



*Circular
of the
Superior General
#2*

**THE SPIRIT OF THE SOCIETY OF MARY
IS THE SPIRIT OF MARY**

Part two: IN MISSION WITH MARY

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

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THE SPIRIT OF THE SOCIETY OF MARY IS THE SPRIT OF MARY

Part Two: IN MISSION WITH MARY

Dear Brothers:

I present here to you the second part, completing my reflections about our charism under the title *The Spirit of the Society of Mary is the Spirit of Mary*. I am sending them one year after the first part –*In Christ with Mary*. Thus I have attempted to offer a simple contribution to the renewal of our Marianist Life. I hope that the time between these two parts has permitted reflective assimilation of that with which the first part dealt, as this is necessary for a proper understanding of what follows. At the very least, that was my intention when I decided to separate the two parts.

I dedicated the first part to a reflection about our conformity with Christ. All that we are and that we live as religious proceeds from this mystery, as our *Rule of Life* reminds us. In particular, I reflected about the role that Mary plays in this conformity, such as it was perceived and lived by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, because that is where our Marianist Charism has its roots. But we still need to consider the missionary dimension of this charism, which springs forth from that same root and is equally essential in our lives.

Our conformity with Christ, our identification with Him, identifies us also with his mission, transforms us into servants of the Kingdom, into missionaries of the Gospel. “Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to **work for the coming of his kingdom**”, affirms our *Rule of Life*, because He is the “Son of God, become Son of Mary **for the salvation of all**”¹. Our conformity with Christ implies our commitment with Him to the salvation of humanity. The missionary dimension of our life is, therefore, an essential element which we cannot fail to live and cultivate. We are, by our very nature, missionaries – “You are all Missionaries!”, our Founder often repeated – laborers for redemption. This is what we are up until the time of our death.

This motto of Fr. Chaminade and the thought of his passion for mission have stayed with me constantly during the formulation of these pages. In a special way, they have brought to mind his delight in the title “Missionary Apostolic,” which the Holy See conferred on him following his return from exile in Saragossa. It meant so much to him that he petitioned the Pope for the grace that his successors might inherit the title, as a perpetual reminder that the Society of Mary has no other reason for being than that of “mission”. Gregory XVI responded to his petition in a Pontifical Brief. This document, full of recognition of Fr. Chaminade’s apostolic spirit and all his good work, among other favors, granted the title in perpetuity to him and to his successors².

¹ RL 2.

² Pontifical Brief of December 3, 1839. (AGMAR 1G1, 1.9)

The Papal Brief was an occasion in which Fr. Chaminade once again reminded us about the missionary character of our Marianist vocation. His request for the title of “Missionary Apostolic” for his successors was not to shower them with personal privilege, a personal honor, but rather, as a symbol to the entire Society of Mary, to all of the brothers and all of their works. Filled with joy, he wrote in the circular announcing to the Society the concession of this “privileged sign”: “The title and quality of Missionary Apostolic, with which I myself have the high honor of being invested, will remind my successors for all time, that **our work is a mission**, derived from and participating in the apostolate of Jesus Christ. **We are all missionaries**. The ordinary lay brothers and the religious of the Daughters of Mary are also missionaries, all Catholic missionaries, recognized by the Holy See”³

The call to mission, so insistent and so urgent on the part of our Founder, remains particularly urgent for us in today’s world. The last several General Chapters have echoed this urgency in a persistent way. *Mission and Culture* (1991), *Partners in Hope* (1996), *Sent by the Spirit* (2001), *In Mission with Mary* (2006) are all documents with a clear missionary perspective, which invite us to respond to new evangelizing challenges in our world, from the perspective of our charism, with missionary creativity and boldness.

We need, therefore, to renew and revitalize the **missionary ardor** which flows from our vocation. In order to do this, we must go down to its source and drink the water of the spirit which gives life. This is a task to which we all must dedicate ourselves with courage. Only in this way will we be able to be faithful to what the Spirit asks of us here and now. The reflections that follow attempt to make a small contribution to this task. I sincerely hope that it is a help!

The circular consists of five parts:

1. “Servants and Ministers” of Mary.
2. The Mission of Mary, the Mission of the Church.
3. Our Marianist Mission in Service to the Church.
4. The Particular Contribution of the Marianist Mission to the Mission of the Church.
5. Mary in the Marianist Preaching of the Good News.

The first three sections attempt to call to mind the framework, both charismatic and ecclesial, in which our mission exists. The fourth section forms the nucleus and is the most extensive. In it, I discuss the characteristics which define our mission, rooting them evangelically in a contemplative reflection on Mary at the Wedding Feast of Cana. The last part, by way of conclusion, discusses the importance and necessity of the presence of Mary in the preaching of the Gospel.

³ The text continues: “It was necessary, therefore, that the first Superior – of whom the priests and the lay members of the Society or the Institute are, from this point of view, only the vicars or the delegates – should be more specially pledged to the Sovereign Pontiff and receive from him the sacred character of the mission which he exercises in his own right, and by those under him in the Church of God. This is why I asked for this favor, and this is what it signifies in the thought of the Pontifical Brief.” (*Circular of March 8, 1840*, n.2)

1. “Servants and Ministers” of Mary.

Although, in fact the passion for mission was the stamp that marked the life and work of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, it was not that which characterized or distinguished him within the ecclesial panorama. Missionary fervor is inherent in all authentic Christian life. “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” said the Apostle.⁴ The whole Church, the Body of Christ, each and every one of its members, is (ought to be!) a missionary.⁵ What makes Fr. Chaminade unique in his being a missionary is his Marian inspiration.

As I explained in my earlier circular, what is charismatic in Fr. Chaminade is his way of understanding Mary and living for her from the point of view of mission and for the purpose of mission. His missionary fervor brought him to contemplate Mary from the perspective of her participation in the redemptive work of the Son, of her role in the History of Salvation. And, vice versa, that contemplation is precisely what inspired him and sustained him.⁶ In the apostolate, he considered himself to be a servant of the mission of Mary, and his founding purpose was none other than to respond to the inspiration to offer the services of a family dedicated to her. One simply need recall those vehement lines from his letter to retreat masters in August 1839, written in his full euphoria after the Decree of Praise from the Holy See regarding the two institutes he founded: “To her (Mary), therefore, is reserved a great victory in our day, for to her belongs the glory of saving the faith from the shipwreck with which it is threatened. We have come to understand this design of Providence, and **we have hastened to offer our feeble services to Mary in order to labor under her direction and to carry on the conflict at her side.**”⁷

The General Chapter of 2001, paraphrasing the *Rule of Life*, offers a good synthesis of this fundamental element of our charism: “Mary occupied a preferential place in Father Chaminade’s founding insights. In alliance with her, he undertook a mission to form a People of Saints who would live the Gospel with the fervor of the first Christian community. At the heart of his spirituality and evangelizing enthusiasm lies the conviction that we come to Jesus through Mary. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Mary conforms us to her Son. We dedicate ourselves to her to prolong her maternal charity on earth, so that Christ her Son may grow and become the center of all creation. In this way, we Marianists make a contribution to the coming of God’s Reign in history.”⁸

As a matter of fact, in following our Founder, we Marianists feel ourselves called by God to prolong Mary’s mission throughout history. We are “her humble servants and minis-

⁴ 1Cor 9:16.

⁵ “The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all men to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, which the Church carries on in various ways through all her members. For **the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate.**” (Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* n.2)

⁶ Cf. Circular n.1, 1.1.

⁷ MW II 74.

⁸ SS 5.

ters” – as Fr. Chaminade defined us in his first Constitutions⁹ – in alliance with her. As such, we confirm this alliance with a special vow, that of stability, by which we “we commit ourselves irrevocably to the service of Mary, Mother of God and our Mother,”¹⁰ following the Lord in a Society which belongs to her.¹¹ This is our *raison d’être*.

Thus, “If we are to participate effectively in the new evangelization, we must rediscover Mary in our life and give her the place she deserves,” the General Chapter of 2001 reminds us. It goes on to say: “For this purpose, we need to develop a Marian spirituality founded on the Scriptures. It must permeate our whole life, because Mary, open to the action of the Holy Spirit, is the model of the faith-life to which Father Chaminade calls us, both as persons and as communities. She sends us on mission. Following Blessed Chaminade, we strive to live in a profound relationship with Mary and to intensify our journey to holiness for the sake of mission.”¹² And, along the same lines, the last General Chapter, whose document actually bears the title *In Mission with Mary*, exhorts us to “return again and again to meditate on the mystery of Mary,” “the first disciple, upon whose graced cooperation the world turned; the woman who shows us how to read the signs of the times; and, the image of the church and Mother of us all.”¹³ To return to our Marian, missionary spirituality, to being servants in Mary’s mission, in order to better discern and live our mission of today – this is our great challenge.

