistants." The novitiate was followed by a period of temporary profession: three years in the former's case; for one year, and thereafter three years for the latter group which, in addition, could only be admitted to perpetual vows after ten years of temporary profession. (One cannot rule out the possibility of Jesuit influence on this early idea about how to structure the Society of Mary. Specifically, in the panorama of religious life, the Society of Jesus had been an Order which presented the uniqueness of having two years of Novitiate and numbering among its members those with simple vows and those with solemn vows.) The *Constitutions of 1839* later on established the time for the Novitiate as "generally two years" (art. 299) and made a distinction between three types of novitiates: ecclesiastical novitiate" and "lettered laymen" and "Working Brothers [*ouvriers*]." (art. 293). The unification of the novitiates in a common one for all, will come much later, imposed as one of the amendments of the Holy See (*Animadversiones* 1865, n. 11) in the process of the approval of the *Constitutions*. (Cf. DELAS, C., *Histoire des Constitutions de la Société de Marie*, Fribourg 1964, p. 127).

³³ *Plan de la Société de Marie, considérée dans son organisation et composition* : AGMAR 57 .3.1, p. 3, col 1 (EP, t.6, doc. 72). The allusion to the fact that simple vows could be dispensed by the Superior General, should not surprise us if we keep in mind what we have seen regarding the canonical situation of the then-called "secular congregations" (Cf. note 20).

of the professed or that of the assistants, there would be priests and lay brothers. The first draft of the *Constitutions*, written by Fr. Lalanne in 1829, is very clear on this point. In some articles that would not survive the later publication of the definitive version in 1839, and have, therefore, remained unknown to many of us, the following classes of people were distinguished within the Society:

- “281. *The persons who make up the Society are grouped according to two respects: 1) their commitment, 2) their function.*
282. *According to their commitment, the members of the Society fall into two classes: those in probation and the professed.*
283. *In the probationary class there are two orders: the postulants and the novices.*
284. *In the class of the professed, there are three orders: the temporary professed, the simple professed, and the perpetual professed.*
285. *The temporary professed are those who have made vows for three years only.*
286. ***The simple professed*** *are those who have made vows for an unlimited time but conditionally.*
287. ***The perpetual professed*** *are those who have made absolute vows.*
288. *According to their functions in the Society, there are two classes: priests and laymen.*
289. ***There are two orders of priests: assistants and Directors.***
290. *The priest Directors are those who, having made their perpetual profession, can be called to one of the upper posts of governance in the Society.*
291. *The priest assistants are those who have been admitted only to simple vows.*
292. ***The laymen are divided between the educated and the assistants.***
293. *The educated are employed in teaching and the assistants in crafts and trades and in service.*
294. ***The lay members may be admitted to perpetual vows*** *and consequently to governance in the Society (the 3rd assistant or Head of Work [Head of Temporalities] will ordinarily be a lay member).*
295. ***The different classes of the Society and their various orders do not form two distinct organizations; they are all and everywhere bound together in their works, and act in concert under the leadership of the Head, just as the various members of the body obey one single mind in the various functions that they perform.***³⁴

As we have seen, the normative crisis in which religious life found itself at that time, made it impossible for this complex and curious original idea to come to pass. Fr. Chaminade himself openly acknowledged this, albeit reluctantly, yet without ceasing to try to think of some possible alternative for attempting to maintain his desired plan for different degrees of commitment, or gradualism.³⁵ He tried in different ways, and with different formulas, but without success.³⁶ Finally, the last drafts of the first *Constitutions* abandoned the distinction between professed and assistants, and it would never appear again in our documents.

Obviously, this is not an attempt to go backwards and recover, in a literal way, the primitive and complicated design for the Society that was in Fr. Chaminade’s mind. If I have brought

³⁴ *Constitutions 1829. (Edited by Lalanne): AGMAR 57.2.1 (The Chaminade Legacy, vol. 6, doc. 81).*

³⁵ “But this organization seems too complicated for the times in which we live... Nevertheless, it is true that a nominal distinction is necessary. Would it be enough to say, for example, Religious of the 1st and 2nd class? Or, an external distinction, like a ring, for example...?” (*Plan de la Société de Marie...*, doc. cit., p. 3, col. 1).

³⁶ It is interesting to see his hesitations and various attempts with respect to the thought process that went into the drafting of the *Constitutions*, in dialogue with Fr. Lalanne. (Cfr. *Notes directives sur la 3^{ème} partie des Constitutions, c’est à dire, les personnes*, AGMAR 57.3.2 (*The Chaminade Legacy*, vol. 6, doc. 72).

it up here it is because, in my view, it reveals two of the most typical features of his foundational inspirations:

- His desire for **universality**, to embrace, and to add the greatest number of persons from as many walks of life and conditions as possible; to add the greatest number of workers to the work. To do this, he always tried to establish a gradation, a gradual system of different degrees of commitments. It was one of his favorite strategies, which he had already begun with the Sodality.³⁷ This was very characteristic of him. In everything he did, he seemed to be guided by a sort of organizational postulate, which could be formulated thus: it is necessary to create structures which permit attention to the greatest possible number of situations and, at the same time, stimulate all types of abilities, giving them channels of expression.

A gradual system of commitments was also one of his pedagogical methods to stimulate excellence. His frequent recourse to the maxim “union without confusion,” clearly expresses this principle of “gradual universality,” which always guided him. The new institute could be no exception.

- His usual practice of **linking the degree of responsibility to the degree of commitment**, and vice versa. In his projects, a system with different degrees of commitment always entailed different degrees of hierarchical responsibilities with respect to the whole. In this way, he generated concentric structures, surrounding what we could consider as a “hard and consistent core, or nucleus” which, because of its radicality and the consistency of its members’ commitment, guaranteed the consistency and identity of the institution. Therefore, his greatest preoccupation was always the quality of the core. With that assured, the various concentric layers of membership and participation could be many, until reaching, and including, those people at the distant periphery. Here that core would be formed by religious, priests and lay, with solemn vows (or “perpetual” or “absolute,” as he called them sometimes).

These are interesting and provocative features of the foundational idea of Fr. Chaminade, especially if we consider it from today’s perspective, where the search for new forms of religious life in the Church is patent...

³⁷This principle of universality, with its consequence of gradualism, already appears at the beginning in his way of conceiving the Sodality. It is interesting to note how, in 1815, after the abdication of Napoleon, with the arrival of the Restoration, Chaminade, upon rethinking and reorganizing the Sodalities, distinguishes within them three stages of life: 1st sodalist status; 2nd the “State” living according to the evangelical counsels (without vows); 3rd the “State” living the religious life in the world (with vows). (Cf. *The Chaminade Legacy* vol. 1, doc 91)

1.5 An apostolic religious life, at the service of the Marianist missionary plan.

In his comments recalling the religious life of the past, Fr. Chaminade alludes many times to the monastic life, without a doubt in order to visualize its essence more clearly, which he always considered to be the renunciation of “the world.” When the community of the working brothers at St. Remy was created, he saw the opportunity to make it a reality also within his foundational plan. In this sense, the articles of the *Constitutions of 1839* that refer to this class of religious are interesting.

“368. The class of working religious should, it seems, excite a pious jealousy in the first two. More withdrawn from the world and having many fewer contacts with it, the Working Brothers can and should live in a greater poverty, whether in dress and furnishings or in diet; their recollection also is less troubled – since they work in silence and are always advised by the superiors, their hearts are more habitually elevated toward God.

(....)

378. Although always in community day and night, the religious have all the advantages of solitude and their houses should be like true monasteries: 1. They never speak among themselves except when there is need and except during the time that the need lasts; 2. They speak neither to strangers nor to their relatives without the permission of their superiors and they should use this permission only for the time demanded by necessity, charity and sometimes a sort of indulgence that is also a consequence of charity.

379. A monastery is a kind of tomb in which he who has made the religious profession consents to be buried; without doubt this tomb is found placed among the living, but in fact it contains only the dead. The religious is dead to the world, whereas the secular is considered to be living in the spirit of the world. In the convents of the Daughters of Mary, there is an enclosure that forms a barrier that the nuns may not cross for visiting not only their former friends, but even their closest relatives – it is the literal application of the Lord’s maxim: “Let the dead bury their dead.”

380. Although the religious men do not make vows of enclosure, their houses should be regarded as cloisters and have borne their name, so that what should be the spirit of the religious who live in them would not be unknown.

(....)

382. If for a religious there arises some kind of business with his family or even with strangers with whom he formerly had dealings, he lends himself to it out of charity with the permission of his superiors – or even, according to the circumstances, the superiors take charge of it and the religious is relieved of it.”

He could not be more explicit in expressing the “monastic idea” that he had in mind. We can also see it reflected in all his thinking and his comments about the cloistering of the sisters, to which he alludes in article 379. With his characteristic universality, he wanted to embrace everything, to accommodate all. Nevertheless, the founding plan of Fr. Chaminade did not take that route. We all know – and it is not necessary for me to pause and explain it – that he was a missionary and that the title he most appreciated was that of “Missionary

Apostolic,” which the Holy See granted him. What pained him, above all, during his lifetime, was not the lack of an appropriate religious life, according to its nature and circumstances, but the loss of faith, the de-Christianization of the world. His whole life, all of his work, was focused on apostolic mission. Also, of course, it was the same for the foundation of the two religious “Orders.” Even within the section of the *Constitutions of 1839*, to which I just referred, dedicated to the consideration of communities of working brothers as authentic monasteries, he did not lose sight of its apostolic purpose.³⁸ There is no doubt that in Fr. Chaminade’s foundational plan, he envisioned a militant religious life, active, not contemplative, nor monastic. What the Founder desired was a solid, strong apostolic body that was entirely consecrated to the spreading of the faith, in the mode of the active orders of the past.

Owing to some family ties, and by some references to which we have already alluded,³⁹ it is not inconceivable that the tumultuous history of the Society of Jesus, suppressed in 1771 under pressure from European states, and recently rehabilitated in 1814 by means of Papal decrees, was present in Fr. Chaminade’s thinking about a new religious order. Specifically, the Jesuits were being “remade” in France during the years of the foundation of the Society of Mary, by the hands of the only “survivor” on French soil, Fr. Picot de la Clorivière, whom Fr. Chaminade admired.⁴⁰ If this historical data is kept in mind, it turns out that it is not merely anecdotal that Fr. Lalanne, himself a faithful and fervent sodalist, thought about entering the resurrected Society of Jesus, according to his own confession, before offering himself to Fr. Chaminade for the foundation of a new institute.⁴¹ But the best proof of the presence of the history of the Society of Jesus in the mind of the Founder can be found in the allusion he made in 1839, in the letter to the retreat masters of that year, when he received the “Laudatory Decree” on his *Constitutions*:

*“Now, we have understood this **heavenly design**, my reverend son, and have hastened to offer Mary our feeble services in order to labor under her orders and combat at her side. We have enlisted under her banner as her soldiers and her ministers, and we have bound ourselves by a special vow, that of Stability, to assist her with all our strength until the end of our life, in her noble struggle against the powers of hell. And as an Order justly celebrated has taken the name and standard of Jesus Christ, so we have taken the name and standard of Mary and are ready to hasten wherever she calls us, in order to spread her cult, and through it the kingdom of God in souls.”*⁴²

This paragraph, with its allusion to the Society of Jesus, and other passages in the same letter, impregnated with the military terminology proper to Ignatian language, shows us that Fr. Chaminade’s desire was to give the Church an apostolic “militia” that was at least as effective and fruitful as the Jesuits had been. But, at the same time, he pointed out the

³⁸ art. 375. *While working constantly at its sanctification, this class does not fail to take an interest in the salvation of souls.*

³⁹ Cf. above, note 32.

