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TO ALL MARIANIST RELIGIOUS IN MID-LIFE (AGES 40-70)

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Feast of the Immaculate Conception

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

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Dear Brothers,

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

This year, as I come toward the end of my service in the General Administration, I have already published two circular letters, one for the senior members over 70, another for our younger members under 40. Now I am completing this series with a third letter addressed to you who are in “mid-life.” If you are interested, perhaps you may want to read the letters addressed to the other groups as well. In this way, I hope to stimulate some reflection about our life-tasks and some dialogue among the different age-groups in the Society.

It is a pleasure to write this to you, but it is not so easy. After all, I fall into your category, even though I am at the upper end. I will often write in the first-person plural. It is not so easy to write about something while still living through it! Moreover, your group is probably the most heterogeneous of the three, ranging from over-burdened leaders in ministry to early retirees.

People between 40 and 70 make up nearly half the members of the Society (631-46%) and are our mainstay at the present time, the men on whom we count for mature ministry and for leadership. But one of our problems is that there are not enough religious at the lower ends of this category. There are only 126 (9% of our membership) between the ages of 41 and 50, and 171 (12%) between 51 and 60. Those of us in our sixties are, in contrast, the largest single age-group in the Society today, numbering 334 (24% of the whole). We sexagenarians still count, for the most part, as “mature active religious,” but it is an illusion and a euphemism to speak of

us as being in “mid-life.” We will naturally and properly be moving into active retirement before very long.

It is clear that as a Society we will have to plan for some time on a relatively limited number of experienced men available to bear the brunt of our life and mission as Marianist religious. Still, we know that faith and dynamism count for more than numbers, and that the Lord and Mary can do wonderful things with a small solid core of dedicated and vigorous people.

I am writing to all of you as members of this diverse group, first to thank you for your dedication, your professionalism and competence, your courage in facing realities and your creative fidelity as missionaries of Mary. I also want to urge you to take the maximum advantage of your natural gifts and your good educations, above all to take a positive, faith-filled stance in your function as central figures in the life and work of the Society of Mary at the present time, and as bridge-builders between our past and our future.

Living in a World of Transition and a Church in Change

Our times have been pivotal and liminal. Some of us are members of the “Generation of 1968” in Europe, or the “baby-boomers” and those who struggled with the Vietnam War in America. We have borne the brunt of much rethinking and transformation, lived through wide-ranging transitions in the political, technological, economic and social domains. What a change from the era of Stalin and Churchill to that of Kofi Annan and Tony Blair, from the gramophone to the internet, from neo-scholasticism to post-modernism, from an era of cold war to one of globalization!

Ecclesially, we have been significant protagonists of the post-conciliar age and of far-reaching changes in Marianist life. Most of us have internalized and promoted the great thrusts of the Second Vatican Council, especially its vision of a participative and dialogical Church, the People of God on pilgrimage through time (*Lumen Gentium*). People of our age have taken much leadership in seeking to follow the Council’s call for critical but constructive relationships with all people of good will in order to meet urgent needs and satisfy the aspirations of the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*). Over the years, many of our friends and contemporaries opted to leave religious life and ministry, and this painful fact has marked us all deeply. We have taken part in significant discernments, personally and in community, about matters to let go of and others to hold to or adapt.

Most of us have significant relationships with people of an older mentality, some of whom still pine for the rock-solid Church of their younger days, still feel a sense of loss. At the same time, we also deal with young people who know nothing of the

preconciliar Church and need formation in the basics of Christian living. We have a mission to fulfill in relation to each of these groups, the older and the younger. We easily end up feeling ambivalent and torn between them.

Sometimes we may feel a tinge of sadness or disappointment at the Church as we know it today. In the post-conciliar years many had great ecclesial hopes and expectations that have not been realized. Some of us longed for certain reforms that have not happened. Perhaps some of these aspirations were wrong-headed, or at least unrealistic.

Moreover, the apostolic religious life to which we are committed seems ill at ease today, particularly in the northern hemisphere. It still plays a role of great significance, but it sometimes has a hard time finding its proper place in a Church that calls all lay people to be apostolic, that often identifies religious life with monastic practices, that appears to regard the role of the Brother as marginal and that focuses most reflection about the ordained ministry on the diocesan clergy.

