

Looking Forward with the Marianist Family Congress

Reflection and Summary by:

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The Executive Summary of proceedings from the recent Marianist Family Congress offers us significant grist for the mill as we seek to discern “the future direction of the Marianist Family in North America”.

The simple fact of the Congress happening however, may be taken to be as significant, if not more so, than the report of its deliberations. The medium, it might be suggested, is the overarching message. Moving forward, deepened interdependent collaboration of the branches is the name of the game.

In recent years, the developing understanding of the fully shared character of our Marianist charism has led to an increasing appreciation of the fundamental relatedness, indeed the essential interdependence of the branches of the Marianist Family, and consequently, to the call for more effective collaboration.

This congressional gathering marks an important concrete step toward the deeper collaborative actualization of our shared Marianist mission in the years ahead.

From the outset, it should be noted that, coming from a non-participant at the Congress gathering, these reflections do not presume to address the overall experience of the gathering. These reflections respond simply to the report presented by the Executive Summary.

If concentrating the language of the Summary’s final paragraph be allowed, it brings us to the nub of what is fundamentally at stake in advancing this collaboration: “By focusing,” [first], on “mission clarity...”, the Summary concludes, “the Marianist Family in North America will be well positioned to strengthen its share mission...,” “and respond faithfully to the opportunities and challenges of the future.”

While the Summary concentrates on identifying what the Congress projects as Strategic Priorities, and usefully so, it begins, appropriately, by addressing mission

and identity. Assuring ourselves of clarity about the Marianist mission is at the heart of the matter. And mission clarity presumes and depends on overall charism clarity.

This presents us, however, with an immediate challenge, that of dealing with the complicated contemporary functioning of the Marianist charism term. In Marianist circles today, it is virtually ubiquitous. It is seen and heard everywhere. Used so frequently, so facilely, typically without any additional elaboration, its fundamental meaning or relevance to the context in which it is invoked, is simply taken for granted. Given the prolific and ambiguous use of the term Marianist charism today a widely shared clear understanding of Marianist charism is not to be presumed among members both lay and professed, or even between and among the branches. Assuring this clarity must be our first task in setting the direction of the Marianist Family in North America for the time ahead. It is this that the Strategic Priorities are meant to serve.

The term Marianist charism, it will be recognized, is a latter day, post-Vatican II introduction into Marianist parlance serving as a summary rubric for the comprehensive Marianist reality that precedes the introduction of the term by some 200 years.

If clarity about the Marianist mission entails overall clarity about the Marianist charism, clarity about the charism entails noting, that foundationally understood, this Marianist reality is constituted by the essentially inter-related dimensions of mission, spirit and vision, and that to speak adequately of one dimension calls for dealing with its essentially relatedness to the other two. Clarity about one depends on clarity about the other two.

In this context then, speaking of the Marianist mission calls specifically for relating it as well to the Marianist spirit that animates it, and the Marianist vision to which it is oriented. The draft statement of mission, it will be observed, has the immediate merit of addressing each of these dimensions.

Before considering the mission statement itself, let it be suggested that drafting a statement of mission is one thing; developing mission clarity is another.

For its part, drafting a statement may be seen to play a role in testing for mission clarity, but it is a prior sense of mission clarity that precedes, gives rise to, and grounds a fully adequate statement of mission.

Wordsmithing is a distinct task. Formulating a clear, shared critical understanding of the Marianist mission is prior. The adequacy of the former depends on the adequacy of the latter. An effective mission statement results from a fruitful process of mission clarification.

Attention here to the Congress statement of mission, is not meant as an exercise in wordsmithing. The intent here is to offer some reflections contributing to a more substantial clarification of the Marianist mission.

Consideration of the Marianist mission needs to begin by acknowledging the fundamental identity of the branches and the Marianist Family as a whole as embedded ecclesial bodies. We are not free-standing associations of faith. We are not a parallel Church. We are not a Church within a Church. We are not Congregationalists, we are Catholic, interdependent members of the universal body of Christ given for the sake of the world. The depth of our appreciation of our ecclesial identity bears directly on how well we understand and articulate the Marianist mission.