In this necessary return to the sources, a question immediately arises regarding the meaning and particular characteristics of Marianist spirituality and missionary action. It could be put this way: Given the fact that our Founder has defined our life in terms of service in the mission of Mary, what does this mean and what consequences does it have for our mission, as expressed concretely through the life we lead and the work we do?

2. The Mission of Mary, the Mission of the Church.

The fitting response to the question just posed, in the first place, is that the maternal mission of Mary is continued through the Church. “Mary represents the Church. As Mother of the Christians to whom she gave birth at the foot of the cross, and whom Jesus in fact constituted as such in his last will and testament,” our Founder said.¹⁴

Understanding and living the mission of Mary, and that of the Church, go hand in hand. Both sink their roots in the mystery of the Incarnation and respond to the mysterious designs of God who, in order to save humanity, sought human collaboration. Entering into this mystery we discover that Mary’s mission, and with her, that of the Church, is indispen-

⁹ “We repeat and we confirm what has already been said, that the motive of our second object, zeal for the salvation of souls, is an immediate consequence of the design that God’s goodness has inspired in us for conforming ourselves with his grace to the resemblance of Jesus Christ and for giving ourselves to Mary for her most humble servants and ministers.” (Const. 1839, a. 252)

¹⁰ RL 15.

¹¹ Cf. RL 14.

¹² SS 30.

¹³ MM 8.

¹⁴ MW I 214.

sable in the salvific plan of God. This is so, not because God is incapable of redeeming us by Himself, but because it is His will that the human person, whom he has created with free will, might cooperate freely with his own redemption. A text that I once read, attributed, although without footnote, to Cardinal Schoenborn, Archbishop of Vienna, aptly expresses this:

“Mary is the guarantor of Christian realism. In her it becomes manifest that God's word was not only spoken but heard; that God has not only called, but the human person has answered; that salvation was not only offered but also received. Christ is God's word, Mary is the answer; in Christ, God has come down from heaven, in Mary the earth has become fruitful. Mary is the seal of perfect creatureliness; in her is illustrated in advance what God intended for creation.”

At the Annunciation, God sought Mary's “yes” in order to give a human body to the Savior, thus revealing his design that redemption might come, not *from outside* of humanity, but *from within* and *with* it. That “yes” continues to be required by God all throughout history. Also in this response is the foundation of the Church. It follows, then, that those who have difficulty grasping the role of Mary in the salvific action of Christ, or who minimize it, or even deny it, will also have difficulty grasping the role of the Church, will minimize it or even deny it – and vice versa.

The Church has always thought of Mary as an icon of her own being and of her own mission. Already in the Gospels, especially in Luke and in John, she is presented as “Mother of the Lord,” “Woman,” and “Mother of the Beloved Disciple,” clearly showing how she is the mirror in which is seen the mystery that dwells within her and the role that is hers in God's plan. The Second Vatican Council recognized our long tradition, beginning with the Scriptures and the profound reflections of the Fathers of the Church, and continuing up to our time, and concluded thus: “By reason of the gift and role of divine maternity, by which she is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with His singular graces and functions, the Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church. As St. Ambrose taught, the **Mother of God is a type of the Church** in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin **stands out** in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. By her belief and obedience, not knowing man but overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, as the new Eve she brought forth on earth the very Son of the Father, showing an undefiled faith, not in the word of the ancient serpent, but in that of God's messenger. The Son whom she brought forth is He whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, (Rom 8:29) namely the faithful, in whose birth and education she cooperates with a maternal love.”¹⁵

The Church is Marian in the depths of its being and in its mission. Thus, when we say that our particular vocation in the Church is one of being allied with Mary in her mission, we absolutely do not mean to say that this belongs to us exclusively. It would be totally erroneous to interpret our vocation and our commitment to Mary's mission as something particularly ours, as something which occurs in the Church “along with” “other” calls to “other”

¹⁵ LG 63.

missions. The mission of the Church is one. It is none other than the redemptive mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, carried out and perpetuated in time through the presence and action of the People of God.¹⁶ And this mission is completely Marian in its roots.¹⁷

Our Marianist missionary vocation is, therefore, a call to serve Mary's mission by serving the mission of the Church. We do not see it as an additional mission, but as a particular way of collaborating with the single, unique mission of the Church, which is that of Mary.

3. Our Marianist Mission, in service to the Church.

Like the beloved disciple,
we accept Mary as a precious gift of God.
Moved by Jesus' love for his Mother we dedicate ourselves to her
so that the Holy Spirit,
in whose action she cooperates with a mother's love,
may form us more fully to the image of her Son.
By our alliance with Mary,
we seek to assist her in her mission of forming in faith
a multitude of brothers for her first-born Son.

This Article 6 of our *Rule of Life*, which affirms so well the Marian character of our spirituality, as well as that of our mission, has as its backdrop Number 63 of *Lumen Gentium*, already cited, and it even contains a literal quote from it. Therefore, in its clearly and explicitly Marian character, it also bears a strongly implied ecclesial dimension. The latter becomes explicit to us when we see that it does not lose its meaning if, while re-reading it in the light of what I explained above, we substitute the word "Church" for the words "Mother" and "Mary." With this simple exercise, it becomes clear how our commitment to Mary, in order that, with her cooperation, the Holy Spirit may form in us the Son, and our alliance with Her in order to assist her in her mission, become concretely incarnate by our commitment and our service to the Church. Thus, an immediate consequence of the Marian character of our charism and of our mission should be our unconditional love and commitment to the Church, in which the Marianist, with the eyes of faith, sees the maternal presence and action of Mary incarnated.

¹⁶ "Therefore the Son of God walked the ways of a true Incarnation that He might make men sharers in the nature of God: made poor for our sakes, though He had been rich, in order that his poverty might enrich us (2 Cor. 8:9). (...)But what the Lord preached that one time, or what was wrought in Him for the saving of the human race, must be spread abroad and published to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), beginning from Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:27), so that what He accomplished at that one time for the salvation of all, may in the course of time come to achieve its effect in all. To accomplish this, Christ sent from the Father His Holy Spirit, who was to carry on inwardly His saving work and prompt the Church to spread out." (*Ad gentes*, nn. 3-4)

¹⁷ "**Everything in the Church**, every institution and ministry, including that of Peter and his Successors, is "included" under the Virgin's mantle, within the grace-filled horizon of her "yes" to God's will. This link with Mary naturally evokes a strong affective resonance in all of us, but first of all it has an objective value. Between Mary and the Church there is indeed a **connatural relationship** that was strongly emphasized by the Second Vatican Council in its felicitous decision to place the treatment of the Blessed Virgin at the conclusion of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church." (Benedict XVI, *Homily during the concelebration in St. Peter's Square with the new cardinals, March 25, 2006*)

As servants of Mary, we are servants of the Church. The Marianist's commitment to the Church's mission is nourished by the Marian character of his vocation. In the first sentence of the first article of the Constitutions of 1839, Fr. Chaminade defined our institute as "The little Society, which offers its feeble services **to God and to the Church under the auspices of august Mary...**"¹⁸ Following his example, we see ourselves as unconditional sons of the Church. As such, we profess filial love and commitment to it, despite its imperfections and human limitations, the very commitment that we profess to Mary. The mission that stems from our alliance with Mary is concretized in our commitment in service to God's plan, in service to the Church.¹⁹ By the Marian character of this alliance, it bears its mark and has its own place within the Marian mission of the Church. As the last General Chapter affirmed, today, like yesterday, "We believe the Lord is still calling us to contribute our Marianist charism to make the Marian dimension of the Church present in the world,"²⁰ thus contributing to the Church's development of a genuine "Marian style."

Note regarding the meaning of this expression:

*"Marian dimension of the Church," "Marian style of the Church," "Marian Church," "Marian model of the Church."... are expressions, for better or worse, that have come into use in order to distinguish the "Petrine-principle," which is founded in the Church's structure, from the "Marian-principle," which fundamentally lies in her being Spouse of Christ and Mother. John Paul II used this distinction in *Mulieris dignitatem*²¹ and alluded to it on other occasions, always, in the deepest sense, with the intention of exhorting the Church to live according to Mary and to commit itself to show its Marian face.*

¹⁸ Today's *Rule of Life*, although with different wording, also conserves in its first article the echoing of this commitment to the Church, even though the relation to its Marian character is more remote, less explicit. "The Society of Mary, founded by William Joseph Chaminade, is a religious congregation of pontifical right. **It is especially dedicated to Mary.** Its members, priest and lay religious, form a single family and strive for the fullness of charity by consecrating themselves to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels and by placing themselves **at the service of the Church.**"

¹⁹ "We work as members of the Church and share in its mission. With heart and mind we enter into its life and teaching and we collaborate fully with the entire ecclesial community." (RL 66). "Since the Society of Mary partakes in the mission of the Church, Marianists should be integrated into its life and pastoral planning. Thus, we regularly examine our insertion in the local Church, according to the guidance of the bishops and fidelity to our charism." (RL 5.3)

²⁰ MM 16.