⁴⁰ Cf. above, note 13.

⁴¹ Cf. LALANNE, J.-Ph.-A., *o.c.*, p. 16.

⁴² *Letters*, #1163. *The Spirit of Our Foundation* already echoes this reference to the Society of Jesus by Fr. Chaminade when he conceived of the Society of Mary. “Which among all the “rules and maxims” of the Saints will be chosen by Father Chaminade? The first person to initiate him into religious life was his brother John Baptist, the former Jesuit, to whom his education had been confided: through him, William Joseph came to know the Society of Jesus; through him, he learned to make mental prayer according to the method of St. Ignatius; and, towards the end of his life, in his Circular on the vow of stability, he modestly compares the apostolic work of the Society with that of this great Society.” (*Spirit of Our Foundation*, vol. I, n. 27)

charismatic difference between the two. The Marianist “standard” in the battle to extend the Reign of God, is that of Mary. Not because he pushes Jesus aside – how could he do such a thing to the very one who is the true object of the proclamation of the Kingdom! – but because it is a charismatic characteristic, proper to the missionary inspiration of our Founder: the conviction that, it having been through Mary that Jesus was incarnated in our world, it continues to be through Mary that Jesus is incarnated in our life and our apostolate.

We are very familiar with contemplating Mary in connection with her role in the History of Salvation, that is to say, Mary in mission, from which derives our understanding of our collaboration with her. This is a typical Marianist charismatic trait. The Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839, from which we have taken this paragraph, is, perhaps, the foundational document that best expresses this. In it, the Founder emphatically shows us that, throughout history, Mary has overcome all heresies and, therefore, to her is reserved the triumph over the unbelief that had gripped his era. That is precisely the “heavenly design,” to which the cited paragraph alludes, from which our vocation is derived: that of being collaborators with Mary in that “battle.” We respond to this vocation by adding to our religious vows, the **vow of stability**, whose meaning, drawing from its literal meaning (to remain faithful in Mary’s “militia”), but going beyond it, has and remains totally Marian-apostolic. With it, Marianist religious life marks its difference. Thus, after that paragraph, Fr. Chaminade concludes: “*This, my reverend son, is certainly the distinguishing character and family trait of both our Societies: we are in a special manner the auxiliaries and the instruments of the Blessed Virgin in the great work of reforming morals, of preserving and propagating the Faith, and by that Faith, of sanctifying our neighbor.*”

I need not dwell on this Marian-apostolic feature of our foundation, especially since I devoted ample commentary to this in my *Circular #2: In Mission with Mary*, to which I refer you for a more extensive development of this topic. With this section, I simply wished not to forget it, and come back to it with emphasis during this celebration of our Bicentennial, out of which we should emerge strengthened in our identity. Along these lines, I strongly recommend that, during this time, you return to this important foundational document known as the *Letter to the Retreat Masters*, from August 24, 1839, meditate on it, study it, and put it into practice, personally as well as a community. In the preparation of the international celebrations, the two General Councils discussed that, perhaps this would have been the best letter to accompany the “trptych pilgrimage,” but we decided against it, for various reasons: it was not a “joint” effort of both founders, we did not have available to us an original autographed by Fr. Chaminade (in fact, it was penned by his secretary), and it was too long. All that notwithstanding, it is “the” letter that we cannot fail to bring into our memory, our mind and our heart during this celebration.

At this point, I conclude the first part of the *Circular*, dedicated to delving into what Fr. Chaminade had in mind when he founded us. I have intentionally desired to do so in a detailed and rigorous manner, hoping to make his unfamiliar words and writings known

among us, and in so doing, awaken in us a desire to know better his true thinking, going to both the sources, as well as the context. I have tried to capture his disposition and motives which moved him to found Marianist religious life, his passion for evangelization, his esteem for religious life, his conviction that true evangelization cannot occur without it, the radicality with which he desired that it be lived... He instilled the spirit; the historical circumstances instilled the law. Historical evolution has brought us to this point, of being what we are. History has also entered into the shaping of the charism. The Spirit does not lead history in vain. The Spirit was present in our origins and is here today, acting and moving the present age. Our charismatic responsibility obliges us to continue scrutinizing the era in which we live, in order to discern and follow its movement, without losing sight of his particular foundational inspiration, so that the Society which the Spirit desired and inspired through our Founder, might continue being effective at the Spirit's service, for the Church and the world today.

II. SCRUTINIZING THE PRESENT

From the mindset and inspiration of Fr. Chaminade, with him, and like him, I invite you to scrutinize the present-day world, with its deep cultural and social changes, in which, and for which, the Church finds itself, with its evangelizing mission. Missionaries like us cannot help but be passionate and commit ourselves with our whole lives to this work, as our Founder did. Guided by the motivations and style that we have discovered in his foundational commitment, which we carry imprinted in our genes, we become particularly aware – or should become particularly aware – of certain aspects regarding the evangelizing needs of the Church in today's world. The situation is complex and “polyhedral,” as Pope Francis likes to say, and, therefore, so must be the evangelizing response. All of it, in all its complexity, is there, before our eyes, challenging us as men and as Christians, but each person and each institution cannot take on everything. Neither can the Society of Mary. We have not been founded for just any mission whatsoever. Every charism is limited and must be lived out conscious of its limitations and, therefore, in a spirit of communion and mutual collaboration within the Church for the building up of the Kingdom. But, yes, every charism has the grave responsibility to respond from that purpose for which it was founded. It has the obligation not to defraud the Spirit which brought it into existence for a particular purpose and to achieve particular ends. Of course, this applies to the Society of Mary as well.

Currently, Marianist religious are present in many different countries and cultures. In each place, the Church's work of evangelization confronts particular challenges, to which we are called to respond in a manner proper to our identity. It is the responsibility of each Unit and each Zone to discern and put into practice what ought to be our collaboration and our specific work in communion with the local Church. From a more universal perspective, trying to beat in unison with the heart and mind of Fr. Chaminade, and without wishing to be

exhaustive, I feel that there are two clear calls at the present moment, to which Marianist religious ought to be more sensitive, and I would say, “naturally” respond:

- a) the call of a Church in need of authentic religious life;
- b) the call of laity to engage in a shared mission.

2.1 The call of a Church in need of the prophetic witness of authentic religious life.

We all know that, after the Council, religious life (above all active, non-clerical religious life) suffered a deep crisis, with abundant departures, from which we have not yet emerged. The loss of personnel and the drastic decline of vocations (we keep in mind, for example, that, in our case, over the last 50 years, the number of religious in the Society of Mary has dropped to a third of what it once was) has brought with it the closure of communities and the abandonment of works run by religious institutes throughout the whole Church. It was, and continues to be, an evident identity crisis. Perhaps that is why, during the pontificate of John Paul II, a certain distrust of religious life was generated within a good part of the hierarchy. Yet, there also emerged with force certain spiritual and apostolic movements that gained the favor of prelates because of their dynamism and their apostolic “effectiveness.” It seemed that the Church had found in these “substitutes” for religious life, and was going to be able to “circumvent” the religious life. This “lack” of support aggravated, if you will, the pessimism that had already seized the religious.

It has been the last two Popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, who have pulled us out of this kind of lethargy into which we had plunged, by their proclaiming that the Church needs us, that religious life is essential to its life and mission, and that, therefore, we must get up and get to work. In his conversation with the superiors general, on November 29, 2013, Pope Francis, with his slogan “*Wake up the world!*,” ended up also waking up the religious.⁴³ As sons of Fr. Chaminade, following his conviction that religious life is indispensable to the life and mission of the Church, we ought to be among the first to shake off the torpor of pessimism and stand up with agility and eagerness.

The first questions that the superiors general posed to Pope Francis at that memorable meeting were about a major concern in today’s religious life: what does the Church expect of us, religious, at this time? The Pope’s answer was simple and clear:

“(Benedict XVI) said that the Church grows through witness, not by proselytism. The witness that can really attract is that associated with attitudes which are uncommon: generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness in order to care for others. This is the witness, the “martyrdom” of religious life. It ‘sounds an alarm’ for people. With their lives, religious cause people to say: ‘What’s happening?’ These people are telling me something! These people go beyond a mundane

⁴³ El P. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, director of La Civiltà Cattolica, present at the meeting, wrote extensively on it: SPADARO, A., “*Svegliate il mondo!*” *Colloquio di Papa Francesco con i Superiori Generali*, La Civiltà Cattolica (2014), I, pp. 3-17. The citations referring to said meeting are removed from this article.

horizon. Thus, religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church, therefore, must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord. No, I do not want to say 'radical.' Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake up the world."

(...)

"What, therefore, is the priority of consecrated life? The Pope answered: "Prophecy of the Kingdom, which is a non-negotiable. The emphasis should fall on **being** prophets, and not in playing at being them. Naturally, the devil proposes his temptations to us; one of them is: just appear to be prophets. But it is not possible simply to play at these things. I myself have seen very sad things in this regard. No: religious are men and women who light the way to the future."

On many other occasions, Pope Francis has returned to this call and solicitation of the necessary prophetic nature of religious life. Certainly, all the People of God share in a call to the prophetic. Every Christian is priest, prophet and king, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us. In fact, the slogan "Wake up the world!" may very well be applied to the entire Church, each according to their particular vocation and their own place in the world. So, we cannot avoid responding to the question of the specificity of the prophetic in religious life within the Church: what is the proper contribution of religious life to the prophetic nature of the People of God, as a whole? What is the specific contribution the religious to the prophetic character of the Christian life?

While the theme of prophecy in the Church was very present during Second Vatican Council, as we have just seen, in the texts no mention is made of the prophetic dimension of religious life, nor in Chapter VI of *Lumen Gentium* (nn. 43-47), nor in the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. The category that is used to describe the specificity of religious life in the life of the Church is that of being a "sign:" "The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a **sign** (tamquam signum apparet) which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation." (LG 44). *Perfectae caritatis*, in #1, reiterates the approach of *Lumen Gentium*, affirming that the religious life, or rather, "the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels ... reveals itself as a **splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom** (praeclarum signum caelestis)."

To say that religious life is, or is called to be, "a sign of the heavenly kingdom" is such a broad expression that it can accommodate the different dimensions of this sign: the eschatological (sign of the future),⁴⁴ the Christological (sign derived from the earthly life of

⁴⁴ LG 44: "[the religious state,] ...more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below. Furthermore, it not only witnesses to the fact of a new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ, but it foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom." (in 1968 the document from the Latin American Bishops at Medellín spoke about the prophetic mission of religious and pointed it out for its "eschatological witness." {XII.2-3}).