Recognizing that the Congress presents its statement as a draft, open to development, it is against this ecclesial backdrop that we may probe the Congress statement of mission and test for mission clarity.

Addressing the three dimensions of the Marianist charism, the Congress statement of mission reads:

“With Mary, we manifest Christ to the world [*spirit*], forming persons in communities of faith and prayer [*mission*] to build a more just, equitable and inclusive society [*vision*].”

We consider the Congress statement in turn in terms of these dimensions of spirit, mission and vision.

Marianist Spirit

This Congress statement of mission begins by attending to our animating Marian spirit: “With Mary, we manifest Christ to the world...”

These words appropriately associate our Marianist mission with Mary from the outset, but absent explicitly situating Mary in her proper ecclesial context, rather than identifying what may be properly understood as her particular mission

embedded within and in support of the overall ecclesial mission, the statement identifies the Marian mission with the general ecclesial mission.

It is also the case that, while surely not intended, nevertheless, as presented, this language projects an image of Mary functioning, in effect, as an independent operator in manifesting Christ to the world. With Vatican II, we have come to more deeply appreciate Mary as a situated Mary, an ecclesially embedded Mary. She does not stand apart from the Church. As first Christian, woman of faith and Mother of the Lord, she has already brought Christ to the world. Her role now is the formation of the Church that it may ever more fruitfully serve as sacrament of Christ to the world. Assigned by Jesus from the Cross as Mother, she assumes her role as Mother of the Church gathering with the apostles at Pentecost. In so doing she enters on her enduring mission, forming the Church ever more fully into the body of Christ.

This is her proper role within the Church, to form the Church more adequately to fulfil the Church's mission in advancing the transformation of hearts and the transformation of the world that God may be all in all.

Clarity about our Marian spirit calls for a more developed appreciation of our alliance with this ecclesial Mary and her mission as Mother of the Church. An adequate understanding of our Marianist mission today depends on this developed understanding of our Marian spirit.

Marianist Mission

Following its opening words focusing on our Marian spirit, and our alliance with her mission, the statement continues on to focus the concrete and specific Marianist mission in terms of “forming persons in communities of faith and prayer...”

With these words, following on and connected to the previous treatment of our Marian spirit, it should be first noted that, as with the Marian mission, the distinct Marianist mission is likewise, an embedded mission. It is nested within the equally

embedded Marian mission within the ecclesial mission of the Church serving as sacrament of Christ to the world.

Implanted within the Marian mission, our distinct Marianist mission participates in her mission specifically by forming communities of faith in alliance with her in forming the church more fully into the body of Christ.

The Congress statement focuses the mission in terms of “*forming persons*” in communities of faith and prayer.

Addressing “*formation*”, the distinct, indeed unique, Marianist mission may be more accurately understood as properly focused on “*formation of communities*” of faith. Communities are comprised of persons of course, but for a Marianist mission foundationally focused on drawing the masses oriented to building up the Church, formation of community, as the privileged, specific crucible for the promotion and sustaining of conversion-by-contagion, is the concrete and specific mission. In terms of emphasis, it is a matter of focusing the mission in terms of “formation of communities” rather than beginning with a focus on forming individuals.

Further, the Marianist mission is not simply about a general formation of communities of faith, but –to anticipate treatment of the Marianist vision – oriented as it is to the e-animation of faith and the re-building of a nation’s church, the mission is more properly understood to be explicitly focused on “the *multiplication* of communities of faith”.

Given its orientation to the overarching Marianist vision, clarity about the Marianist mission calls for a more developed appreciation of the multiplication-centered exigency associated with explicit focus on the formation of communities of faith.

Marianist Vision

Finally, having addressed dimensions of the Marianist Spirit and Marianist Mission, the statement focuses the Marianist vision in terms of “build[ing] a more just, equitable and inclusive society.”