²¹ After speaking about the Church as the Bride who is united with her Bridegroom in a bond that confers the "royal priesthood" upon all the faithful who participate, he goes on to say: "This is of fundamental importance for understanding the Church in her own essence, so as to avoid applying to the Church - even in her dimension as an "institution" made up of human beings and forming part of history - criteria of understanding and judgment which do not pertain to her nature. Although the Church possesses a "hierarchical" structure, nevertheless this structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the "great mystery" in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom. She does this "in the Holy Spirit," since "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). The Second Vatican Council, confirming the teaching of the whole of tradition, recalled that in the hierarchy of holiness it is precisely the "woman," Mary of Nazareth, who is the "figure" of the Church. She "precedes" everyone on the path to holiness; in her person "the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27)." In this sense, one can say that the Church is both "Marian" and "Apostolic-Petrine." (*Mulieris dignitatem* 27)

It would be erroneous to interpret this distinction as an opposition, as if the “Marian model of the Church” were opposed to the “Petrine” model, as if the Church were to incarnate two distinct models. The Church is one, Petrine and Marian at the same time. One because it is, above all, communion: one faith, one baptism, one Spirit that works in each and every one of its members, as the Apostle proclaimed. It is Petrine and Marian at the same time, because, although a human body, it is impregnated by the Spirit.

*This distinction helps us not to lose sight of the fact that the Church, visible Body of Christ, in pilgrimage in this world, always has Mary on the horizon as its point of reference, the star that illumines its path, and helps to guide it, the “Most Holy One” whose presence is always a call to purification and holiness. As Benedict XVI reminded the new cardinals in his first consistory: “What a great gift, dear Brothers, to be able to conduct this evocative celebration on the Solemnity of the Lord's Annunciation!... This providential coincidence helps us to consider today's event, which emphasizes the Petrine principle of the Church, in the light of the other principle, the **Marian one**, which is even **more originating and fundamental**.”²²*

*The latter expresses the maternal character of the mission of the Church and shows that it is “not an apparatus, an endless bureaucracy, in charge of some type of organization. Church means that we are the family of Jesus Christ and that, because of this, we are called into a community of love with Him. It means that we have His mother as our Mother and therefore we are His brothers and sisters. It means that, as a child is formed by its mother, so we too are formed and molded by her so that we become a **Marian church**, the only Church, Bride of the Lamb.”²³*

From the point of view of our charism, for us Marianists, this dimension of the Church resonates in a special way, and in profound communion with the other charisms and ministries, we can affirm that we understand and live our mission as a particular and humble contribution to the development of the Church's Marian character. “Toward a Marian Style of Church,” is the title of Document #1 of the last General Chapter. It attempts to show how our mission goes hand in hand with, and contributes to, the overall mission of the Church.

Our mission, thus, finds its place in the maternal mission of the Church. Yet, it does not comprise the totality of the Church's mission. From the charismatic perspective itself, it offers a humble contribution to the development of one aspect of the overall mission. How so? What aspect of the Marian mission of the Church do we Marianists feel called to bring to the world and how do we bring it?

4. The Particular Contribution of the Marianist Mission to the Mission of the Church.

Formation in faith is the aim of our apostolic work.

Whatever we do is meant to contribute, directly or indirectly, to this end;

²² Benedict XVI, *Homily during the concelebration in St. Peter's Square with the new cardinals*, March 25, 2006.

²³ From the homily of Cardinal Josef Ratzinger to the Schoenstattists meeting in Rome on the occasion of the birthday of Fr. Joseph Kentenich. (Rome, St. Mary Major, September 18, 1985)

thus we make our modest contribution
to the Church's universal mission.²⁴

In effect, this is the distinctive feature of our mission in the Church, inherited from our Founder. “By our alliance with Mary, we seek to assist her in her mission of **forming in faith** a multitude of brothers for her first-born son,” as we clearly affirm in Article 6 of our *Rule of Life*, already cited.

We must, nevertheless, be more specific if we wish to understand our particular contribution to the formation in the faith of the Church. How do we contribute to this task?

If we understand the question from the point of view of the concrete means that we use, we can respond with a list of our works or, in a more general way, by saying that we serve in this mission through diverse ministries and activities²⁵ and that “we remain open as a Society to all means of evangelization,”²⁶ without forgetting that education has always been and continues to be “a privileged means of formation in faith.”²⁷

We realize, however, that this response is not sufficient. It is not our works and tasks, as such, that define our particular mission in the Church. Others also dedicate themselves to these things. The question goes beyond them. It is a matter of mode, spirit or style. The answer lies, after all is said and done, in Mary. How do we contribute to formation in faith? -- As Mary did. What do we contribute to this task in the Church? -- That style and those aspects of Mary that the Gospel inspired in our Founder through his particular and charismatic approach to her.

Above all, there are two Gospel stories that show us Mary “in mission” and which, in doing so, allow us to discover the features that characterize her. In both, Mary’s action has as its effect the awakening of faith within those to whom it is directed. One of these episodes is the Visitation of Elizabeth, which provokes the first profession of faith in Luke’s Gospel, the recognition through his mother of Jesus as Lord. “And how has it happened to me that the mother of **my Lord** would come to me?”²⁸ exclaimed Elizabeth upon receiving the greeting of Mary. The other story, cited constantly by Fr. Chaminade when he would speak about our mission, and continually present in our tradition, is the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana in the Gospel of John. This sign caused the faith of the disciples to bloom “This beginning of

²⁴ RL 5.1. (Cf. a. 71)

²⁵ “The community fulfills its mission in a diversity of ministries. Some of our members have as their chief task that of preaching the Word of God and leading the Christian community in prayer. Others work principally in the fields of education and culture, aiming to show that the human person can be fulfilled only in response to God's plan. Through laboring in technical, administrative, or domestic service, still others make present in our world and in our communities the witness of Christ, the carpenter's son.” (RL 69)

²⁶ RL 10. Cf. RL 73.

²⁷ RL 74; 5.10. “Under this title (On Christian Education) - wrote Fr. Chaminade - are included all the means by which religion can be inculcated into the mind and into the heart of men and by which they can thus be trained from tender infancy to the most advanced age in the fervent and faithful profession of a true Christian life.” (Constitutions 1839, a. 251)

²⁸ Lk 1:43.

His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and **His disciples believed in Him,**²⁹ the evangelist tells us.

In order to answer thoroughly the question at hand, I suggest that you go back once again to the last story mentioned,³⁰ to Jn 2:1-12, in order to ponder it from the perspective of the mission of Mary, a perspective that, in my judgment, is not too far from the perspective of the evangelist himself. We could say that, in this episode, the Beloved Disciple contemplates Mary in action, fulfilling the mission that Jesus entrusted to him at the “Hour” of redemption.

It is not out of place to understand it like this. In a certain way, the Gospel of John is a Gospel that can be read in reverse, from the back to the front. It is, perhaps, even more revealing to do it this way. In essence, between chapters two and twelve, the Jesus who speaks and acts is more like the risen Lord, than the Jesus of Nazareth. His miracles, few and well chosen, are seen not so much for their material value, but for that which they symbolize, as authentic “signs” of new times, opened up by the Pasch of the Lord when his “Hour” had come. The “first” among these signs, as the evangelist himself points out, is the sign of the Wedding at Cana. Occurring on the “third day” (v.1), once the group of disciples had been established, (1:35-51), it is a sign of what would occur on the other “third day,” when the era of the Church would begin, a time of the superabundance of grace, a time to experience the fullness of the marriage of God with his people.

Reflecting on it this way, the story of the Wedding Feast of Cana shows us the woman and mother – Mary (and the Church) – in mission, and allows us to perceive the special nature of that mission, which, by vocation, is also ours as Marianists.

There are four elements, it seems to me, which define the nature of this mission: a presence that “anticipates”; compassionate and hopeful attention to poverty; zeal for faith – obedience to the Word of the Lord; and the witness of the community.

4.1. “A Presence that Anticipates”

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus **was there**; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.”

I have always been surprised at the way this story begins. Mary is presented in a different way than are Jesus and his disciples. They were “invited”; the mother of Jesus “was there.” She was a part of that wedding feast and her presence preceded that of Jesus and his disciples. After Jesus would manifest his glory, and the disciples would believe in him, she would then be united with them. But, before the “sign” occurred and opened the way to the

²⁹ Jn 2:11.

³⁰ Here there is no intention of ignoring the Visitation. Fr. Chaminade found in this mystery many seeds for contemplation of Mary as mediatrix and instrument of grace. He dedicated several sermons to this theme. These can also help us to penetrate into his Marian experience. (Cf. MW I, nn 414-422; 473-481; 506-512)

feast of abundance, Mary “was there,” in the midst of a wedding feast doomed for lack of wine.