Christ),⁴⁵ and the theological-Trinitarian (sign of the transcendent and of the power of God the Father, Son and Spirit),⁴⁶ are all present in the text of LG 44.

The document of the Holy See in which we find the first explicit mention of the “prophetic” character of religious life is the instruction, *Religious and Human Promotion* (1978). In the introduction, it states that in its evangelizing mission, the Church cannot neglect the integral promotion of the human person and the defense of their rights: “*the Church must search out the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel, thus responding to persistent human questions. Religious are called to give singular witness to this prophetic dimension. The continuous conversion of heart and spiritual freedom which the Lord’s counsels inspire and promote make religious present to their contemporaries in such a way as to remind everyone that the building of the secular city must be founded on the Lord and have him as its goal.*”

In the same document, there is mention of the Evangelical Counsels as being “*a prophetic sign of intimate union with God, who is loved above all things.*” (#24) and in this sense, it goes on to add: “*The profession of the evangelical counsels, in the context of religious life-Church-modern world, may require new attitudes which are attentive to the value of prophetic signs as a power for the conversion and transformation of the world, of its mode of thinking and of its relationship*” (#33b). So here religious life is recognized as a force that can affect the world’s mindset and structures with special reference to the Evangelical Counsels and a reading of the signs of the times.

All these allusions to the prophetic character of religious life were abundantly collected in the post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (John Paul II, March 25, 1996). We can identify in this last document three interpretations, lines of thought, of the prophetic nature of religious life.⁴⁷ Although they do not contradict each other, they do offer different nuances.

- a. The first line establishes the profession of the Evangelical Counsels as a fundamental prophetic character of consecrated life.⁴⁸ Numbers 87-92 develop an anthropological reading⁴⁹ of the Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience with responses/testimonies to “*three major challenges addressed to the Church herself [...] by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world*” (VC 87), namely:

⁴⁵ “Christ proposed to His disciples this form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. This same state of life is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church.”

⁴⁶ “The religious state clearly manifests that the Kingdom of God and its needs, in a very special way, are raised above all earthly considerations. Finally, it clearly shows all men both the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ the King and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvelously working in the Church.”

⁴⁷ I am inspired in this analysis by the presentation made by Fr. Saverio Cannistrà, Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites during the last meeting of the USG General Assembly (Rome, May 2016): “What do we mean when we talk about the prophetic nature of religious life?”

⁴⁸ VC 15: “For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community of the brethren and for the world.”

⁴⁹ VC 87: “These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, impelling the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, to clarify and testify to the profound anthropological significance of the counsels. The decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation.”

- “a hedonistic culture which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms” (VC 88);
- “a materialism which craves possessions, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources” (VC 89);
- “those notions of freedom which separate the fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms” (VC 91).

In this sense, the prophecy of consecrated life consists in **giving witness to a way of living and acting that is different than what the world and contemporary culture proposes**, reaffirming the primacy of God and relativizing created goods, thus offering humanity a “spiritual therapy” (VC 87). We find this to be in line with what Pope Francis said during the meeting mentioned above: “*Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth.*”

It is clear that, in this world, the spreading of the Gospel needs this prophetic witness on our part, but we have to live with humility, like Jesus, avoiding two temptations: that of believing we are the best and that of considering that the world which surrounds us is all opposed to the Gospel. On the one hand, religious life does not live with bright assurances, nor does it live with unblemished integrity, yet it also advances laboriously through the desert, with its temptations, doubts and stumbles, some of which are well-known and broadcast in the mass media of our world. On the other hand, the world is not made only of shadows, but also of many bright lights which illumine the turbulent pathway in search of the truth. I am reminded that some years ago, the Spanish Marianists published a brochure presenting who we are, bearing the accurate heading: “*We are not many, nor the best.*”

- b. More along the lines of the prophetic witness described in the document *Religious and Human Promotion*, in #84 of *Vita Consecrata* we see the prophetic charism of religious life as being principally rooted in one’s close personal relationship with God, the manifestation of which is the dedication of one’s self to the Kingdom of God’s favored ones, the poor.

“The prophetic character of the consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life. The sign value, which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life, is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel

*have in the Christian life. **Because of this pre-eminence nothing can come before personal love of Christ and of the poor in whom he lives.***

*The Patristic tradition has seen a model of monastic religious life in Elijah, courageous prophet and friend of God. He lived in God's presence and contemplated his passing by in silence; he interceded for the people and boldly announced God's will; he defended God's sovereignty and came to the defense of the poor against the more powerful of the world (cf. 1 Kgs 18-19). In the history of the Church, alongside other Christians, there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit, have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the pastors of the Church. True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. **Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin.** Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom."*

Therefore, some characteristic features of the prophet are: **the search for the will of God, spiritual discernment and love for the truth out of friendship with God, and a passion for God's holiness, which is made manifest in the construction of God's Reign of justice and peace.** It is no coincidence that the biblical model to which the text refers is Elijah, the prophet who lived in the presence of God, and at the same time rose up as a defender of the truth of the faith of Israel against the prophets of Baal and fought for the rights of the poor amidst the powerful.

With this second line of thought, we can relate #73 of the exhortation, perhaps one of the most significant texts for defining the prophetic mission of consecrated life:

*"The consecrated life has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity (cf. Col 2:20-22). **To carry out this service appropriately, consecrated persons must have a profound experience of God and be aware of the challenges of their time, understanding the profound theological meaning of these challenges through a discernment made with the help of the Spirit.** In fact, it is often through historical events that we discern God's hidden call to work according to his plan by active and effective involvement in the events of our time."*

These texts are rich in content and they should awaken in us a living desire for renewal. As Marianists, we cannot fail to recognize here the persistent call of our Founder to live exclusively by faith and to bear witness, as a fundamental feature of our religious life. Our *Rule of Life* echoes that call in article 4: "*We strive to become men of faith and to ponder all things in the light of revelation. By faith we see how God is at work in human history and in the events of our daily lives.*"

Also in the exercise of this type of prophetic witness in religious life there is a need for vigilance. Once again, here we must be humble and avoid the risk of becoming “self-referential,” because the reading of history from the point of view of faith, intimacy with God and the service of justice and peace, is not the exclusive prerogative of religious life, not even close! To begin with, we must recognize that, when we wish to speak of contemporary society, we need to turn to scholars, specialists, who are generally laypersons, in order to enlighten us about the phenomena that we witness and are normally not able to appreciate in all their fullness and complexity. In this sense, I would say that we have more to learn than to teach. Moreover, the subsequent interpretation of these key realities of the world, from a theological or pastoral perspective, cannot be done without interacting with the rest of the People of God, laity and hierarchy, in deep communion of faith and mission.

- c. Finally, a third line of thought highlights the eschatological dimension of the prophetic witness of religious life, to which the exhortation gives special devotion in numbers 26-27, although in other places there are also plenty of references to consecrated life as a sign and foreshadowing of ultimate realities.⁵⁰

*“Since the demands of the apostolate today are increasingly urgent, and since involvement in temporal affairs risks becoming ever more absorbing, it is particularly opportune to draw attention once more to the **eschatological nature of the consecrated life**.*

(...)

*It is in this perspective that we can understand more clearly the role of consecrated life as an eschatological sign. In fact, it has constantly been taught that the consecrated life is a foreshadowing of the future Kingdom. The Second Vatican Council proposes this teaching anew when it states that consecration better ‘foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly Kingdom.’ It does this above all by means of the vow of virginity, which tradition has always understood as **an anticipation of the world to come**, already at work for the total transformation of man.*

(...)

Immersed in the things of the Lord, the consecrated person remembers that ‘here we have no lasting city’ (Heb 13:14), for ‘our commonwealth is in heaven’ (Phil 3:20). The one thing necessary is to seek God’s ‘Kingdom and his righteousness’ (Mt 6:33), with unceasing prayer for the Lord’s coming. (#26)

*‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Rev 22:20). **This expectation is anything but passive**: although directed towards the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission, that the Kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness.*

(...)

⁵⁰ Cf., for example, #32: “The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved, and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (cf. Mt 22:30).” And in #111: “...men and women who will be, for the people of our time, dispensers of mercy, heralds of your return, living signs of the Resurrection.”

Eschatological expectation becomes mission, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now. The prayer 'Come, Lord Jesus!' is accompanied by another: 'Thy Kingdom come!' (Mt 6:10).⁵¹

Those who vigilantly await the fulfilment of Christ's promises are able to bring hope to their brothers and sisters who are often discouraged and pessimistic about the future. Theirs is a hope founded on God's promise contained in the revealed word: the history of humanity is moving towards 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), where the Lord 'will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev 21:4)." (#27)

The prophetic witness of consecrated life is based here on its experience of “*eschatological tension*.” Religious live fully committed to history, underlining in their commitment and the way they live it, the certainty of the primacy of God's action in history, the final triumph of God's promise. Thus, they live in tension between the “already” and the “not yet” with regard to the Kingdom, between Christ present, but still absent, whose coming is expected.

I sincerely believe that here, in this third line of thought we find ourselves with the most proper aspect of prophetic witness in religious life, in which the other two elements mentioned above converge and from which they exist and take their meaning: the prophetic witness of a life lived by the vows, and the prophetic witness of a faith-filled reading of history. To live the present moment from the perspective of chastity, poverty and obedience, makes no sense if it is not also from the perspective of hope in a world that transcends the present, to an eternal reality, manifested in the risen Christ, he who was, who is, but also, who is to come. The religious, by his style of life, clearly testifies, in the Church and before the world, what St. Paul said to the Corinthians: “*if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain (...) If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.*” (1 Cor 15:17-19). On the other hand, in the faith-filled reading of the present historical moment, the religious life brings, from its particular prophetic stance, the hope of a history that is open to the ultimate triumph of the Reign of God. In this sense, the following text from St. Bernard's address to his monks strikes me as profound and meaningful:

“It is really a great style of prophecy to which I see you have dedicated yourselves, it is truly to a great passion for prophecy that I see you have committed yourselves. What does this consist of? According to the Apostle, it consists in not considering the things that are seen [cf. 2 Cor 4:18] and without a doubt prophesying. Walking in the Spirit [cf. Gal 5:16], living by faith [cf. Rom 1:17], looking for realities in heaven, not on earth [cf. Col 3:2], forgetting the past and plunging into the future [cf. Phil 3:13], is to live as prophets. Otherwise, how could our conversation be in heaven [cf. Phil 3:20], but for the spirit of prophecy? Prophets of long ago hardly ever lived among the people of their time, but transcending their age, by

⁵¹ *Vita Consecrata* merely applied to the consecrated life the broader teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*, #39: “...the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.”