While not suggesting it to be intentional, nevertheless, having side-stepped, from the start of the statement, the ecclesially grounded character of the Marianist mission as embedded within the Marian mission focused on the formation of the Church into the body of Christ, the Congress statement concludes its articulation of mission, overlooking the Church, and projects a Marianist vision focused simply and directly on – “society”. Foundationally understood, the Marianist mission is by no means dismissive or indifferent to the crying need for, and the contribution it is called to make to the promotion of social and moral reconstruction.

While the multiplication of sodalists was their essential mission, Chaminade’s sodalists were deeply involved in Bordeaux ministries devoted to the promotion of human flourishing.

As Christians, Marianists, both lay and professed participate in and are engaged with the ecclesial mission as sacrament of Christ to the world at work for the transformation of hearts and for the transformation of the world. However, as Marianist Christians, with a mission embedded in our, properly appreciated, ecclesially nested, Marian mission, foundationally understood, the Marianist mission is to be appreciated, in alliance with the Mother of the Church, as directly oriented, in the first place, to the Church itself, focusing on the re-animation of faith and the rebuilding of a nation’s Church.

Clarity about the Marianist vision to which our Marian spirit-animated mission is oriented calls for a deeper appreciation of our being a Marianist ecclesial body gifted with a charism meant in the first place, as Paul would put it, for “the building up of the body of Christ”.

At the risk of redundancy then, it may be underlined at this point, not only that the overarching Marianist vision accounts for the orientation of the concrete and specific Marianist mission to the Church itself, it is also the case that our Marianist spirit does so as well. The inter-related dimensions of our Marianist spirit, mission and vision form an integrated whole.

In sum, clarity about our Marian spirit-animated, Marianist vision-focused Marianist mission invites us to a deeper appreciation of:

- 1.) The fundamental identity of the Marianist Family as an embedded ecclesial body
- 2) Our alliance with the ecclesially nested mission of Mary as Mother of the Church,

3.) The Marianist mission as centered on the multiplication of communities of faith

4.) The orientation of the multiplication of communities of faith as directed in the first place to the building up of the Church itself.

Advancing the realization of the Marianist charism in the years ahead is a matter of deeply engaging our roots with an eye to forging our future.

The Marianist mission did not arise in a vacuum; nor does it exist in a vacuum today. Our concrete and specific missionary focus arose in the context of, and in response to the ecclesio-social devastation stemming from the French Revolution, the consequences of which continue to reverberate today in spades.

The Marianist mission in North America today exists in the context of an acute ecclesio-social crisis to which the foundational Marianist vision-oriented mission may be seen to be as uniquely relevant in our time and place as it was in 19th century France.

The Marianist Family however, is not “the Church”. We are, in Chaminade’s term, applicable to the whole Family, “the little Society”. In a sense, we are about both more and less than the general ecclesial mission. We have from the Missionary Apostolic and Founder, a grand vision, but a humble mission, the multiplication of communities of faith oriented to the re-building of a nation’s church from the ground up. In alliance with the Mother of the Church, it is a mission of helping to form and build up the Church that it may ever more fruitfully realize its mission of serving as sacrament of Christ to the world.

“Looking Forward” with the Marianist Family Congress, it may be acknowledged that, while work on the Strategic Priorities can proceed in tandem with the process of assuring the clear mission they are meant to serve, our first order of business is that of assuring ourselves of mission clarity. It is a matter of responding to the question: Leading, funding, collaborating, communicating, attracting – for What?

As forthrightly expressed as these reflections may be, they are offered not to end a conversation but to begin one.

The perspectives expressed here are meant to help set the table for a fundamentally needed Marianist Family conversation about who we are and what Marianists are called to be about in our time and place.

Clearly there are multiple perspectives among us. The Congress statement of mission reflects one such perspective. Surely, there are others.

As individual branches and as the Marianist Family of North America as a whole, we need to develop organized processes of sufficient duration to assure ourselves of a relevant, clearly shared, critically grounded grasp of our Marianist charism, its spirit, mission and vision.

Assuring ourselves of clearly shared mission clarity is the fundamental condition of possibility for the Marianist Family of North America to advance the Marianist charism effectively and collaboratively in the years ahead.