If we stick simply to its literary form, the story allows us to see that Mary is not a stranger to that impending problem. She is not an outsider, does not have to be told. Her presence is not passive, like an invited guest. We see her in action. And, it is her action, from “within” the banquet, which saves it from being a disaster. If we now elevate this from the literal sense to the theological, we can say that the evangelist presents us Mary as belonging to the old covenant, which has become sterile, but she now emerges as the first believer in the new covenant. By virtue of her faith, her recognition of who Jesus is, the new covenant makes the old bear fruit.³¹ Thanks to her, who “was there,” thanks to her faith, the presence of the Lord becomes active and changes the potential bad ending of the story into a story of bounty.

This prior “anticipatory” presence, which places Mary at the frontier between the old and the new, between a deprived humanity and the superabundance of the grace offered in Christ, should also be a trait of the presence of the Church in our world. It is necessary to be present in the world with and like Mary, so that from within the world might open its doors to the Redeemer, so as to cross the frontier of faith. Furthermore, this “anticipatory” presence is even more urgent as the world drifts further away from this frontier. The Church cannot fulfill its mission if, faced with the drifting away of the world, it turns in upon itself. The mother of Jesus “was there.” To be there – where the world drifts further away from faith, is, therefore, one of the challenges for our mission.

One of those places is the world of culture, that vast composite of knowledge, values and habits, which form our human understanding of reality, in which we are inserted, and with which we must interact.³² Paul VI already spoke forcefully of “the split between the Gospel and culture” which is, “without a doubt, the drama of our time.”³³ “The new peoples, who do not know the Lord or who do not know him well so that they cannot recognize him as the Savior, are distant today, not so much from the geographical as rather from the cultural viewpoint,” Benedict XVI recognized recently. “It is not oceans or immense distances that challenge the heralds of the Gospel but the boundaries resulting from an erroneous or superficial vision of God and man that stand between faith and human knowledge, faith and mod-

³¹ This perspective is also the same as at the scene of the Visitation in Luke. The presence and the greeting of Mary, bearer of the Lord, sanctify and fill the prophet and priest with joy.

³² “The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family. Thence it follows that human culture has necessarily a historical and social aspect and the word “culture” also often assumes a sociological and ethnological sense. According to this sense we speak of a plurality of cultures. Different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of laboring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridic institutions of cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form the patrimony proper to each human community. It is also in this way that there is formed the definite, historical milieu which enfolds the man of every nation and age and from which he draws the values which permit him to promote civilization.” (GS 53)

³³ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 20.

ern science, faith and the commitment to justice. The Church thus urgently needs people with a deep and sound faith, a well-grounded culture and genuine human and social sensitivity; it needs religious and priests who dedicate their lives to being on these very frontiers to bear witness and to help people understand thus that there exists a profound harmony between faith and reason, between the Gospel spirit, the thirst for justice and initiatives for peace. Only in this way will it be possible to make the Lord's true face known to the many for whom he is still concealed or unrecognizable.”³⁴

Sensitive by vocation and by tradition to this need, Marianists, who from our origins have always been present in institutions in which the culture educates and is transmitted, we feel a particular concern for this calling. As the last General Chapter said, we perceive the urgency to “open the world to faith,” to “bridge the faith and culture chasm.”³⁵ “By contemplating Mary and following in the footsteps of our Founder, we too feel ourselves called to respond to the challenges of our world from within the perspective of the Incarnation. That is: 1) To act in the midst of the world, among its people, inserted in their reality, and to discern the opportunities that each society and culture offers toward the development of a renewed faith; 2) To become particularly concerned with the relationships between faith and culture, and to be convinced that the Christian experience liberates the person and contributes to an authentic progress of societies; 3) To utilize in our mission all of those means which form the social and cultural fabric of the society in which we live, especially those which contribute to the education and formation of the whole person.”³⁶

This feature has always given the Marianist mission a character of openness to the world which surrounds us, to which we belong and in which we are engaged in an attitude of dialogue, and not of condemnation, of collaboration and not of systematic opposition.³⁷

³⁴ From the discourse that Benedict XVI directed to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus on Thursday, February 21, 2008.

It is worthwhile to complement these words with the words of Cardinal Poupard, the President of the Pontifical Council of Culture, in a conference given to the Spanish University Foundation on May 28, 2001 in Madrid. Speaking of the response of the Church to the challenges of modernity, he said: “I would like nevertheless, to point out a task that strikes me as being of capital importance. It has been written that the crisis we suffer from these days is not a crisis of faith, but one of culture. It is necessary therefore a commitment ourselves bravely, creatively and determined in the field of culture. For reasons that would be too long to enumerate now, there has been a drop in the number of Catholics in the field of culture, art and literary creation, abandoning these things for deficient positions and anthropological models. The Church in Europe, and Spain is no exception, has experienced an “intellectual upheaval” like it has not suffered in quite some time, and finds itself devoid of figures capable of offering and alternative cultural response.” To this he added a warning that, in my judgment, is very important for the Church today: “It does not have to do with a culture of a ghetto, closed or hostile to the surrounding culture, but with decisively assuming the culture of our time in order to transform it from within, following the example of the Fathers of the Church. This is not about creating centers of *Catholic culture*, but *Catholic centers* of culture.” (Ecclesia [2001] p. 1209)

³⁵ MM 16.

³⁶ MM 22.

³⁷ This ought to be, on the other hand, the style of the Church, just as it is in the spirit that underlies the documents of Vatican II. “A wave of affection and admiration flowed from the council over the modern world of humanity. Errors were condemned, indeed, because charity demanded this no less than did truth, but for the persons themselves there was only warning, respect and love. Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful prognostics, messages of trust issued from the council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honored, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed.” (Paul VI, *Discourse at the Closing of the Second Vatican Council*, December 7, 1965, n.9)

“Like Christ, the Word Incarnate, we strive to be at one with the people of our time.”³⁸ “Each of our communities can receive support and enrichment from its environment. We are happy to welcome those who live around us to share our faith, friendship, and hospitality. In this way we seek to penetrate our time and place with the spirit of the Gospel.”³⁹ These are words from our *Rule of Life* by which we can understand and live out that “anticipatory” presence of Mary, so that the doors of the reality of our world and our history may be opened to the Lord’s work.

We cannot forget, nevertheless, that this “being there,” this insertion, has its risks, its dangers, from which we do not always know how to escape. To be *in* the world without being *of* the world demands a difficult balance. Aware of this difficulty, Fr. Chaminade, after speaking in the Constitutions about the two principle objects of the Society, “religious perfection” and “working *in the world* for the salvation of souls,” as well as how, as a result, our life is nourished by action and contemplation, added: “But, because it happens too often that the employments of the active life expose those who are engaged in them to the contagion of the world, the Society regards as third object of its Constitutions the rules of precaution and of reserve that tend continually to fortify the religious against relaxation.”⁴⁰ Living on the cultural frontiers of faith demands of us a serious commitment to keep faith alive and remain faithful. The *Rule of Life*, in line with the concern of the Founder, after affirming, as we have seen, that “we strive to be at one with the people of our time,” adds: “However, we remember the Lord's warning to remain vigilant so that the norms, customs, and habits of the world will not tarnish or weaken the power of his word. ... The more attentive our watchfulness, the greater our apostolic boldness.”⁴¹ Without a deep and consistent faith, like Mary’s, our “being there” would not be meaningful. It would be a diluted presence that did not point to the Lord; that did not anticipate Him. It would not be “anticipatory.”

4.2. Compassionate and Hopeful Attention to Poverty

“When the wine was finished, Jesus' mother said to him, “They have no more wine.”

Mary’s presence is watchful and attentive, like that of a believer. Her faith shines light on the new reality that surrounds her and gives her gaze a unique penetration. It makes her clairvoyant. In this way she perceives true deficiencies, those that would prevent the wedding from concluding with a good banquet; those, in short, which prevent the Reign of God from being made manifest in all its glory.

At the same time, her presence is “com-passionate,” in other words, lived in the solidarity of “suffering-with.” Deficiencies awaken in her the memory of her own needs. She, too, is lacking, poor. But, along with being “compassionate” she is also “hopeful,” open to hope, because she experienced in her own flesh how the Lord turns poverty into wealth

³⁸ RL 11.

³⁹ RL 43.

⁴⁰ Const. 1839, a.1-3.

⁴¹ RL 11. It would be good to recall Circular #8 of Fr. José María Salaverri –*Incarnation and Vigilance* (December 8, 1984) - which deals with this article of the *Rule of Life*.

when, by faith, she abandoned herself into His hands. Therefore, she addresses him: “They have no wine.”