It may be that we are meant at this time to be an alternative presence, to promote a style and vision of Church that does not fit neatly and comfortably into the usual categories. If we were to fit in better, without any friction, would we be really faithful to our call?

In recent years Marianists have spoken much of a “Marian model of Church” as a distinctive style of living our charism in these times. The realization of this model of Church no doubt depends more on people of our age group than anyone else; after all, we are the ones who set the tone and create the corporate culture of the present time. If we model a Church that is dialogical, inclusive and in solidarity with the poor, it has a chance to happen, at least in our immediate environments.

Our way of assimilating the Council and facing the challenges of our times will continue to have great relevance for the life of the Church for many generations to come. We should not expect that others will follow exactly the same interpretations as ours. But our influence and our example of resilience and ongoing development, our successes and our failures, perhaps will mark a pathway for a long time in the future.

Bridge Builders among Cultures and Generations

We are called to build bridges in our changing world and Church. For example, we seek to be close to today’s youth, those inside our communities and those we meet in our ministry. We can perhaps be mentors for some of them, passing on what we have learned and experienced and then stepping aside to let them develop in their

own way. In some places we feel challenged by members of this younger generation who appear to desire a return to practices of the past, perhaps in their search for a strong Christian identity. It is as if they repudiate what we consider to be gains. Despite this painful struggle, perhaps we can together contribute to a new synthesis of Christian life for future generations.

In this bridge-building role we must also do our best to support the older generation: encourage them to keep living out their honest truth, involve them in the life of the whole community, above all listen to them in the conviction that their wisdom and experience is of value for today. We might be tempted to dismiss what they have to say as outdated or merely repetitive. Yet we have much to understand and learn from their experience. Our respect can also help them achieve full integrity as they look back over a lifetime.

Many of us have a significant lived experience of the challenges of inculturation. Our generation of Marianists is overwhelmingly European and American, while those we are often mentoring into maturity as Marianist religious come predominantly from other continents. The Marianist life of the future, which we are helping to build now, will be pluriform and multi-ethnic, more than anything we have known thus far. In our globalized world and Church, wherever we happen to be, we are living at the cusp of a transition, called to be more aware than ever before of multi-cultural understanding, inculturation and solidarity.

We must do our best to grasp and appreciate the cultures and outlooks of those who come from historic contexts, educations, and family backgrounds radically different from our own. We are often tempted to try to westernize them, to neutralize the difference of their cultures and homogenize them with ourselves. Instead, we are called to pass on wisdom and values, but also to leave plenty of space for them to develop their own expressions and styles of Marianist living.

Being a bridge or a pivot between age-groups and cultures is not easy. This role challenges many assumptions. It is often a test of patience. Nevertheless, our call as mature and seasoned religious is to be positive toward those who are different from ourselves. God is working in them, just as we believe He works in us.

We must not be too hard on other cultures or other generations. We must not expect others to follow our leadership unquestioningly. God has a loving plan to use all the wealth of human cultures, all the experience and cautious wisdom of the old, all the idealism and honesty of the young, their generosity and creativity, for the Kingdom. God's wants to do "something new" in and through all of us (Isaiah 43:19), as a community. As bridge-persons we play an key role in this evolving community.

Spiritual Opportunities at Mid-Life

Spiritual life is never stagnant. It constantly develops or regresses, in pace with our human and psychological growth. At mid-life there are not only challenges but also special gifts available to us as people who seek to be faithful disciples. I would just like to comment on two of these gifts: creative fidelity and generativity.

Creativity is both an opportunity and a challenge. Mid-life is a time for many responsibilities, for shaping the inheritance that we pass on to those who will follow us. In a world characterized by rapid change, creativity is especially important. Of course, not everything qualified as new and creative is automatically good. Pope John Paul in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* identifies “creative fidelity” as a unique challenge for today’s leadership in religious life: following the fundamental insights of the charism we have received, but with an inventive and creative thrust in order to adapt them to the circumstances of our changing world.