*force and inspiration of the spirit, they exalted at seeing the Lord's day; they saw it and rejoiced in it. [cf. Jn 8:56]."*⁵²

In this attitude there is no devaluation of earthly things, but a different focus regarding them, as they look with eyes that go in a new direction, toward a wider horizon. Prophetic witness, in this sense, is effectively a glance forward, beyond the mundane reality, toward what has been promised and hoped for, even if it should seem impossible. This does not imply indifference, much less contempt, for the world, but rather freedom with respect to the world's schemes. It is, basically, the attitude that Teresa of Avila expresses in her famous text which she carried tucked into her Breviary: "*Let nothing disturb you / Let nothing frighten you / All things are passing / God is changeless / Patience gains all things / Whoever has God wants for nothing / God alone suffices.*" It is the attitude witnessed by our Blessed Jakob Gapp when, the day before his execution, he wrote to say goodbye: "*Don't be sad. Everything passes, only heaven remains.*"

The eschatological tension that runs through religious life, if you look at it clearly, is a form of radical love for the world. We religious, following the image of Christ, take the world and carry it with us in the effort and hope of reaching the Kingdom together. Thus, as religious, we embrace our own frailty, our weakness, the histories of our family, of our religious community, of our village, of humanity..., carrying in our embrace the flame of a desire for transfiguration and redemption which is nourished through contact with the person of Jesus Christ.

Up until this point has been an analysis of the prophetic witness that is expected from the religious life in the documents of the Church. If I have dwelled a little more on the eschatological aspect of the prophetic dimension of religious life and have said that it seems to me to be the true core from which will emerge the other prophetic dimensions, it is not only because it clearly appears that way in these documents of the Church, but also because this was, equally, the thinking of Fr. Chaminade. When, in 1981, I was named Novice Master, I became interested in reading and studying what our Founder had written to those whom he had named to this same task. Among those writings, there were ten letters directed to Fr. Metzger, who had asked for advice since he lacked experience (one must remember that Fr. Metzger had entered the novitiate already as a priest and was named Novice Master of Ebersmunster immediately after his first profession). In the first of these letters, I found this recommendation from the Founder:

"I will speak only, my dear son, in this first letter about the entry into the novitiate: I would like 1st that during their first 10, 12, or even 15 days, you accustom your novices to follow the regulations of the novitiate and to keep above all the silence of words; 2nd that to the postulants who are entering the novitiate, like athletes into the arena, or like soldiers into Jesus Christ's militia, you present very vividly the crown of life which will be the prize for their victory; or that, as Moses promised to

⁵² *Serm. de diversis*, XXXVII, 6 (PL 183, 642). This text was cited by Fr. Saverio Cannistrà in the conference to which I referred above. (cf. note 43).

the Israelites the beautiful land of Canaan flowing with milk and honey, you show them what faith teaches us about the land of the living, the heavenly homeland.

I believe in life eternal. The joy of eternal life must be carved deeply into all those who enter this holy militia. What battles they will have to endure! But those who fight well, those who are like athletes of Jesus Christ their divine Head, will be assured of that glorious crown that never withers: Qui certat in agone non coronatur nisi legitime certaverit (2 Tm 2:5). (“And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules.”)

It would also be good to make them think of the temporal reward at the immediate end of their labors, the hundredfold in this life, the resemblance to and union with Jesus Christ and the marvelous fruit of all these, but above all the immortal crown, life eternal.

(...)

I invite you therefore, my dear Son, to give almost all your instructions, conferences, and exhortations on faith in eternal life. In the individual interviews, see the progress which they (the novices) might make; be sure that they have well understood all the truths included in that article which is so important for our faith; that as they meditate, reflect or write about those same truths, they continually make acts of faith; that they ask the Lord for an increase in faith: adauge nobis fidem... (Lk 17:5). Credo, Domine, adjuva incredulitatem meam... I do believe, Lord, help my unbelief... (Mk 9:23). Every time they have occasion to approach or to speak to the Master of Novices or his Assistant, one can say: ‘Credo vitam aeternam.’ And the other respond: ‘Amen.’”⁵³

Needless to say, I was surprised. The last thing that I thought about was to receive the novices with conferences about eternal life. Neither had it occurred to me that the recommended mutual greeting would be: “*credo in vitam aeternam* (I believe in eternal life).” I must humbly confess that, as a formator, I did not follow this recommendation of the Founder. With the passage of time, nevertheless, I became more and more convinced that he was right. So, years later, now as Provincial, I dedicated one of my annual letters to the temporary professed to this essential dimension of the experience of religious life. In it I invited them to examine themselves with regard to their faith in eternal life, following the indications of Fr. Chaminade, with attention to three indicators which, in my judgement, show if this faith is limited or weak: a) the tendency to place the meaning and happiness of our lives in ephemeral or fleeting things; b) the tendency to live more by achievements than by hope, relying more on what we have been or done or acquired in the past, than what we hope for as definitive in the future; c) activism; not activity – which, God knows, we need – but the idolatry of activity, by which we lose sight of the ultimate meaning that motivated it. I reminded them:

*“Every faithful Christian believes and hopes in eternal life, but the religious make their way of life a confession and explicit testimony of that faith. ‘Offering ourselves to God, **we share in the Lord’s paschal mystery** and bear witness to **our hope**’ (RL 17). With our way of life, we announce the consistency and reality of that ‘eternal life, which was present to the Father and became visible to us’ (1 Jn 1:2) and which he offered to us in the Risen Christ. It is that ‘other life’ which, ultimately, justifies and explains that we renounce, by our vows, certain aspects of ‘this life,’ not because they*

⁵³ EP, vol.7, doc.17. (trans.)

*are contrary to the other life, or constitute an obstacle to reaching it, but because, in the face of eternal life, they are simply relative, even though being holy and good.”*⁵⁴

We could say that, within eschatological tension, religious life lives its history, based on an absence more than on a presence, it is based more on what is not seen, than on what is seen. A faith that nourishes, that stimulates and that sustains is described in Hebrews 11:1: “*Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for and conviction about things we do not see.*” Fr. Chaminade referred to this verse on many occasions, in his abundant conferences and commentaries about faith. In order to show in practice how one lives based on this faith-hope, we know that the rest of Chapter 11 covers the history of salvation, in order to recall some outstanding testimonies from among those in that “*cloud of witnesses*” who have preceded us. It does us religious much good to frequently bring them to mind in order to reaffirm our vocation. Our consecrated life is identified completely with theirs: with that of Abraham, who “*left, without knowing where he was going,*” with Moses, who headed toward the promised land without fearing Pharaoh’s wrath, “*he persevered as if he were looking at the invisible God,*” and, of course, although she does not appear on that list, with Mary, who lived in the firm conviction that, in spite of her poverty, the promises of the Lord would be fulfilled through her “*for with God, nothing is impossible.*” The central verses of that same chapter (13-16) are especially comforting and motivating for us:

*“All of these died in faith. They did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar. By acknowledging themselves to be strangers and foreigners on the earth, they showed that they were seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking back to the place from which they had come, they would have had the opportunity of returning there. But they were searching for a better, a heavenly home. Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called **their God, for he has prepared a city for them.**”*

This is the proper prophetic witness of religious life: to announce a God who not only is committed to the present moment in history, but one who brings it into a fullness that transcends the present, beyond its always limited possibilities, both personally and collectively. Let us recall, once again, what I said at the beginning of the *Circular* about the spread of “presentism” throughout our culture. It is evident that, when one lives only from and for the present, religious life fades, it becomes empty, it lacks substance. It is completely logical. Many of those who leave the SM obey that logic, lacking this faith-hope in either a personal or collective history, whose final outcome is not in our hands but in the Lord’s. Yes, our Founder was right: when this eschatological tension is lacking in our experience of faith, religious life becomes meaningless.

- It is from this perspective, rooted in a healthy sense of Christian eschatology, that one must understand the traditional *fuga mundi*, the “renunciation of the world,” so present in the nature of religious life throughout history and in the writings of Fr. Chaminade that I have cited in the first part of this *Circular*, in particular the articles

⁵⁴ For whomever might be interested, this letter was published under the title *Creo en la vida eterna* [I Believe In Eternal Life] in COMUNICACIONES, Province of Zaragoza, # 386 (20-Apr-1996).

of the *Constitutions of 1839*, which I consider as a “small catechism” of religious life (p.17f). We should not understand it as a “flight” in a physical sense, that would isolate us or take us out of the world, but rather as a call to live within and embrace “this world” from that “other world” which is eternal.

- It is from this perspective, as well, that the religious life contributes to the prophetic character of the Christian life when it shares with the rest of the People of God the commitment to bear witness to the Christian life in all its dimensions. We are not separated from, or detached from the rest of the faithful, but rather, on the contrary, it urges us to unite with them, with the duty to ensure that in this witness, there is no shortage of faith-hope in the God of the promise.
- It is from that perspective, finally, that religious life acquires its radical freedom before the powers and dynamics proper to this world, present in society and including, at times, in the Church itself. It is that freedom which so many witnesses have left us throughout the history of religious life, including the Society of Mary, from the Founder to our martyrs.

2.2 The call of the laity in a shared mission.

Earlier, while speaking of the crises of religious life after the Council, I alluded to the drastic decrease in the number of religious within all the religious institutes and mentioned the statistic of the Society in this regard. It is a worrisome fact, of course. If we go through the *Personnel*, from year to year, we see that the decline is permanent and inexorable. But, in the same perusal, we will realize that, in spite of that fact, the number of works has not diminished in proportion to the decrease in religious, but, on the whole, it has been maintained and even, in some Units with aging personnel, it has grown. In spite of having lost two-thirds of the religious, our actual apostolic presence in the world remains rich and abundant. Why is this? Certainly, it is due to the participation and integration of laypeople into our mission. There was a time in which our apostolic works were fully managed and maintained by religious, by large communities, even bigger for larger works. This reality has been turned upside down in recent decades. The picture is reversed. Our communities are small and the number of committed laypeople in our mission, including some with important responsibilities, has grown enormously, in proportion to the size and number of the works. And what is even more amazing: we are noticing that many of them have truly opened themselves to our charism. They appreciate it, they live it and are even able to project it in mission.

This phenomenon of the adhesion of the laity to our mission and to our spirit, is not exclusive to the Society of Mary. It is a phenomenon common to religious life today, above all for

active religious life, but not only.⁵⁵ Contemplative religious life has also seen growth around a rich constellation of groups of faithful laypeople. In my view, given this factual reality, evident and undeniable, we have a clear call of the Spirit at this present time in the Church. Giving us this great gift of a generous and responsible laity, as if the Spirit were calling us to put ourselves at their service, to offer to the laypeople what they need from our charism as they live out their faith and their Christian commitment. And, what is it that they need and seek from religious life? In my opinion, the answer can be synthesized in three words: mission, fraternity and spirituality.

- a) **Mission.** I begin with mission because it is the first and most immediate point of engagement of the laity with the religious life. The Spirit, through the Second Vatican Council, raised the consciousness regarding the dignity of the laity within the Church and their co-responsibility in the mission of bringing the Gospel to the world and the world to the Gospel, from their own state of life, inserted in the world. *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and the later post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, are profound documents, which make clear the key role of the laity in the Church, referred to as the People of God, from the mystery of communion which is essential to their identity and from which derives their mission. Pope Francis expressed it with urgent clarity in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’. If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: ‘We have found the Messiah!’ (Jn 1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him ‘because of the woman’s testimony’ (Jn 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, ‘immediately proclaimed Jesus’ (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for?” (#120)

The mission of the Church is, therefore, a common task, to which are committed all of the faithful, the laity as well as the hierarchy or religious, because of our common baptism, each from their particular experience and vocation.