The last General Chapter, in these times when deficiencies near and far, whether social, ecclesial, or congregational, become more evident to us, invited us to contemplate Mary from this perspective. “Personally, Mary sensed a radical poverty in her virginity. She felt her emptiness. She was not yet fruitful as others expected her to be. No wonder then, that she would eventually sing, ‘The Lord has looked upon my lowliness.’ She was also unsullied by experience, opening her to believe that ‘nothing is impossible with God.’ It was precisely this kind of poverty and openness that God was seeking to do a ‘new thing,’ to create a new humanity. He looks on her and finds exactly what he needs, a fertile virginity. God does fulfill his promises to her ancestors but in a way never before experienced in Israel. He fills her emptiness with his own divine life... When we are discouraged ... let us place our poverty before God, as Mary did, and ask him to do “a new thing” in us.”⁴² Out of this experience springs her song of the Magnificat.

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted - these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”⁴³ These words from the beginning of *Gaudium et spes* express the identification of the Church with the attitude of Mary which we have just pondered. Identified with her, the Church understands that its mission in the world occurs by being present in it with that special Marian sensitivity for what is lacking and for those who suffer.

In the “banquet” of our world, needs are clear and abundant. It does not take deep analysis to realize the need that our humanity has for all those signs of the Kingdom that occur with the coming of the Son of God to the world: peace, justice, brotherhood, forgiveness, reconciliation, solidarity, respect for the life and dignity of every human person ... in a word, the love that comes from the Father. The Church, present in the world, is aware of these shortcomings and cannot fail to be so. It cannot but feel concern for them, as Mary did. Because it is at the service of the Kingdom for humanity, it cares deeply about humanity.

The Second Vatican Council, in its entirety, was an exercise of this Marian presence of the Church in the midst of the world, attentive to what is human, sensitive to human needs. At the conclusion of the Council, Paul VI affirmed: “Never before perhaps, so much as on this occasion, has the Church felt the need to know, to draw near to, to understand, to penetrate, serve and evangelize the society in which she lives; and to get to grips with it, almost to catch up with it, in its rapid and continuous change. This attitude, a response to the distances and ruptures we have witnessed over recent centuries, in the last century and in our own especially, between the Church and secular society—this attitude has been strongly and unceasingly at work in the council, **always inspired by the essential salvific mission of the Church**; so much so that some have been inclined to suspect that an easy-going and excessive responsiveness to the outside world, to passing events, cultural fashions, temporary

⁴² MM 9-10.

⁴³ GS 1.

needs, an alien way of thinking...may have swayed persons and acts of the ecumenical synod, at the expense of the fidelity which is due to tradition, and this to the detriment of the religious orientation of the council itself..... We prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of this council. Now, no one can reprove as want of religion or infidelity to the Gospel such a basic orientation, when we recall that it is Christ Himself who taught us that love for our brothers is the distinctive mark of His disciples ...” And he adds later on: “The ancient story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council. **A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it. The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs (and these needs grow in proportion to the greatness of the son of the earth).**” And, alluding to the confrontation with atheistic humanism he concludes: “But we call upon those who term themselves modern humanists, and who have renounced the transcendent value of the highest realities, to give the council credit at least for one quality and to recognize our own new type of humanism: **we, too**, in fact, we more than any others, **honor mankind!**”⁴⁴

This sensibility of the Church, entirely Marian, which was strongly manifest in the spirit of the Council, passed on to our current *Rule of Life* introducing into our missionary tradition the concern and commitment for building up the Kingdom amidst the deficiencies of our society and our world, through justice, peace and reconciliation. This is a concern and work that opens us up to “sym-pathize,” with the “sympathy” that Paul VI speaks about, and join forces with all those who, like us, share this concern and commitment.

In order to attain this objective we work
at the direct proclamation of the gospel
and also at the enrichment of culture
and the transformation of society
in accord with the message of salvation.
Faith leads
us and the apostles we form
to conversion of heart
and to unity with those who struggle
for justice, freedom, and dignity;
it moves us always to work for peace through reconciliation and healing
of peoples and communities.⁴⁵

This preceding article, belonging to Book I of the *Rule*, has its subsequent development in articles 5.16 to 5.20 of Book II, which I will not cite, for reasons of space, but the reading of which I highly recommend in order to grasp the full scope of this fundamental element of our mission today.

In order to be Marian, our active attention to the deficiencies of our world must be in solidarity. Fortunately there are plenty – although not enough – of people in the Church and in the world who are sensitive to its needs and become actively engaged in the commitment toward overcoming them. Yet, few do this by actually living in solidarity; there are plenty of

⁴⁴ *Discourse at the closing of Vatican II*, December 7, 1965, nn 6-8.

⁴⁵ RL 72.

sensitized people who remain “outside the needy reality,” while few are incarnated within it; plenty are disposed to act as “fathers” coming from the outside, but few act as “brothers” from within. But we are called to place ourselves in our world in solidarity with the poor and those who suffer. This stems directly from our vow of poverty. By the vow we seek “to be sensitive to the sufferings and misery of others; we cultivate a special love for the poor, share our resources with them, and offer our personal talents to work together with them. Thus we commit ourselves to help build a society that is just and fraternal.”⁴⁶

One must also be hopeful, filled with true hope, something our world today especially needs. In the face of needs, there are many who denounce and few who announce; there are plenty who feed on false hopes and few who point to the way of truth. People of today demand that we “give reason to the hope we have.”⁴⁷ They need that, like Mary, we contribute by our very presence the profound and personal experience of a God who is superabundant in love, who “looks upon the lowliness of His servant” and is capable of “doing great things with her”; an experience of the God of Hope, lived as she lived it, not as something singular of her own, aimed at her own personal enjoyment, but as good news to the humble, the poor and the thirsty, for human need. Without this personal experience of the God of faithful mercy, our action, though it may be based on solidarity, becomes sterile in the long run. From this experience, with Mary, we do not merely observe poverty - “they have no wine” - but in the midst of it, we will be able to open the path to hope.

Note regarding our commitment in favor of Justice and Peace

As we have seen, our Rule of Life considers this important in our mission. For its part, since Vatican II the Church has been calling for this in a particular way from religious life, appealing to that particular sensibility toward the poor which has always characterized it, and to the vow of poverty itself.⁴⁸ But, despite the fact that this attention to the poor and suffering has been a constant in the fundamental charisms of religious institutes throughout the history of the Church – and ours is no exception⁴⁹ – this concrete task has not yet been integrated into our mission as it should be. There are people and communities who do not even try, using the excuse that it is a later addition, a recent fashion, that it does not belong to our Marianist missionary tradition. Is this a lack of interest or sensitivity? I do not think so. A lack of formation? ...Perhaps.

⁴⁶ RL 27.

⁴⁷ 1Pt 3:15.

⁴⁸ See, for example, *Vita consecrata*, nn 82 and 102.

⁴⁹ Simply consider the life of our Founder, his attention to the chimneysweeps, the “street children” of his time, to the marginalized women, or those cast out, and his preference for the “the poorest and youngest children” (*Const. 1839*, a. 253), in other words, those with the most needs, his preference for the prioritization of primary education, the truly needy in the marginalized world of his day. Along the same lines, the *Rule of Life* reminds us that “all apostolic works of the Society should be open to the less favored” (a. 2.11) and “In considering new apostolic activities, a certain priority should be given to those directed toward the poor and those which involve a more direct sharing in their life.” (a. 2.17)

It is true that these missionary accents, stemming from the Council, are new in the history of our Constitutions. Therefore, in order to assimilate them, we need to open ourselves up in a new way to the world, a way to which, perhaps, we are not accustomed. Thus, we need formation, not only intellectual, but also spiritual and pastoral, along with concrete actions that will give this commitment shape and create tradition. The last several General Chapters, following the Rule of Life, have continually reminded us of this. We must commit ourselves and help one another in this struggle.

4.3. Zeal for Faith-Obedience to the Word of the Lord

“His mother said to the servants: ‘Do whatever He tells you.’”

With these words, Mary opened the deficiency up to true hope -- the lack of wine to the possibility of enjoying the better wine. What is even more important is that she makes it possible for the glory of Christ to be made manifest so that he could be recognized as Lord, as Savior, and as the one, true hope.

It is interesting to note that, although the words of Mary assume and bear the believer’s implicit recognition of the lordship of Jesus on her part, they neither explicitate it nor begin with an explicit expounding of this lordship. Mary’s words are, simply and straightforwardly, a call for obedience to His word.

Here we can also understand this action of Mary as coming from her own personal experience. She directs herself to the “servants,” perhaps because she recognizes in them her own condition as “Handmaid of the Lord,” and she guides them with an order in which it is not very difficult to discover the echo of her “Let it be done to me according to your word,” through which God entered her life and her being, transforming her barren human virginity into divine motherhood. Mary knows by her own experience that there is no manifestation of God without obedience to his word; that faith-obedience is a prior condition in order for one to be able to enter into the grace of faith-recognition.⁵⁰ Said another way, in order to have the experience of the Magnificat, it is necessary to go through the “yes” of the Annunciation. Therefore, she said to the “servants”: “Do whatever He tells you.”