We who are in mid-life can normally be expected to take the lead in whatever “creative fidelity” comes to characterize the Church and the Society of Mary in our time. This is an awesome responsibility and a chance to make a lasting contribution. One set of dangers is facile adaptation, yielding to mere fashions, watering down our heritage. Another is rigid hanging on to the past. When we steer a path between these dangers, we become signs of hope to many people.

Another of the characteristic spiritual opportunities of mid-life is what psychologists call “generativity.” Generativity is the desire to give new life, to pass on valued and hard-earned experience. Parents experience the drive to pass on their life to their children. We religious experience a similar desire to mentor our students and younger confreres. We naturally desire to communicate our treasures of faith and wisdom, our experience of values and culture, to the next generation. This generativity is an aspect of the mission characteristic of people in mid-life.

Generativity is a good thing, but it can make us become domineering and controlling. We are called to learn how to give life and transmit wisdom effectively but without compulsion.

Temptations and opportunities for growth: the “task of purification”

Some particular pitfalls bedevil those who are in mid-life, in the fullness of activity and responsibility. Ancient Christian writers noted the danger at mid-life of “*acedia*” – a kind of spiritual slothfulness. The medieval spiritual tradition spoke hauntingly of “the noon-day devil.”

Although his vocabulary was different from that of earlier ages and from our own, our Founder also knew much about the temptations, challenges, and opportunities of mid-life.

Blessed Father Chaminade personally experienced times of transition, the burdens of responsibility, leadership in mission, the call to creative fidelity and generativity in community. He knew that our greatest spiritual challenges often arise very directly in our day-to-day work. He treated these themes of mid-life spirituality in his teaching on the “task of purification.”

Following his analysis, I would like to reflect on a few of the more common manifestations of the “noon-day devil” as we meet it today:

- *Domineering Egoism:* Most of us have come to a mature stage where we feel quite capable of standing on our own. We have well-defined preferences and specializations. We can easily become activists, totally involved in work that appears to depend on ourselves. Temperamental tendencies may get in the way of what God wants to accomplish – a sense of superiority, for example, or compulsive activity, a desire for control, pride or ambition. In his treatment of the purifying experiences common in mid-life, Chaminade identified “distrust of self,” a sense of practical humility, as a virtue to develop so that we are not carried away by self-sufficiency.
- *Short-sighted Priorities:* Amid the many responsibilities we bear, we can become little more than business persons, absorbed only with administering “our” enterprises. We can become obsessed with trivia and details, means rather than ends, jobs rather than missions. It is easy to narrow our focus, to settle for external criteria of success, like balanced budgets, high reputations, good academic results, and influential friends. After many years of living religious life, we can become careless and negligent. We are mature and rightly receive a wide margin of respect and confidence from others; we no longer have to answer to so many people. So we can begin to cut corners in the observance of the vows we have promised. We may find ourselves susceptible to harmful influences and the attraction of evil itself. Chaminade therefore emphasized “recourse to prayer” and the “firm renewal of our intentions” as purification virtues needed to keep our priorities clear amid all our activity and productiveness.
- *Impatience:* We rightly tend to feel more sure of ourselves in mid-life, seasoned and capable. We often feel irritated and frustrated at the limitations of others. The result can be an expectation that people measure up to our standards rather than develop at their own rhythm, in accord with their own gifts and

graces. Chaminade identified “long-suffering patience” as a virtue of special purification at this stage in our lives.

- *Paralysis and Discouragement:* Even though we have amassed a rich experience, we have already met with some failures as well. Hence we often experience weakness and insecurity. We are tempted to hold back, to flee from challenges, to avoid any possible mistakes. Sometimes, the burden of expectations may be such that we cannot make up our minds about what to do. Chaminade highlighted “confidence in God” as a key virtue for our time in life. To counter the paralysis of perfectionist hesitancy, he also taught his followers the virtue of “recourse to wise guidance.” In any case, he firmly believed, we cannot achieve anything on our own. Whatever good we do is a gift God gives us. We should trust in God, seek good advice, and then move ahead without hesitation.

- *Individualism:* Community presents a special challenge at our age. Many of us have circles of friends who look upon us as special points of reference. We think we can succeed on our own, and we don’t feel so much need for others. We can center too much on ourselves, become convinced we are indispensable, focus on furthering our careers, not attend enough to the full development of others. It is easy to close ourselves into our own little self-sufficient worlds. The call to be community with others for the sake of God’s Kingdom is particularly important in these years, since we are at an age when we can offer a particularly rich contribution. But we can lose interest. Chaminade knew that the virtues of community are especially purifying at our moment in life.