In the wide range of structures and apostolic institutions in the Church, the laity have found, in those generated by active religious life, one of the closest and most suitable

⁵⁵ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, #’s 54-56.

places for the exercise of their mission. The reason is in that these ecclesial structures and institutions are not naturally hierarchical, but lay. Institutions of education and instruction, hospitals and health centers, centers for human development, shelters and social assistance..., and so many other examples, all are fruit of the missionary initiative of religious life throughout history, above all after the French Revolution. In the past, with the laity relegated to being a dependent minor in the Church, it was the religious life that, in the name of the Gospel, generated and took on these institutions at the service of society. Today, an adult laity, well-formed and ready to assume its role, is capable of assuming these institutions and running them. From a believer's outlook over history, it seems evident to me that, with this fact, the Holy Spirit is sending a double call to the religious life: share your mission with the laity and, consequently, reposition yourself in it. We ought to listen to these, take them serious and respond to them concretely in our life. The two calls are related in themselves.

Taking seriously the call to share the mission with the laity, means our being open to sharing responsibilities with them in the institutions, through mutual relations in which both parties, lay and religious, interact, mutually benefitting from the particular identity of each one, derived from each one's specific vocation. That forces us to open ourselves to the laity's contribution to the mission and, at the same time, rediscover ours as religious, in order to re-situate ourselves in an effective way in that mission. In an interview that I gave to the magazine *Vida Marianista*, which is published in Spain, they asked me about the role of the laity in our lives. I share, here, my full answer:

*“Their role is not as ‘substitutes,’ but as the new ‘inhabitants’ of the family, with their own identity as laypeople. They don’t come to ‘replace’ us. Their role is that of being lay Christians, committed to the mission as laypeople, and not ‘as if they were’ religious. They assume tasks and services that only religious assumed in the past. And, they do this with an admirable competence and commitment. But they do not replace us. The laypeople are laypeople, and we are religious. They are the first to be conscious of that, and they repeat it to us constantly. Therefore, one of the beneficial effects of their entrance into our ‘home’ has been (or should be, because in some places it is not yet evident) that they have caused us to reflect about our identity. With their participation in our mission, we have come to realize that the lay tasks and services that we assumed in the past as religious, do not define us as such. The conclusion is not that we should leave them alone in their own hands. We religious are also laos, People of God, engaged in lay ministries. Therefore, in a certain way, it is natural for us to share the mission with the laity. But, upon doing so, we realize that our identity comes from elsewhere, it is somewhere else, in another way of being present and of acting. We can say, therefore, that the role of the laity in our life is not only that of collaborator in the mission in which we are engaged, but also in helping us discover and deepen the meaning of our religious vocation.”*⁵⁶

To begin to answer this call of the Spirit in the present moment, we need to take proper steps.

⁵⁶ *Vida Marianista*, # 59 (February 2009), p. 15.

- In the first place, we need a change of mentality which opens us up, not only to receiving collaboration *from* the laity in our mission, but of entering into collaboration *with* the laity in the common Marianist mission.
- Secondly, we need to give significance and apostolic meaning to the responsibilities that we give to the laypeople in our apostolic institutions, in order that they might receive the mission in a fully incarnated way, and not just be in charge of an organization.
- Thirdly, because our mission is based on the Gospel, accepted, practiced and announced from our particular charismatic inspiration, we will need to generate bonds of spiritual communion, evangelical and charismatic harmony with the laity, if we want to make the “common” mission effective.

And this leads us to the two following points:

b) Fraternity. The evangelical mission is not individual, but communal. It emerges from the community and is nourished by the community: a community that lives the fraternity of the Kingdom, derived from one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one Father, one Spirit. No wonder the Lord began his preaching of the Good News by calling the apostles to “be with him” and “sending them out to preach” (Mk 3:14-15), that is, to form a community in order to make them missionaries, heralds of the Kingdom. He did not make them missionaries, one by one, but stemming from the community experience, in which the desire to dominate was forbidden and the only recognized mutual treatment was that of being a “brother” (Mt 23:5-12).

Indeed, out of that fraternity of the Kingdom the religious life is called forth to be an incarnation and witness in the Church and the world. The Congregation for the institutes of consecrated life recently published a document about the identity of the lay religious in the Church.⁵⁷ I am not certain of the reception this document has been afforded among you, but it is an important document, a real gift and a clear call of the Church to the religious life, that we should embrace with enthusiasm and follow responsibly. Although it is specifically directed toward lay religious, it has to do with the whole of religious life, because it is in them, the lay religious, where religious life is found “in its pure state,” without being contamination by other states and ministries. I gather here a few lines from its initial affirmations, with those that define the role of the religious in the Church:

*“Being part of this people and its mission, the Religious Brother lives the call to be memory of the covenant by his consecration to God **in a fraternal life in community for mission***⁵⁸. Thus he makes more visible the communion that all God's people are called to embody.

Encouraged by the Spirit, the Church today deepens its awareness of being the People of God, where all have equal dignity received in Baptism, all have a common vocation to holiness, and all share responsibility for the mission of evangelization. Each one according to

⁵⁷ CIVCSVA, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*. “You are all brothers” (Mt 23,8), (October 4, 2015).

⁵⁸ VC 72.

their vocation, their charism and their ministry becomes a sign for all the others. Religious life is born and inserted into this consecrated people, and within it lay religious life with a new and special consecration which develops and deepens baptismal consecration. Lay religious life participates in "a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God"; it lives its particular charism in relationship and continuity with other ecclesial charisms and it integrates itself into the mission of the Church which is shared with the other believers.

*Religious Brothers find their natural **habitat** in this context of communion, by way of belonging to the People of God, and they are also united with all those who, by religious consecration, reflect the essence of the Church, the **mystery of communion**. In it they keep alive the **obligation of brotherhood as a confession of the Trinity**⁵⁹ (#'s 5-6)*

"The fraternity of Religious Brothers is an encouragement for the whole Church, because it makes present the Gospel value of fraternal relationships of equality in the face of the temptation to dominate, to search for the best place or to exercise authority as power: "You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, for you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father who is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ" (Mt 23:8-10).

*Communion is proposed today in the Church as a particularly pressing **challenge** in the new millennium, so that it may be transformed into the **home and school of communion**⁶⁰. Brothers are active inhabitants in this home and are both students and teachers in this school; that is why they make their own the urgency that the Church proposes for itself, to live and promote a **spirituality of communion**⁶¹." (# 7)*

So, on the one hand the laity need, in their mission, that space for fraternal community, or communal fraternity, for sharing and nourishing their life of faith, that space generated by being "together with the Lord," and from which they "are sent."⁶² On the other hand, within the Church, the religious life is especially called to live that fraternity and bear witness to it. It is natural, therefore, that religious life and the lay state be in harmony in this regard, and mutually seek each other.

As Marianist religious, this call should resound with us in a particular way. We all know how our Founder was convinced that the way to evangelize was to generate communities of faith. In his missionary plan, these were, at once, the first fruit sought after and the generating source of the mission. We recall how he liked to define the Sodalities as "perpetual missions."⁶³

⁵⁹ VC 41; 46.

⁶⁰ John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001), 43.

⁶¹ Cf. VC 46, 51; NMI 43.

⁶² Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, insists indirectly on this need when he affirms: "a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because **in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act**, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making." (# 102)

⁶³ Cf. Letter to M. O'Lombel on March 22, 1824: *Letters*, # 274.

Here also, in order to answer this call, we have to be taking concrete steps. In the first place, and in my opinion the most important, is the need to change perspective from that which we consider our communities to be, and how we construct them. We must move away from seeing them and building them such that they are oriented exclusively inward, paying attention to the maintenance and development of “our” human and religious needs. Instead, we must begin to consider them to be centers of witness and radiation of the fraternity of the Kingdom “outward,” toward our environs, beginning with the laity with whom we share our mission. In many Units of the Society they know how, following our visits as a General Council, we have insisted on the need for our communities to open themselves up and be “visible and accessible.” In truth, this recommendation should not be seen as something new for us. At its root, it has to do, simply, with the first step necessary for putting into practice what is said in our *Rule of Life*: “**The community itself is a primary instrument to fulfill our mission.**”⁶⁴

- c) **Spirituality.** The laity comes to religious life in search of support for the development of their own spiritual life. The mission and the community are works of the Holy Spirit and are based on the life of faith. Without a faith that is open to the Spirit and led by it, the mission is a mere human project and community is just teamwork, or a simple group for mutual aid. It falls, therefore, into what Pope Francis has called “spiritual mundanity.”

“Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn 5:44). It is a subtle way of seeking one’s ‘own interests, not those of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 2:21). It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, ‘it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral.’

This worldliness can be fueled in two deeply interrelated ways. One is the attraction of Gnosticism, a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings. The other is the self-absorbed promethean Neopaganism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ RL, art. 67. It is important to remember the entire article, as well as articles 11 and 43 which complement it.

⁶⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 93-94.

It is faith that takes us out of this danger that threatens the mission as well as the community. If the mission and community are not centered in faith, they remain mundane, sterile. It is faith that reveals the true meaning of what we are experiencing, which makes us discover the presence of the Lord, the action of the Spirit, which pushes us to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, and live and act in the Spirit, just like the first Christians in the Acts of the Apostles. Now, that faith which “de-centers” us from self-absorption, and takes us out of that “self-referential,” is a gift of the same Spirit. This gift sustains and nourishes our experience of an absolute God, incarnated in the person of Jesus, and made manifest in our way of life. By virtue of their vocation, religious are called, as I tried to make clear when speaking about the prophetic witness proper to us, to be witnesses to this absolute truth, in the face of the relativity of all the rest of the world. The laypeople who come to share our fraternity and mission are also looking for – and I dare to say “above all” – brothers who live according that experience of the absolute quality of God. This is need for the nourishment of one’s life of faith.

Last year, Fr. Marko Iván Rupnik and Maria Capatelli published an interesting and thought-provoking book about the current status of religious life and pathways towards the future.⁶⁶ The book begins with an encounter and dialog between Boguljub, an old oriental monk, a recurring character in Rupnik’s books, and a Christian couple, Marijan and Maruška, around forty years of age, who come to visit him, eager to find the light that can give strength and meaning, from the perspective of their faith, to their marriage, beyond the “recipes” that the world offers them. Through this literary device, the authors go threshing through a profound analysis of the meaning of Christian life, of the coincidence in both states of life, married and religious, and the particular contribution of religious life to their own lives. Allow me to cite two passages, that graphically express, I believe, what I have tried to express in this section.

At the beginning, Maruška appears with her husband before the monk and tries to explain their reason for visiting:

“Father, Marijan and I, to the extent it has been possible, have always tried to live deeply in the faith, participate in the life of the Church, follow its teaching, stay close to its pastor... But, we have always encountered many obstacles. The main problem was not so much the difficulties we encountered, but the lens through which we were invited to consider them. Over the years, we have both become convinced that, at the end of the day, it is not a question of seeking to resolve the difficulties, by searching for solutions. We started to sense that, perhaps, we needed to look for something else. If one participates a little more, from within the ecclesial life, listens a little more to conferences, takes part in meetings in which an infinite analysis of what the current situation is like are continuously put forth: long expla-

⁶⁶ RUPNIK, M. I.; CAMPATELLI, M., “Vedo un ramo di mandorlo” [I See An Almond Branch]. *Riflessioni sulla vita religiosa*, Lipa, Rome 2015.

nations, at times erudite, about historical, cultural and psychological conferences that always conclude with what more should be done... Pardon me, father, for what I am saying – it could seem to be a criticism, but it is born of concrete experiences over so many years in ecclesial community, this approach has generated fatigue, mistrust and even, sometimes, a certain cynicism – but what we find is that this approach does not work. It does not work in general, nor among us.