The power to be able to cure humanity’s needs, to rescue humanity from its deficiencies does not lie in our hands. Neither does it lie in Mary’s hands, as she is poor and limited as we are. But, with Mary, we surely know who is capable, and the only thing that He is going to ask of us is to put at the disposal of His word our limitations and our poverty, in an act

⁵⁰ This distinction between “faith-obedience” and “faith-recognition,” which is based on the Gospel stories of the miracles of Jesus, is particularly evident in the Gospel of John, and involves an interval of time. Consider, for example, the case of the royal official (4:46-54), the story of the paralytic at the pool (5:1-15) or the man born blind (9:1-38), the most evident of all as being a sign of access to the faith. Definitive confession of faith in Christ takes place after “His glory has been manifested” and this is manifested following an act of faith in Him and obedience to His word: return to your house; pick up your mat and walk; wash in the pool of Siloe. In this “interval of time” is inserted the catechumenal path of formation in the faith, which goes from conversion to Christ to the penetration and participation in the mysteries of redemption that He worked. (Cf. *Ad gentes*, nn 13-14)

of pure confidence, blind, naked, which relies solely on Him as the one reason, above all of our own. To fill the jars with water **by obedience to his word**, and fill them all the way up, waiting for wine; to cast out the fishing net when one has just spent the whole night without catching a single fish, simply **because He told you to do so**; to give up a piece of bread and a few fish that one might have for oneself **because He requires them** to feed five thousand; to roll away the tombstone **obeying His command** even though there will already be a stench... Thus, and only thus, through faith-obedience, the reality of our world remains open to the manifestation of the saving power of the Lord. “He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.”

Reflecting on this intervention of Mary at Cana, we see that her mission is to direct us, to bring us to Christ. But, as we already saw, she does not do it by giving explicit witness to Him, but by evoking faith-obedience to His word, in order that reality might open up to His manifestation and lead us to that authentic witness, which He gives of himself and of the Father through his works. Whoever does not listen and obey His words cannot have access to knowledge of Him because he does not allow Him to manifest Himself, so that He may reveal who He truly is.⁵¹ “The wine steward **did not know** where the wine came from; the “servants” **surely knew.**”

This passage about the Wedding Feast at Cana has a very special significance for us Marianists. It is also very significant for the whole Church, which, contemplating itself in Mary, recognizes in this passage its mission of leading the world to Christ, in whom humanity finds true salvation.⁵² Yet the particular meaning it holds for us is that it is from this intervention of Mary that Fr. Chaminade derived our *raison d'être* and our mission.

Fr. Chaminade's contemplation of the missionary action of Mary found its focus at this very moment – the moment in which she said: “Do whatever He tells you.” He considered this to be “**the apostolic moment**” of Mary in the Gospel. His fixation on this moment was so great that it gave rise to our motto. “We, who come last of all, we who believe ourselves called in her struggle against the great heresy of this age, have taken as our motto, these words of the Blessed Virgin to the servants at Cana: ‘*Do whatever He tells you*’... Our work is far-reaching; it is magnificent. If it is universal, the reason is that we are missionaries of Mary, who has said to us: ‘*Do whatever He tells you!*’ Indeed, every one of us is a missionary. To each of us the Blessed Virgin has given a mandate to work at the salvation of our brothers in the world.”⁵³ Certainly, therefore, in the thought of the Founder, the Society

⁵¹ As we know, this is a recurring theme in the Gospel of John. The road to faith passes through the acceptance of the testimony. Cf. 4:39-42; 5:31-45; 10:27-39; 12:37-50.

⁵² “In my first encyclical, in which I set forth the program of my Pontificate, I said that “the Church's fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of Christ.” (John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, n.4) “Evangelization will also always contain - as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism - a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy. And not an immanent salvation, meeting material or even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfillment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute: a transcendent and eschatological salvation, which indeed has its beginning in this life but which is fulfilled in eternity.” (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 27)

⁵³ MW II 81-82.

exists in the world and in the Church precisely as a response to this command of Mary, as a corps of true “servants” under her orders. As a result, this will need to be a corps that is strongly armed with the spirit of unconditional faith-obedience to the word of the Lord, and totally dedicated to the mission of making it known in the world.

At the closing of the retreats in 1827, Fr. Chaminade said to the religious “*Do whatever He tells you*. These words were addressed by the Blessed Virgin to the servants at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, to which she and her Son had been invited...that is to say: do whatever He asks you to do, don’t reason it out, even if it appears unreasonable. It is as if she had said: put your faith in Him. Well, these are also the words the Virgin addresses to us her sons: do whatever my Son tells you. But how will Jesus Christ speak to us? By faith. Listen with faith, call on faith for help and put its teachings into practice. Thus we will then be doing what Jesus tells us. The spirit of the Institute is a spirit of faith; we must go to God by faith. *This is the victory over the world – our faith (1Jn 5:4)*. The objectives of the Institute are: 1) the perfection of each religious; 2) the salvation of our neighbor; 3) zeal for the glory of God. The means used for these purposes is faith.”⁵⁴

Animated by this faith, we collaborate with Mary in her mission of evoking it in others. The target of Fr. Chaminade’s missionary concern was the faithlessness that had developed in the society of his day. Such faithlessness had closed off the way to the manifestation of the Reign of God. “In our own day, the great prevailing heresy is religious indifference, which numbs the souls of men and reduces them to a state of torpid egoism and moral degeneration...the divine torch of faith is burning low and dying in the heart of Christianity...It seems that the time is near when we are to witness what has been foretold, a general defecation and an all but universal apostasy.”⁵⁵ In these words, which describe his particular outlook on the world, we can see that what awakens his missionary response to this reality is not so much lack of knowledge of the Lord, but rather its cause: lack of faith. Hence he finds in Mary’s action at Cana the perfect image of what he himself felt called to do: spread and educate in the faith; lead humanity back to religion; multiply Christians, men and women, who by their faith-obedience to the Lord make the “threatened banquet” possible. Decay into a state of “egoism and a morass of passions” can be transformed into the banquet of the Kingdom. It follows, therefore, that, as we have said, the Marianist mission is oriented completely towards formation in faith.

4.4. The Witness of the Community

“After this, Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers and his disciples. They did not remain there for many days.”

The first effect, and thereby, the first sign of the “wedding banquet” is the emergence of the community, the appearance in the world of a new fraternity, unifying and universal. Unifying because Jesus arrived at the old wedding feast with his disciples, His “new family,”

⁵⁴ MW II 833-834.

⁵⁵ *Letter to retreat Masters ...* (MW II 73)

which had been formed around Him prior to the “third day” which completed the week that began with the testimony of John the Baptist.⁵⁶ He leaves from the new wedding banquet, having united this new family with his “old family,” His mother and brothers. Along with being unified, the new community is geographically universal. It physically exists in a place, Capernaum, logically, but it is not to be enclosed in this place: “They did not remain there for many days.”

This last verse of the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana clearly refers to that first Christian community in Jerusalem,⁵⁷ described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, to which the mother of Jesus and his brothers are united, to which the Lord continues “adding” those who are converted to Him.⁵⁸ The new community offers the world witness to the “new banquet,” in which there are no needy people since no one considers anything his own, because all is held in common, because communion reigns among them -- “they were of one heart and one mind.”⁵⁹

Community is a reality consubstantial with the Gospel, an essential element whenever the gospel is present. Not only as a necessary context for cultivating and developing the Christian life, but also, and above all, in order to bear witness to it. Within this new brotherhood the transforming power of the word and of the active presence of the Lord are made manifest. We could say, alluding to the previous commentary about the Wedding Feast of Cana, that in a true Christian community, the Lord is His own witness to the world.⁶⁰

“It is appropriate first of all,” said Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, “to emphasize the following point: for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God **in a communion that nothing should destroy** and at the same time **given to one's neighbor** with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’...it will be above all by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus- the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Jn 1:19-28. From this testimony, the evangelist goes about describing the formation of the community based on encounters with Jesus which occurred “on the following day,” and also on subsequent days. The sum of the days, from the day of the testimony of John until the Wedding at Cana, is seven, one week.

⁵⁷ That the Gospel of John places this “first sign” of redemption, like the first Christian community, in Galilee, and not in Jerusalem, is one more demonstration, on the one hand, of his particular polemic with the Jewish world, which has rejected the salvation offered by God through Christ, and, on the other hand, of the “eccentric” character of his community in the Church. This eccentricity, which has its most clear manifestation in the pre-eminence given to the “Beloved Disciple,” above Peter, is lived, nevertheless, in deep communion: “one flock, one Shepherd” (10:16). The sacerdotal prayer of Jesus manifests how the importance of communion is indispensable for the Christian. (17:1-26). The recognition in the Epilogue of Peter’s mission as shepherd of the flock, expresses it de facto.