Only if we reflect consciously and prayerfully on God’s call for us will we be able to avoid the pitfalls of the noon-day devil, overcome *acedia*, and realize the rich potential of our time in life. Our Founder’s insights about “the task of purification,” only sketchily developed in his writings, can take on solidity and depth in our experience today.

Being “Missionaries Apostolic”

When Blessed Father Chaminade returned from exile to France, he was at the threshold of his forties. He already had an intense personal experience of the “virtues of purification” which we have just mentioned. He felt within himself the drives of which we have been speaking: generativity and creativity, the need to bridge generations and mentalities. He devoted the rest of his life to channeling these drives as a missionary. The result of his efforts is visible to all in his life-story.

At the beginning of this post-exile ministry, our Founder's way of finding an institutional anchor for the role to which he felt called was to request the ecclesiastical title of "Missionary Apostolic." For the rest of his life, he seems to have valued this title far above all others that he held.

Canonists might explain the term in different ways, but Chaminade's understanding was that a "missionary apostolic" was a person sent to minister in a non-Christian world, beyond the boundaries of well ordered ecclesial life. It was someone who felt responsibility for the whole Church, for finding creative new means to reach out to those who were neglected and untouched by the usual channels of grace.

In seeking this title, Chaminade seems to have been thinking first of all of the youth of France who had grown up without any religious formation. He was concerned with them in all their variety: street-children and chimney-sweeps, post-Enlightenment university students, young workingmen, middle-class women without access to education, people from the countryside and city dwellers, people left without any special skills to fend for themselves.

He was concerned primarily with Bordeaux, but beyond as well: Bazas, Agen, Auch, eventually the Northeast of France and even still farther afield. Before young people could be grouped into traditional parish structures, he felt it necessary to gather them into communities that offered a solid and appealing basis in Christian formation. He felt that his role as "missionary apostolic" gave him a responsibility to be concerned with all these people, beyond any immediate parochial context. "I will make them Christians," he said in effect to the critical parish clergy of Bordeaux, "so that you can then make them parishioners" (cf. *Spirit of Our Foundation*, vol. III, no. 212).

At Blessed Father Chaminade's beatification, Pope John Paul II stressed our Founder's "inventiveness" in mission, his partnership with laity, and his special concern for those who were disconnected from ecclesial life. I believe that all of us, especially Marianists at the high-point of our service, are called to something similar.

The canonical title "Missionary Apostolic," originally linked with the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, is no longer actively used by the Vatican. It exists only as an honorary designation for certain people, such as our Founder's successors as Marianist Superiors General. But the spirit that motivated Blessed Father Chaminade to value this title so highly is still very meaningful for us today.

In this analogous sense, we should all be "missionaries apostolic." This spirit is especially fitting for people in mid-life. We are often called to take new initiatives because people need them. We have some wonderful institutions, and we are called to use them for creative service to people today. We are sometimes called to create

new institutions or to serve in new places. Like our Founder, we should be concerned with inventive creativity in mission, and with outreach to people who stand far from the usual channels of ecclesial life. Like him, we should have a wide-ranging interest and a sense of corresponsibility for the good of the whole Church. Like him, we should take a special interest in young people, within our institutional ambit and beyond them, as the future of our Church and world.

We who have a certain maturity and length of experience are particularly invited to live out this missionary sense, to take leadership in meeting emerging ecclesial needs, to be full of ideas and projects for the good of those who most easily “fall through the cracks” in the Church’s ministry of our time.

Three Special Tasks

I would like to stress three special areas of our creative tasks as “missionaries apostolic” for today.

1 - First of all, we should be concerned and positive about partnership with lay people in mission. If there is anything deeply embedded in the Marianist charism, it is the sense of the leading role lay people can play in our Church. I am convinced that active partnership with laity holds the key to preserving the mission we have inherited and also to being inventive for the Church of today and tomorrow.