Let me explain: for us two, to live the sacrament of matrimony means to become, more and more, one thing. That is exactly what the Lord asks in the Gospel of John: As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, I pray that they may be one in us” (Jn 17:21). Nevertheless, for every problem that has arisen between us, in all of those moments of tension, misunderstanding, and mutual estrangement, there was always someone willing to counsel us with some psychological approach, some relational dynamic, or something that, if you will, always began with us, our doing, our task. Finally, we have realized that all this only leads to a mere agreement between us, like two individuals who are simple seeking to live together, peacefully one with the other...”

With this experience, Maruška explains to the monk the couple’s desire: that, in the ecclesial community in which they belong, somebody might speak to them from a Gospel point of view, from the perspective of faith, not so much to solve the difficulties of life, but to see them, understand them, and confront them, with a different point of view, in another light. Later, she will tell him that they have gone looking everywhere, but have not found this even among the religious.

This mention of religious life, gives the old Boguljub the opportunity to develop a long discourse about the dangers that threaten it and the risk that it will result in the loss of identity. After interesting allusions to tradition and deep theological reflection, the monk comes to the conclusion that, in the long run, the meaning of the Christian life is the same for all, that is for marriage as well as for the religious life, but that meaning is lived out from different perspectives. Thus, both states are called to help each other come to live this meaning, in all its fullness and depth:

“From the very beginning, the monks have had difficulty defining themselves, to say what they were. The saying of Orsiesi, disciple and successor of Pachomius, the Bishop of Alexandria who wanted to ordain Orsiesi, is quite famous: ‘We are unimportant laypeople...’ Centuries of theology, spirituality, Canon Law, based on the search for distinctions, have complicated everything. Personally, I believe that in this relation of tension and identity, between religious vocation and the vocation common to all the baptized, one fittingly finds the specifics of a religious vocation...”

What is the effect of baptism? It transports us to the Kingdom, where our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). And, what is a monk? One who has the vocation of bearing witness here and now, to our total belonging to the Kingdom. All of us Christians are pilgrims (Heb 11:13) who walk toward the golden square described in the Apocalypse. Most of us, at the same time, have other objectives along the way: caring for our husband or wife, raising children, organizing human society... The monk simply does not have these things and, thus, by his very style of life, reminds everyone where we should walk.

Once, a friend of mine quoted a Chinese sage whose name I cannot recall. This sage says that the window is just a hole in the wall, but thanks to this hole, the room is filled with fresh air and light. My friend, ever since he read this quote, did nothing further than compare the monk to this hole. Completely emptying his heart, leaving him only his relationship with God, the monk becomes a window for the Church and for the world, through which passes the splendor of the future, this future Kingdom which, however, is already present among us. And this gives clarity to everything, illuminating with a light that would not exist if this hole were shut. The monk is the hole through which the future is explained, not with arguments, but through an epiphany, a living manifestation.”

This beautiful image describes that to which we are called as religious, in our service to the ecclesial community and to the world. We are called to be that emptiness, that “window” in the wall, through our particular way of life, in chastity, poverty, obedience and fraternity that fosters the epiphany of the everlasting Kingdom, a glimpse of that life which is now hidden with Christ in God, which, in the future, will be made fully manifest, when God will be all in all.

This call compels us to wonder about the quality and the witness of our life in this sense. What kind of life do the laypeople find in us? Is the reality of the everlasting Kingdom truly transparent, or is it obscured by other realities, other tasks, other concerns? One question involves another: how do we practice means of emptying our lives to become transparent? What is our practice of the vows? prayer? liturgy? the sacraments? community life? universal fraternity? unconditional welcoming? service of the poor? the chosen of the Kingdom...?

Dear brothers, I sincerely believe that our future will depend on the seriousness with which we respond to these two calls, which are connected to each other: the call to prophetic witness which is particular to us, and the call to shared mission with the laity, with all that this entails. These are not new calls for us; they do not catch us Marianists by surprise. If they find any resistance within us, we simply need to renew, deep down, our experience of our charism, and thereby rekindle, with enthusiasm, the foundational inspiration of our Founder. Our ears will be opened, our hearts penetrated and these calls will become incarnate in our lives.

III. OPENING UP THE FUTURE

3.1 Some temptations to overcome.

Following the foundational inspiration and the calls we receive in the present day, we must try to live a personal and community life that makes the future, which the Spirit is already trying to engender today, possible. This is a serious responsibility. We should embrace it with courage, as Pope Francis has said to young people, and get going without fear. But, in order to start moving, we must overcome the temptations that paralyze us. Some try to dissuade us from confronting a present-only living with an eye for the future; others seek to discourage us by leading us down deceitful paths, trapping us, and eventually ending up in weariness and disappointment. Among others, there are three that seem to me to be particularly dangerous because, unfortunately, I see these very active and powerful in today's religious life, including, of course, the Society of Mary.

- The first is what I would call the **temptation to “get off the cart” of history too early**. Unfortunately, there are more than a few, especially among those who have reached a certain age, who think: “I am already old; mine is the past, the future is for the youngsters.” This is not true. Actually, it is a dangerous temptation with which the Devil, taking advantage of our aging, wants to decimate us in the battle for the future, paralyzing us. Whoever gives in to this temptation contributes to making our lives, with its habits, routines, ways of doing things, be they personal, communal or institutional, stagnant or static, as if the present moment were all there is. But it is not. Time passes, and what remains immutably fixed in the present, dies. With this tactic, we would not have a future.

May none of us ever fall into this temptation! It is quite clear that the future is inchoate in the present, and the present is in each and every one of us, in each and every one of our institutions. Let us not die prematurely! Age, no matter how advanced it may be, does not allow us to exit history, before the Lord calls us to himself, and he wants us to be here. We are the present, and, therefore, **each and every one** of us is a seed of the future. Whatever our personal situation may be, we must try to live the present in such a way that it makes the future possible. It is an obligation of each religious, of each community, of each Unit. No one can circumvent this duty. To not assume it would be a sin of infidelity to our vocation.

- The second temptation is to think that **the future ought to be a recovery of the past**. It is the temptation of nostalgia. For many religious, the preoccupation about the

future comes with questions like: How do we get more vocations? How do we maintain our institutions? How do we remain influential?... In short, how do we recover the “splendor” of yore?

No. The future will not be like the past. That is sure. We do not know how it will be, but it will be different. All attempts to return to the past are doomed to failure and, thus, lead to eventual weariness and disappointment. This is, also, a temptation of the Devil. Once again, the Devil wishes to take advantage of our aging in order to entice us: “Given that the old tend to get their self-worth from their past – the Devil astutely thinks – and reminisce with satisfaction, even pleasure, let us tempt them, with the illusion of a future similar to the past that they have lived. If they should fall into this temptation, we have won them over for discouragement and resignation.”

It is important that we overcome this temptation, which is much more subtle than the first one. Our hope in the future, as Christian hope ought to be, is always Paschal, meaning from death to resurrection. Between what is sown and what is reaped there is, logically, a continuum, but also a rupture. As the Lord said: “*unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it yields much fruit*” (Jn 12:24). Or, as St. Paul preached the resurrection of the “body”: “*Perhaps someone will say, ‘How are the dead to be raised up? What kind of body will they have?’ A nonsensical question! The seed you sow does not germinate unless it dies. When you sow, you do not sow the full-blown plant, but a kernel of wheat or some other grain. God gives body to it as he pleases – to each seed its own fruition.*” (1 Cor 15:35-38). Our vision toward the future should be an open vision, detached from the past, **concerned only with the quality of the seed that, in this very moment, we are planting into history**, trusting that God will give body to what sprouts from the seed.

- The third temptation is to think that **the future is in the mind of the “experts.”** It has always made me uncomfortable when people ask for my view on how the religious life should be in the future. Unfortunately, given the responsibilities that I have had to assume during my own religious life, I have been asked this question many times. I have always responded in the same way: “I don’t know; I am neither a prophet nor a founder.”⁶⁷ The great number of scholars and theologians who have dared to write books that confidently expound on how religious life must be in the future amazes me. I am equally amazed how these are so eagerly sought after in order to find – finally! – the “recipe” for getting out of that jam in which we find ourselves, in order to start walking down the “true” path to the future.

⁶⁷ When I was a formator, I participated in many conferences and meetings in which they discussed what religious life would be like. It seemed important, so it was said, that those beginning their walk in this life were formed according to this direction, and not according to what it had been up until now. I saw that plenty of formators began to go down this path, and they tried to form candidates for what “would have to be” the religious life of the future. Naturally, there was not unanimity either on the objectives, or on the content: everything depended on the trend or the author who was taken as the latest prophetic oracle. The results were disastrous. The great majority of those formed professed their vows, some, logically, with the idea and illusion of being “the future,” but they did not persevere. Therefore, where did that “foreseen” future go?

I confess that I am unable to think of the future of religious life as a result of analysis, of a plan or strategy emerging from an academic chair or some office. What institute, or what reform, has ever appeared in history that way? Religious life is not a conclusive result of theological, sociological or psychological analysis. It is a miracle of the Spirit and it depends exclusively on our openness to that Spirit. I fully agree with what Joseph Ratzinger said in his book *Faith and the Future*, in that fifth chapter to which I referred above, in which he tries to respond to the question about the future of the Church:

“The future of the Church can come, and will really come today, only by the power of those who have deep roots and live by the pure fullness of their faith. The future will not come from those who only give recipes. It will not come to those who only adapt to the given moment. It will not come to those who only criticize the rest and see themselves as the infallible norm. Neither will it come to those who only choose the easiest path, nor to those who avoid the inevitable trials of the faith, considering as false, old fashion, tyrannical and legalistic, all that is demanding for the human person, all that causes pain and forces one to renounce one’s self. Let’s put it positively: the future of the Church, also at this point in time, as always, will be rebranded with the seal of the saints.”

The exact same thing can be said for the future of religious life. Indeed, the future, not only our personal future but also that of the Society of Mary, is written in the life of each one of us and depends on the degree of depth and the fullness of faith with which we are living. It is here already, in seed form, and it depends on the quality of that seed. When we speak about the future, what comes to my mind is the passage from the Gospel in which the Pharisees ask Jesus: *“when will the kingdom of God come? Jesus replied, ‘The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.’ Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. People will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them.”* (Lk 17,20-23).

3.2 The necessary “re-foundation” of our personal religious life.

In recent years, and before the great changes experienced by the world, the need to “re-found” religious life was much talked about. Normally, when this is spoken of, the idea is to “re-form” the structures by decree. There is the great expectation that, finally, the “messiah” has arrived, namely, a General Chapter or General Council, intelligent and insightful, which decrees new “forms” and puts them into practice. But, it doesn’t work that way. If what I have just said in the last section is true – and it is –, there is no re-foundation possible

without re-founding the personal life of each one of us. There is no future if we do not concern ourselves with our personal lives as religious, as Marianist religious, leaving behind our leaning on what is transitory and relative, in order to be “founded,” anchored in the true foundations of religious life; leaving behind houses built on sand in order to build them on rock.

Joseph Ratzinger, after saying what I just quoted at the end of the last section, concluded:

*“From today’s crisis will emerge tomorrow a Church that will have lost much. It will be smaller; **it will have to start all over from the beginning**. It will not be possible to fill many of the buildings constructed during a more favorable time. It will lose followers, and with them many of its privileges in society. It will present itself, much more intensely than heretofore, as a free-will community, which can only be accessed by means of a decision. As a small community, **it will demand with much more strength the initiative of each of its members** ...the Church will find, once again, and with determination, what is essential, what has always been its center: faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ, Son of God, become man, and the Spirit’s help which will last until the end of time.”*

His diagnosis about the future of the Church can be applied, word for word, to the religious life. We don’t need to be very insightful or intelligent to realize that, in the future, we will be less – just a “small community” – and less “powerful,” as the author says. It is clearly evident. But what I find truly lucid in this diagnosis and what is often absent from discourses about the future, is what I have underlined in the text and what I reformulate in this way: From the position of its smallness, religious life of the future ***will demand with much more strength the initiative of each of its members*** in order to start all over from the beginning and thus, in that future, will find, once again, and with determination, ***what is essential, what has always been its center***.

In order to “start all over from the beginning” and, thereby, to open up the future in order to discover what is essential, we need every one of us (“the future will demand with much more strength the initiative of each of its members”) to strive to “re-found” our religious life on solid foundations. This is a personal task, of course, but our lives are not isolated, they are intertwined, one with another, in mutual interdependence and, therefore, it is also a community task. We need to take responsibility from and for each other, mutually assisting one another in this endeavor.

What do I mean by religious life “re-founded” on solid foundations?

- a) A religious life that is **founded upon the roots**, which nourish it deep down and hidden, as opposed to the branches and the leaves which outwardly appear. The leaves fall in the winter and it is not the branches that assure and maintain the life of the tree in anticipation of its re-emergence in the spring. In fact, a good pruning helps them to acquire their vigor again. What is really important are the roots. Without good and healthy roots, the tree has no future. It is condemned to die, to perish.

The root of religious life, as I have tried to explain all throughout this *Circular*, is in one's personal relationship with the absolute God. Do I live religious life from this relationship? What is the concrete impact of this relationship on my life? On February 1st of this Jubilee Year 2016, Pope Francis offered a discourse to religious, gathered for a meeting in the Paul VI Hall, on the occasion of the celebration of the Jubilee of Religious Life. In it, as is his habitually direct style, he shared, among other things:

“The first is prophecy. It is a characteristic of yours... You are called, first of all, to proclaim, with your life even more than with words, the reality of God: to speak God. If at times he is rejected or marginalized or ignored, we must ask ourselves whether perhaps we have not been transparent enough to his face, showing our own instead... In order to make him known it is important to have a personal relationship with him; and for this it takes the capacity to adore him, to cultivate friendship with him day after day, through a heart to heart conversation in prayer, especially in silent adoration.”

The generous and gracious time that we dedicate to prayer and meditation is the proof that God is absolute in our life. Before God, all else is relative and left aside. It is necessary time to take to distance ourselves from the day to day situations in which we live, not to abandon them, but that we might see them through another perspective, see them with the eyes of the Lord. It is the time to climb the mountain where the Lord comes to meet us, like Moses, like Elijah, like the Apostles on Tabor, in order to return to the valley with another perspective, the perspective of faith. Many Church Fathers have underscored how, at the Transfiguration, the disciples were transformed, thereafter able to know Jesus beyond his “human form.” We need that penetrating gaze, and to live from it. We need, as Fr. Chaminade so often insisted, to really live a profound life of faith.

In this sense, on February 2, 2013, during the Year of Faith, at the Eucharistic celebration on the day of religious life, Pope Benedict XVI addressed religious in his homily, the central theme of which is worthwhile to recall and reflect upon here:

“I would like to address three invitations to you, so that you may fully enter through that ‘door of faith’ which is always open to us (Apostolic Letter, Porta Fidei, #1).

I invite you in the first place to nourish a faith that can illuminate your vocation. For this I urge you to treasure, as on an inner pilgrimage, the memory of the ‘first love’ with which the Lord Jesus Christ warmed your hearts, not out of nostalgia but in order to feed that flame. And for this it is necessary to be with him, in the silence of adoration; and thereby reawaken the wish to share — and the joy of sharing — in his life, his decisions, the obedience of faith, the blessedness of the poor and the radical nature of love. Starting ever anew from this encounter of love, you leave everything to be with him and like him, to put yourselves at the service of God and your brothers and sisters (cf. Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata, #1).

In the second place I invite you to have a faith that can recognize the wisdom of weakness. *In the joys and afflictions of the present time, when the harshness and weight of the cross make themselves felt, do not doubt that the kenosis of Christ is already a paschal victory. Precisely in our limitations and weaknesses as human beings we are called to live conformation with Christ in an all-encompassing commitment which anticipates the eschatological perfection, to the extent that this is possible in time (ibid., #16). In a society of efficiency and success, your life, marked by the 'humility' and frailty of the lowly, of empathy with those who have no voice, becomes an evangelical sign of contradiction.*

Lastly, I invite you to renew the faith that makes you pilgrims bound for the future. *By its nature the consecrated life is a pilgrimage of the spirit in quest of a Face that is sometimes revealed and sometimes veiled: 'Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram' (Ps 27[26]:8). May this be the constant yearning of your heart, the fundamental criterion that guides you on your journey, both in small daily steps and in the most important decisions. Do not join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armor of light — as St Paul urged (cf. Rm 13:11-14) — keeping awake and watchful.”*

- b) A religious life **founded on patient hope**. As we have just seen, Benedict XVI exhorted us to not join with the “prophets of doom.”⁶⁸ I have already mentioned above, in the second part of the *Circular*, the faith-hope, of which we religious should be living witnesses in the Church. And, in the introduction of this third part, I offered an invitation to overcome the temptation of nostalgia with a hope that is based upon the Paschal Mystery, upon confidence in the God who gives life beyond death. I am not going to repeat all this again. I will take that for granted. Here I try to add something new to what I have already said. This is the virtue of “patience” with which we should live hope. Upon adding the adjective “patient” to the word hope, I refer to a characteristic that is derived from its Christian nature and that Pope Francis has emphasized by stating that, for the Christian, “*time is superior to space.*”

“A constant tension exists between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us. Broadly speaking, ‘time’ has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure. People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. Here we see a first principle for progress in building a people: time is greater than space.

⁶⁸ Using this expression, it is very possible that Benedict XVI had in mind those words of Pope John XXIII in his Opening Speech to the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962): “*In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, nonetheless, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty.*

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men’s own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.”

This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time. One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes. Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity.”⁶⁹

The Pope recalled, later on that this was the attitude of Jesus and it is also what he wanted to instill in his disciples through the parables, like the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24-30), or through warnings like the one that there were things they still could not comprehend and they had to wait for the Holy Spirit to reveal these to them (Jn 16:12-13). It comes down to the assumption that it is not our business “*to know the times or moments that the Father has established with his authority.*” (Acts 1:7)

When hope in the future is impatient, when it tries to dominate God’s time, it ceases to be Christian and becomes demanding, aggressive, intolerant of situations, structures and persons that are judged to be “obstacles” to that future which is awaited. “Impatient hope” tries to “cut” the time by making the way smoother, eliminating the “obstacles,” without realizing that in assuming this attitude, this impatience is precisely what closes off the future. It does nothing but generate, by reaction, the same aggressiveness and intolerance that all impatience carries with it, and in this way, eventually divides and paralyzes. In the recent history of religious life, there have been more than a few initiatives “of the future” attempted (new communities, new missionary options, new forms of government...) which, although good and plausible in themselves, have failed for this reason. Therefore, we need to re-found our life in “patient, evangelical” hope, so that a positive future may be possible.

- c) A life **founded on a passion for the mission**. Like our Founder. Without a passion for the mission, there is no Christian life; nor, therefore, religious life and, much less, Marianist life. If this passion is not actively present in our lives, Marianist religious life will lose its meaning, fade away, and eventually die. There will be no future.

This passion stems from two loves that feed off each other: love for Christ and love for humanity. Beneath it all, there is but one love. All comes from the joyful discovery of God’s love, manifested and found in the love with which Christ loves, not only me, but all of humanity. Christ’s love for me makes me understand God’s passion for humanity (“*God so loved the world...*” : Jn 3:16) and urges me to love humanity in the same way, as a consequence (“*if God loved us in this way, we must also love*

⁶⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, #’s 222-223.

one another...” : 1 Jn 4:11). The experience of having found, in Christ’s love, the treasure that truly gives value and the fullness of joy to my life, brings me to love Christ with all my heart. The love with which he gives himself to humanity makes my heart ache to see so many brothers and sisters not have the fortune of finding him, and urges me to convey him to them. Passion for the mission is nothing but the result of feeling carried, impelled by God’s love which redeems humanity, embracing it with tenderness and infinite mercy.

It is a constant task of Pope Francis to make us understand that the mission of the Church is none other than the logical consequence of the experience of God’s love, which is evident in the exercise of love of neighbor. The entire encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* is rooted in this basic principle and there are many times when he recalls it with insistence: evangelization is an act of love and only love evangelizes. Recently, in his homily at the Eucharist of September 25 of this year, while celebrating the Jubilee of Catechists, he affirmed once more:

*“It is by loving that the God-who-is-Love is proclaimed to the world: not by the power of convincing, never by imposing the truth, no less by growing fixated on some religious or moral obligation. God is proclaimed through the encounter between persons, with care for their history and their journey. Because the Lord is not an idea, but a living person: his message is passed on through simple and authentic testimony, by listening and welcoming, with joy which radiates outward. We do not speak convincingly about Jesus when we are sad; nor do we transmit God’s beauty merely with beautiful homilies. **The God of hope is proclaimed by living out the Gospel of love in the present moment**, without being afraid of testifying to it, even in new ways.”*

The Gospel of the day was the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which gave rise to the Pope’s explanation of the danger threatening evangelizers – catechists in this case – which is none other than indifference to the poor. And so continues the previous paragraph:

“This Sunday’s Gospel helps us understand what it means to love, and more than anything how to avoid certain risks. In the parable there is a rich man who does not notice Lazarus, a poor man who was ‘at his gate’ (Lk 16:20). This rich man, in fact, does not do evil towards anyone; nothing says that he is a bad man. But he has a sickness much greater than that of Lazarus’, who was ‘full of sores’ (ibid.): this rich man suffers from terrible blindness, because he is not able to look beyond his world, made of banquets and fine clothing. He cannot see beyond the door of his house to where Lazarus lies, because what is happening outside does not interest him. He does not see with his eyes, because he cannot feel with his heart. For into it a worldliness has entered which anesthetizes the soul. This worldliness is like a ‘black hole’ that swallows up what is good, which extinguishes love, because it consumes everything in its very self. And so here a person sees only outward appearances, no longer noticing others because one has become indifferent to everyone. The one who suffers from grave blindness often takes on ‘squinting’ behavior: he looks with adulation at famous people, of high rank, admired by the world, yet turns his gaze away from the many Lazaruses of today, from the poor, from the suffering who are the Lord’s beloved.