⁵⁸ Acts 2:47.

⁵⁹ Acts 4:32-35. Cf. 2:42-47.

⁶⁰ “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” says the Lord, “there am I in the midst of them.” It is Christ, present among us, who gives inspiration and strength to community life and makes it a sign to those around us: “By this shall all know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.” (RL 37)

⁶¹ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41. John Paul II, recalling these affirmations also wrote: “The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission ... The first form of witness is the very life of the missionary, of the Chris-

It is well-known how Fr. Chaminade was profoundly convinced of this truth. The world cannot be converted to the Gospel if we do not offer it, as he so often repeated, the witness of that primitive community, “the spectacle of a people of saints.”⁶² From this conviction sprang the strong communitarian character which he gave to all his foundations, from the sodalities of Bordeaux to the religious institutes. In his missionary work, evangelizing and “congregating,” converting and associating, go hand in hand. “Inspired by God’s Spirit, Father Chaminade understood the rich creative possibilities of a Christian community for apostolic service. Such a community could bear the witness of a people of saints, showing that the gospel could still be lived in all the force of its letter and spirit. A Christian community could attract others by its very way of life and raise up new Christians and new missionaries, thus giving life in turn to still other communities. A community could thus become the great means to re-Christianize the world. It was this insight that gave rise to the first groups of men and women founded by Father Chaminade as sodalities.”⁶³

Imbued with the spirit of our Founder, the *Rule of Life* strongly underlines the central place of community in our lives, not only as a context in which they develop – we live in communities of life, faith and mission – but also as the fundamental means for our mission.

*In communities inspired by faith, we seek to live
like the first community of Jerusalem,
having but one heart and one soul.
Thus we hope to bear witness
to the presence of Christ
and to show that still today
the gospel can be lived
in all the force of its letter and spirit.*⁶⁴

Marianist life seeks to bring this community aspect to the mission of the Church, as something essential to it. We must protect it and sedulously care for it, above all in today’s world, marked by individualism, the quest for personal advantage and the fulfillment of our own desires before all else. Confronted by this culture which surrounds us and from whose contagion we are not exempt, it is necessary to continually remind ourselves, from the first steps of initial formation until the last day of old age, that we Marianists are not a group of

tian family, and of the ecclesial community, which reveal a new way of living. The missionary, who, despite all his or her human limitations and defects, lives a simple life, taking Christ as the model, is a sign of God and of transcendent realities. But everyone in the Church, striving to imitate the Divine Master, can and must bear this kind of witness; in many cases it is the only possible way of being a missionary. The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. It raises precise questions which lead to God and to the Gospel.” (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 42)

⁶² On February 15, 1826, he wrote to Fr. Pierre-Bienvenu Noailles, Founder of the Sisters of Loreto and of the Institute of Poor Priests, who had made contact with him for the possible fusion of his foundations with those of our Founder: “The principal spirit of the Society is to present to the world a marvelous community of saints, proving that in today’s world, like in the primitive Church, the Gospel can be practiced with full rigor in spirit and in letter.” (L II, n. 388, p. 177)

⁶³ RL: “Our Origins.”

⁶⁴ RL 9. And also in article 34, which opens the chapter about community life: “The Marianist community aims to be an image of the first community of Jesus’ disciples, united with Mary and filled with the Holy Spirit. We give ourselves to community life in order to bear witness to God’s love, to attain holiness, and to fulfill our apostolic mission.”

individual missionaries who happen to reside in common residences, called “communities,” but missionaries who live from and for the community; that “We form a new family, based on the gospel of the Lord, in which we share in common prayer, friendship, possessions, work, successes, and difficulties”⁶⁵; and this is not for the community itself, but for the mission that has been confided to it: “Every member, in his own unique way, contributes to realizing the one mission of the Society.”⁶⁶ Through our dedication to and care for this essential dimension of our charism, we Marianists wager our reason for being in the Church, the validity and the quality, not only of our life, but also of our mission.

The community itself
is a primary instrument to fulfill our mission.
We know that the quality of our life
has greater impact than our words.
Therefore, together we seek ways
to bear living witness
to our shared faith.⁶⁷

Animated by its missionary spirit, our particular communities cannot retreat into themselves. They are called to be expansive. They must be generative, in turn, of community life, of wider communities. “The Society as a whole, as well as each individual community, considers itself in a permanent state of mission. We are committed to the multiplication of Christians, forming **persons and communities** in a lived faith...”⁶⁸ In order for that to take place, we must open our doors in order to share with those around us the spirit of the life within the community.

The first effect of this diffusion of the spirit which specially animates our life and our mission is our particular contribution to the generation of that “wider community” that we call the Marianist Family. We do not forget that, as our *Rule* says, “One of the main reasons for the foundation of the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary Immaculate was to assure the existence and development of a more comprehensive community of Christians of all states of life who recognize their common bond in the Marianist spirit,” and therefore, “We aim to attract Christians to form communities consciously committed to living the Marianist spirit. We should offer our services and ministries to these communities, while fully encouraging their proper characteristics and autonomy....On the basis of “complementary roles,” animated by the same spirit, we “work together to further the common mission of the Church.”⁶⁹

The call to open up our communities to the Marianist Family and, in a particular way to the laity, with whom we actually share our mission in the Church, is especially urgent today. Since the awakening of the laity after the Second Vatican Council, we are witnesses of how there has generated around religious life, which is lay in origin and spirit, a true constellation of lay communities and movements that seek to find the fraternity and spirituality

⁶⁵ RL 35.

⁶⁶ RL 70.

⁶⁷ RL 67.

⁶⁸ RL 63.

⁶⁹ RL 1.1-1.3.

needed to live out their vocation and their mission in the world. Could it be perhaps one of those "signs of the times" through which the Spirit calls?

The incorporation of the laity in the mission of the active religious life is not only a need arising from a current scarcity of vocations. It is, rather, a genuine gift from God who, as always, makes himself present in the ups and downs of human history and integrates them into his plan of salvation. By this gift, the Spirit helps religious life to discover that the field of "social" service, to which it has been oriented since its beginnings, is not exclusive to itself, since this work is rather eminently lay in character. At the same time, the Spirit is giving religious life a sensitivity to the call to dedicate itself as well to another kind of service to the laity - "more internal" and "more ecclesial" – without losing its missionary thrust. It is a call to contribute in this way that particular gift that religious life has always offered to the Church for its edification and even its reform.

We Marianists, by charism and by history, are particularly sensitive to this call. The last General Chapters have made it quite clear. It suffices to recall what the Chapter of 2001 said when, presenting the resources that Marianists count on in our mission, it included: "Dedication to the service of the Church": "We are deeply concerned about rebuilding the Church. We recognize the role of the laity within it and we view its fundamental nature as a family, a people of God, more than a hierarchical institution." Later it adds: "Fr. Chaminade, in addition to being a prophet of the laity, knew how to foster new relationships among all the members of the Church – relationships of equality, communion and participation. He saw the Church as a 'network of communities' whose center is Jesus, Son of Mary. This mission to 'rebuild the Church,' similar to the task of St. Francis in his time, becomes a particularly strong call for us today. We believe that we have, as Society of Mary and as Marianist Family, elements that can help the Church mirror better what Jesus wants it to be" (*Sent by the Spirit*, 24e).

What are the elements that define our particular contribution to the mission of the Church? We asked this question at the outset of this long section. Contemplating Mary at Cana we have responded: "anticipative" presence, compassionate and hopeful attention to poverty, zeal for faith-obedience to the word of God, and the witness of community. We have been raised up by the Spirit in the Church for a mission that is defined in this way. This is how the Church recognizes us and needs us. Hence, these traits must be for us criteria to help us discern the types of works in which our mission becomes incarnate, and above all, the way we are present and act in those works.

5. Mary in the Marianist Preaching of the Good News.

We have been able to examine in the previous sections the importance that Mary has in the Marianist mission, of which she is the source and continuous reference point. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude our reflection without recalling that her presence in our mission is not just limited to carrying out this function. She is present also in our announcing the

Good News and is the object of the same. By the vow of stability, we not only promise to assist her in her mission, but “to make Mary known, loved, and served.”⁷⁰

This commitment is not always correctly accepted on our part. Some of us even see it as unacceptable, thinking that, in our mission, one cannot give Mary the place which corresponds to Christ; He is the one whom we should “make known, loved and served.” Others accept it with good will, but do not integrate it as if it were something “extra,” added on in announcing the Gospel. It is worthwhile, therefore, that we spend a moment in reflection, attempting to understand the meaning of this.