Today, the role of the laity is stressed everywhere. In Chaminade’s day an overly active laity was considered innovative and dangerous – to the point that groups like his Bordeaux Sodality were eclipsed for over a century, reduced to rather passive pious associations. Chaminade’s vision was sometimes thought strange and aberrant. He was a “prophet of the laity,” but he was ahead of his time.

Chaminade’s ecclesial vision has flourished again only since Vatican II. The comprehensive Marianist Family, offering a space of ecclesial fidelity and creativity for all states of life, ages, sexes and cultural backgrounds, is central to our understanding of the Marianist mission today. There is nothing in the conciliar heritage which is more in harmony with our founding charism than this active partnership with laity in spirituality and mission. Its realization will depend on the leadership of people like us.

Yet, in our sense of responsibility, we can be tempted to monopolize leadership, to take the protagonism to ourselves, to consider Marianist life a bit too firmly as our exclusive domain. We often feel that our status as religious or clergy, our experience and education are entitlements to power and domination. After all, things often seem to go better – at least, more to our taste - when we are firmly in charge! Sometimes we need to let go, to entrust the mission with more confidence to others.

We have an ongoing challenge to work through and with others, to draw as many people as possible into the mission of prayer, love and service which is the life of the Church.

2- Secondly, we need to give top priority to formation in faith, to the service of those who long for solid moorings and points of reference. Religious should be recognizable as people with genuine experience in the ways of God's Spirit. People of our age and experience can validly be expected to have resources and experience for the spiritual accompaniment of others.

With our active temperaments and our know-how, we may be tempted to absorb all our energies in outreach projects and neglect the less tangible tasks of spiritual guidance. Here our Founder is an especially good model for us. He spent most of his days in the work of guiding others, working quietly in and through them for the good of the whole Church. There is no service or ministry more precious or more necessary in today's Church.

3- Thirdly, we should be good examples of solidarity, of closeness to the poor in our time and place. The first generation of the Marianist Family abounded in projects for the poor and the marginalized. Avoiding abstract theorizing or romantic identification with the poor, early members of the Marianist Family undertook innovative services in solidarity with them. Think, for example, of Mother Adele's outreach to the people of the countryside, of Marie-Therese de Lamourous and her work with women in trouble, of Chaminade's mission through the Bordeaux Sodality to chimney sweeps and prisoners, or of his insistence on founding free schools for the poor.

More explicitly than ever, the Church in our time has come to identify such solidarity as an integral part of mission. Perhaps we Marianists are beginning to rediscover this dimension of our charism today, very especially in creative educational projects, formal and non-formal, reaching out to those who otherwise remain untouched by quality private education. This movement needs the experience and leadership of mature and experienced Marianists.

Mary as a Wise and Mature Woman

Mary is a model of faith and fidelity, as well as an inspiration for mission at each moment of our life-journey. John the Evangelist presents her in ways that seem especially important to us at our time in life. John's stories about Mary seem to have been our Founder's favorites.

At Cana, John shows us Mary as a practical person, close to ordinary people, attentive to their needs, sensitive to their problems, with an acute spiritual sense of timing, inventive and insistent in her efforts to respond to the calls of the moment. In this scene she actually seems to serve as a kind of mentor or stimulus for her divine Son. She is a good inspiration for us who are deeply involved in a great variety of activities in service of others.

Later, at the foot of the Cross, John presents us with a Mary who knows she is unable to control events, but who stands in fortitude and solidarity, sharing in saving divine mysteries whose full meaning she can only dimly fathom. She represents an aspect of our life-journeys that we are all too prone to forget: we cannot direct and control matters, but are called to live in mystery and union with a saving work that is much greater than our own.

At the end of this letter, I leave you with these Johannine images of Mary. I also attach for your meditation an image of our Founder, painted by Fausto Conti, which served as the official portrait at the time of his beatification. It hangs on the wall facing my desk here in Rome. It shows a serious and kindly figure with penetrating eyes – someone who can truly inspire others. As you can tell from reading this letter, I see Blessed Father Chaminade as a special model for us in the most active years of our lives.

May the Lord and Mary his Mother, whose presence was so vivid in the life of Blessed Father Chaminade, be with us all as we seek to be faithful in our time and stage of life!

Faternally,

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