But the Lord looks at those who are neglected and discarded by the world. Lazarus is the only one named in all of Jesus' parables. His name means 'God helps.' God does not forget him; he will welcome him to the banquet in his kingdom, together with Abram, in communion with all who suffer. The rich man in the parable, on the other hand, does not even have a name; his life passes by forgotten, because whoever lives for himself does not write history. And a Christian must write history! He or she must go out from themselves, to write history! But whoever lives for themselves cannot write history. Today's callousness causes chasms to be dug that can never be crossed. And we have fallen, at this time, into the sickness of indifference, selfishness and worldliness."

The figure of the rich man in this parable, is contemplated here as that of the "anti-missionary," as someone radically incapable of communicating the Gospel by living secluded in his own world, with doors shut.

I worry that this self-imposed seclusion of the rich man could even occur among us. A danger lurks nearby into which it is easy to fall. It has to do with the identification of the mission with a task. If the task ends, the mission ends. When, for whatever reason, we have to leave, or we judge it prudent to leave, the work that we were developing in the name of our "mission," the "missionary passion," which should be accompanying us throughout our whole life, unfortunately, and with too much frequency, also vanishes. Sometimes, in practice, there develops, *de facto*, a connection between retirement from work and abandonment of the missionary plan of our life. It is a clear sign that, in such cases, the mission has not been lived from the true basis for which it was undertaken, but from other spurious motives. When this happens, one's life ends up closed in on itself, occupied with its own things, limited to its own world, resistant to any change that might shake it up. Little by little, it becomes transformed into a life that is incapable of being lived "outward," an essential characteristic of a life lived in mission, as Pope Francis likes to repeat.⁷⁰

If my life has entered or is entering into this dynamic, I need immediately to pull it out from there. No, the mission is not a task. The mission is, before all, a mode of being in the world, outside of one's self, moved by the love that has been given to us by Christ. Thus, it has nothing to do with circumstance, with age, or with speaking ability, communication or relationship. We all, in whatever circumstance, are missionaries and we cannot cease being so without betraying our vocation.

"The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; 'communion and mission are profoundly interconnected.'⁷¹ In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded..."⁷²

⁷⁰ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, #'s 19-20.

⁷¹ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (December 30, 1988), # 32.

⁷² *Evangelii Gaudium*, #23.

Fortunately, among us there are abundant testimonies of brothers exemplary in their availability, openness and missionary enthusiasm, all the way to their death. There is no more contagious a witness than this. With their attitude they have sown and continue sowing seeds of the future.

3.3 “New wine in new wineskins”: the necessary re-foundation of our structures.

On November 27, 2014, Pope Francis received the participants of the plenary session of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life beginning his discourse with these words:

*“I find the title you selected for this session, ‘New wine in new wineskins,’ beautiful and meaningful. In the light of this Gospel phrase you have reflected on consecrated life in the present-day Church, 50 years after the Constitution Lumen Gentium and the decree Perfectae Caritatis.
(...)”*

*In the portion of the Lord’s vineyard represented by those who have chosen to more closely imitate Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels, new grapes have ripened and new wine has been pressed. In these days you have set out to **discern the quality and maturity of the ‘new wine’** which has been produced in the long season of renewal, **while evaluating whether the wineskins that hold it, represented by the institutional forms present today in consecrated life, are suitable to hold this ‘new wine’ and help it to fully age.** As I have had the opportunity to point out at other times, **we must not be afraid to discard the ‘old wineskins’**: that is, **not to renew those habits and those structures** which, in the life of the Church and thus also in consecrated life, we recognize as **no longer corresponding to what God asks of us today in order to help his Kingdom move forward in the world**: the structures that give us false protection and that condition the vitality of charity; the habits that distance us from the flock to which we are sent and prevent us from hearing the cry of those who await the Good News of Jesus.”*

In the previous sections I have addressed, above all, the “new wine,” and the quality that one hopes to find in it. We should not forget, though, like the Pope says, that we also must ask ourselves about the “wineskins” that contain the new wine, *those habits and structures* which frame our religious life, personal habits and structures, and those of the community, Region, Province or General level. Pope Francis urges us to confront the necessary renovation of these without fear, when we see that they no longer serve the purpose for which they were adopted. He also gives us two important indications for evaluating them:

- They should serve to bring the “new wine” to full maturity, meaning that they should help the religious life of each one of us acquire more authenticity, depth and consistency. Therefore, we should commit ourselves, each and every one of us, to: a) analyze what it is among the *habits and structures* in which our religious life unfolds that hinders or prevents the maturation of that life, whether these be in our own personal life, or that of our community, Unit or of the Society. b) share this analysis with

the rest of the brothers in an attempt to reform those things. It is not easy, but it is necessary. It requires a lot of personal sincerity, as well as an openness and availability to welcome the needs of others, and cooperate together in the true search for progress in the maturation of religious life, without deviations toward distractions.

- They should *correspond to what God asks of us today in order to help his Kingdom move forward in the world*. The Pope warns us that, in this regard, those structures and habits no longer serve us when they: a) *give us a false sense of protection*; b) *place conditions on the dynamism of our charity*; c) *distance us from the people to whom we are sent to serve and impede us from listening to the cry of those who await the Good News of Jesus Christ*. These are three criteria for crystal-clear analysis with which to discern our missionary structures, our own works or those in collaboration with others. It is also a task that should be undertaken by communities, Units and the Society in general, through their methods of discernment: community meetings, councils and chapters.

The evaluative criteria described here are negative: they help us to discover the structures that “don’t work.” Now, how do you discern those that do work? For that, we must take a look at them from the perspective of the identity and mission of religious life. Pope Francis, in the same discourse I just cited, offered, with precision and clarity, those benchmarks that define this perspective:

“In the challenging task that has brought you together, in order to assess the new wine and test the quality of the wineskins that must hold it, you are led by a few guidelines:

- *the evangelical originality of choices,*
- *charismatic faithfulness,*
- *the primacy of service,*
- *attention to the smallest and most fragile,*
- *respect for the dignity of each person.”*

The Gospel, the charism, service, attention to those most in need, respect for human dignity – all are references for the Pope when the time comes to “evaluate” and test the “quality,” whether it be the present structures of our life, or those that are proposed as “new” in facing the future. In my view, with these references, the Pope provides a good template to use in our discernment, provided, I believe, we don’t understand them as being separate, but rather, inclusive. We cannot place ourselves in the perspective of one of them, in isolation, without regard for the others. The “value” and “quality” of a particular choice of life or structure is not assured simply because it responds to one of these orientations; it should respond to all of them in an inclusive way. Actually, this list does not offer several different criteria, but just one: the Gospel, lived from the perspective of the charism, for the service of the most needy and the promotion of human dignity.

I have dealt extensively with the religious life in this *Circular*; now I have alluded to its structures. It is clear that the quality of religious life and of the structures that frame it in its

being *ad intra* and *ad extra*, are intimately related and, consequently, we need to “re-found” both, the life and the structures. Always, the question emerges about what has priority: reform the structures in order to reform the life? or, reform the life in order that the structures might be reformed? Said another way: what should be first – the wine or the wineskins? Following the wine simile, I daresay it is the wine that is fundamental, because it is the original wine that gives quality to the new barrel, and not the reverse. If we throw good wine into a new barrel, that barrel becomes good, and able to make good wine in the future; if we fill a new barrel with wine in poor condition, the barrel becomes spoiled and is no longer useful because it will spoil the wines that come later, even though they may have been good. Now, if we deal exclusively with the wine first, what will happen to it if we do not, at the same time, have a concern for the barrel? Wine needs the barrel so as not to spill out all over. A life without structures which give it flesh, is a pure pipe dream. Reforms of our life and structures necessarily go hand in hand with each other, but it is the life that should be at the root, as the foundation of the structures. If the wine is not good, the barrel serves for nothing.

I say this in order to reaffirm a principle to which I have already alluded and which to me is very important to keep in mind throughout this whole process of renovation or “re-foundation,” during which we must work hard. The principle is this: there is no need to create or impose new structures as a result of decisions made by authorities, from “on high,” with the purpose and hope that these might renew the life. Good structures arise – and as it should be – at the same time as the life, and where there is life being generated, namely, at the base. A concrete experience of “re-foundation” has more renewing impact, anywhere in the Society, than all of the documents or declarations – and these are not few – or even beautiful discourses about what we need to live and do. If that experience, even if it is just local, is an authentic charismatic response to what the Spirit is calling us, here and now, surely it will be transformed into a seed of renewal for the entire Society of Mary. I think of, for example, how Marianist Lay Communities appeared and, today, have become so universal and fruitful in the Marianist charismatic world. Most certainly, it was not by a plan coming out of a Chapter, but the phenomenon sprang from various local experiences, that built on one another and spread. Once again: the future lies in our concrete life, in our capacity to open our eyes and ears to what the Spirit is trying to offer us and to bring it to life there, where each one of us is.

Dear brothers, the celebration of the Bicentennial of our foundation is a call to become aware of our responsibility with respect to what we have inherited: How are we living this gift?

How are we passing it on so that it may be kept alive in the future? This past September 12, I sent you a letter calling on all to participate in the preparation of the next General Chapter, as was the expressed wish of the General Leadership Assembly which took place in July of last year. In the context of the celebration of our two hundred years of existence, the Assembly sought to mobilize the entire Society in the preparation of this next Chapter. The purpose of this mobilization is, precisely, to facilitate the exercise of this responsibility to which I have referred, with the revision of our religious life and of our mission, and with the discernment of the pathways forward, into the future, on which the Spirit is inviting us to walk. In my view, the objective of this preparation to which we are all called, is not to offer the Chapter a series of suggestions and theoretical desires, in order to be able to produce a beautiful document – yet one more document – but rather, to convey what, in our personal and community life, as much on the local as on the regional or provincial levels, one perceives as the call of the Spirit and which **one is willing to live**. I dream of a Chapter of the Bicentennial that would be affirming and supportive of a renewed life, which is already present here and now, although it may be present in seed form, rather than a Chapter that pretends to generate it.

It is to this type of **preparation based on our lives and commitment**, that we are called; for this work we are all responsible. This *Circular*, together with the other three documents of the General Council mentioned in my letter of September 12, are attempts to help in this process. I can only assure you of my prayers that the Holy Spirit might illumine this path and that we might not lack the accompaniment of Mary during this journey. May she help us to welcome the Spirit, as she welcomed it, and, in that way, Christ may be incarnated for today's world, as he was incarnated through her.

Your brother in Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all,

Manuel J. Cortés, SM
Superior General

Rome, October 2, 2016,
*199th Anniversary of the Foundation
of the Society of Mary*