In the first place, we must bear in mind that this term goes back to that definition of our identity and the meaning of our vow of stability which Fr. Chaminade outlined in the letter to the retreat masters in August 1839: “What I regard as a really distinctive trait of our two orders, and what seems to me to be without precedent in all the religious orders I know, is the fact that we embrace the religious life in the name and for the glory of the Blessed Virgin, and for the sake of devoting to her ourselves, that is to say, our bodies and all that we possess, in order to make her *known, loved and served*. For, we are thoroughly convinced that we shall never bring men back to Jesus, except through his most holy Mother.”⁷¹ Thus, it is not that Marianists give Mary the central place that corresponds to Christ in proclaiming the Gospel, but that we have realized, inspired by our Founder, the need of making her present in our proclamation, in order to better proclaim Christ.

Indeed, Mary makes the proclamation of Christ its genuinely real, with the realism of the Incarnation. With Mary, this proclamation avoids the constant danger of getting caught up in the realm of ideas, of reducing the person of Jesus to a type of “doctrinal preacher,” directing our gaze more to his teaching than the mystery of his person, since it is precisely the mystery of his person, and not his teachings, that forms the nucleus and essence of the Good News. This is neither an ideology nor a moral doctrine.

“Mary saves us from getting lost. She reminds us that it is Christ, a living person, who is the object of the announcing which we are called to do. It is not about preaching an ideology, nor about announcing the God of the philosophers; our faith has nothing to do with a vague deism. We are not propagandizers of an idea, of an abstract theory or of a path of wisdom for good living. Rather, we announce the living Christ, true Son of God, and true Son of Man, born of a woman. We announce Jesus Christ, our ‘brother in humanity’, fully human among human beings, whom Mary brought into this world. It is impossible to reduce Jesus to an idea, not even to the idea of God. We preach a God-made-man, a human God, a man-God. Mary leads us unceasingly to the realism that is Jesus’ humanity.”⁷²

In addition, one must keep in mind that announcing the Good News does not end here. It is not limited to preaching the mystery of the person of Jesus. If it is announced as Good News, it is because this mystery is offered to us, and we can participate in it. If Christianity

⁷⁰ RL 15.

⁷¹ MW II 77.

⁷² Card. Godfried Danneels, *Le feu de l'Esprit. Paroles de vie... Pentecôte 1987*, p. 13.

is not only accepting doctrine, neither is it only confession of a creed about the person of Jesus, but rather the appropriation of the mysteries that we affirm in Him. This appropriation is a mystery of faith and of grace, of faith that is supported by grace, of grace that bursts forth through faith. Mary is, precisely, the icon that reveals this to us.

Karl Rahner put it admirably in a text that I would like to quote to show this place that Mary occupies in the revelation of the mystery of Christian life: “What is Christianity?...Christianity is not something thought out or discovered by men. It is not man’s approach to God by his own power. Nor is it primarily the fulfilling of commandments given us by God so that we may observe them on our own power. Christianity is rather what the living God does in relation to us, what the living God of grace gives us, in forgiveness, redemption, justification, and the communication of His own glory. Since, however, what God gives is not, in the last resort, a created gift, but Himself, Christianity is ultimately simply the eternal God Himself, coming Himself to man, and Himself by his grace influencing this man, so that he freely opens his heart for the whole glorious infinite life of the triune God to enter the poor heart of this tiny creature. (...) What is perfect Christianity?...Perfect Christianity must consist in receiving this gift of the eternal God, God Himself, in grace-given freedom, with body and soul and all the powers of the whole being. With all a man is and has, all he does and suffers, so that this receiving of God takes up his entire nature and his whole life-history into the eternal life of God. Perfect Christianity must mean that our public and our private acts, what appears publicly before the world in its history, and what takes place in the inner depths of conscience, perfectly coincide and correspond. What occurs there in the depths of Christian life becomes visible, and conversely, what is visible and manifest, truly mirrors what is taking place in the depths of the soul, in God’s presence. Christianity in its perfection must also mean that this Christian’s perfect Christianity unconditionally serves the salvation of others...We can and must say that Mary is the actual realization of it, the perfect Christian. (...) Mary is clearly the perfect Christian and an actual typical expression of what redemption itself in its most perfect form actually means....she is the figure that manifests completely the meaning of the Church, and grace and redemption, and God’s salvation.”⁷³

Thus, when she is absent from this preaching, the true significance of fundamental realities of the Christian life, such as the Church, grace, redemption and God’s salvation, seems to fade or become cloudy. How can we preach without her? Mary, therefore, not only is no obstacle to the preaching of Christ and the Good News of the Gospel, but becomes indispensable to it. Also, she is not an “add-on,” but a central figure. Correctly, Fr. Chaminate recalled, while contemplating the history of the Church, that “all the heresies have bowed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and little by little she has reduced them to the silence of oblivion.” Later, after speaking about the “prevailing heresy of our time,” he adds: “Mary’s power is not weakened. It is our firm belief that she will vanquish this heresy as she did all the others.”⁷⁴

So, we see the presence of Mary in our announcing the Good News is not spurious, superfluous, or marginal. Our duty to “make her known, loved and served,” as a means of

⁷³ This quotation is taken from the English version of: *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, New York, Herder, 1963, pp. 35-37.

⁷⁴ MW II 73-74.

announcing the Good News that has occurred with Christ's coming into the world, is well founded. But it must also be well carried out in practice, so as to build on its solid foundation. Said another way, not just any manner of "making her known, loved, and served" is valid and correct, but only that which, as we have seen, serves to truly announce the Good News. Thus, in order to "make her known, loved and served" in a proper way, we Marianists need to begin by taking special care to correctly cultivate and form our knowledge of Mary, as well as the devotion and veneration that we profess for her. Only in this way can we transmit it to others.

With these two circulars I have tried to offer you, precisely my own particular contribution, so that Mary may more and more become known, loved and served among us. They are the fruit of a long journey over the years. As you might already have been able to tell, these reflections have helped me trace out my route and two fundamental criteria have guided me along it, like two buoys. I now remind you and offer to you these two criteria. I hope they are of help to you as well.

The first is that one can only attain knowledge of Mary when one does not consider her in herself, but in relation to what has happened in Christ. We find Mary when we go down deep into what has occurred between God and humankind from the moment that, "the fullness of time came upon us"; from the moment the Word appeared incarnate; from the moment when what we call the "New Covenant" was inaugurated. Therefore, any approach to Mary as "one more part" of the Christian message does not lead us anywhere. The Good News that we live and announce is not about the Father, the Son and the Spirit, the Church, mankind, grace...and "also" Mary. The presentation, veneration and devotion to Mary must be inscribed in the presentation, veneration and cult of the whole Christian mystery. She cannot simply be "added on."⁷⁵

The second is that preaching about Mary must be supported by the Word of God. If our focus on Mary is not biblical, then we run the risk of generating a distorted image of her, either by excess or by defect, stemming from extrapolations and psychological or sociological projections, to which I alluded in my last circular. Only the biblical path leads us to Mary inserted in God's plan, and permits us to contemplate her as a true "place of revelation" of this plan, keeping us away from maximalisms and minimalisms in the consideration of her person. Of her, "all generations" speak and will speak, but not for her sake, but "because the Mighty One has done great things" in her and with her. These "great things" are revealed precisely in the light of the Word of God, and not of our human assumptions. The study and contemplation of the Word of God is essential for us.

I am convinced that if we continue moving along this path, we will deepen more and more our authentic knowledge of Mary and we will find more and more that her presence is central in our lives and in our mission.

⁷⁵ Cf. *Marialis cultus*, Introduction and nn. 24-28

I hope, brothers, that these two circulars, or better said, this one circular in two parts, might have been able to contribute to the revitalization of the living out of our charism. I beg your pardon for its length. I believe the theme merits a full and well founded development. This food for thought is abundant, yet, we can avoid indigestion if we are willing to set aside the time to digest it little by little.

Once digested, the food nourishes life, and everything ends up being more profound and simpler, or simpler because it is more profound. In my recent visit to the Province of France, and in light of my previous circular, I had a long conversation with an older brother about his Marian experience, well digested and assimilated over a long life, in one of those conversations that broaden one's spirit and confirm one's enthusiasm about being a Marianist. He delivered this to me expressed in a simple drawing, accompanied by a text. I promised him I would quote it. I now offer this text to you.

*Marie me dit :
dans ce monde difficile,
si tu veux suivre le chemin de Jésus,
viens avec moi,
je te conduirai jusqu'à lui,
et il te conduira vers son Père
et vers les hommes, tes frères,
jusqu'à la « Terre Promise »
où tu goûteras le bonheur d'aimer
et d'être aimé.*

*Le veux-tu ?...
Alors, tu seras aussi chemin
pour les autres !*

Mary says to me:
in this difficult world,
if you want to follow Jesus' path,
come with me,
I will lead you to him
and He will lead you to his Father
and toward men, your brothers
to the "Promised Land"
where you will delight in the joy of love
and of being loved.

Is this what you want?...
Well then, you will also be a pathway
for others too!

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

Manuel J. Cortés, SM
Superior General
Missionary Apostolic
March 31, 2008
Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord