

TOWARDS A MARIANIST FUTURE: A MARIANIST SPIRITUAL FAMILY?

Today Marianist life is at a crossroads. To me it seems that the spark of vitality among us needs rekindling. This essay is a reflection on our current and future prospects in the life of the Church. It suggests one possible direction: more intentional development as a spiritual family centered in a lay movement. Basically I am suggesting that we may have something important to learn from some other Church movements of the current time. I am presenting these ideas tentatively, with the hope that they may stimulate others in our corporate movement toward a new vision.

Marianist Religious in Contrasting Situations

In the developed nations of Europe and North America the large contingents of Marianist religious, men and women, have greatly aged. The small cohorts of younger religious in these countries, often including people of great promise and excellent background, remain vulnerable more than ever to the fragility of contemporary religious commitment. In such an environment it is difficult to dream future dreams, to sustain highly appreciated works inherited from the past or to launch new corporate undertakings .

Meanwhile, in the developing nations of the South, Marianist religious have made several foundations in recent decades. Here Catholic vitality appears to be greater, and in some situations a good numbers of young people seem ready to make the radical commitment to experience and witness which is the core of religious life. But in these countries, too, it is not easy to root and mature the Marianist charism. A slow and gradual process is necessary to develop our characteristic style in community and ministry, and to consolidate fully Marianist structures of leadership and formation. New foundations of Marianist religious are rich with youthful vitality and sometimes develop noteworthy numbers. But in these situations the charism cannot easily be passed on – there is simply not a sufficient critical mass of Marianist experience to support the osmosis process to which we have been accustomed. Young religious from developing nations also feel the fragility of contemporary religious commitment, and this fragility may even be enhanced at times by the good, somewhat secularizing education they receive. They may feel more secure in imitating other institutions than in penetrating deeper into what is specifically Marianist.

Recent months have underlined the fragility of structures of the Society of Mary. In a few months, the Society has felt compelled to closed its foundations in four countries: Germany, Haiti, Nepal and the Philippines. Some predict that other strategic closings will soon follow.

Marianist Lay Communities

Meanwhile, Marianist Lay Communities in the past few decades have progressed in numbers and organizational structures. In many parts of the world, developed nations and developing ones, North and South, more lay people than ever before – many more than in the times of Blessed Father

Chaminade – now see key elements of the Marianist charism as their point of spiritual reference and as a key focus (for many *the* key focus) of ecclesial belonging.

In most cases, Marianist religious communities and lay communities collaborate positively. Marianist Lay Communities generally function effectively as small Christian communities of support and mutual stimulus. But much work still remains to be done in order to create a vigorous and self-sustaining Marianist lay movement. Many will take it for granted that the disappearance of Marianist Lay Communities in the countries mentioned above will inevitably follow the closure of the religious communities (the MLC's seemed to be growing and flourishing in Haiti and the Philippines, maintaining their own in Germany). For a variety of reasons, lay Marianists often remain rather dependent – organizationally, financially, educationally, spiritually – on the religious. Marianist laity sometimes do not appear ready to be a self-sustaining, self-directing, self-forming ecclesial reality that takes initiative for the life of its members and for the vitality of the contemporary Church.

Searching for a Way Forward

I believe that the way forward for the entire Marianist Family, religious and lay, depends on a deepening of commitment, a greater spirit of initiative from all components, and a stronger sense of belonging to a single spiritual family. This Family must resolutely see itself as a community of adults, in which each component, while relating positively to others, is responsible for its own life. In a quickly evolving world, with an exponentially increasing global consciousness, the Marianist Family can flourish only if it is clearly committed to a new mission of evangelization, in the spirit of Blessed Father Chaminade, Missionary Apostolic. I think most Marianists, religious and lay, would agree to this in theory.

What follows is an offering to help us think about where we are as a Marianist Family and where we might go in the future. It is meant as part of an overall global vision that might enhance our sense of being a single spiritual family within the Catholic Church and focus our sense of mission as a worldwide community encompassing all states of life.

A New Structure: Catholic Spiritual Families

Our times have seen a noteworthy new development in ecclesial structures: the flourishing of “spiritual families” in which both men and women, of different states of life - primarily lay people and their families, linked to consecrated persons, religious and clergy – join together in movements with a common corporate spirituality. The members of these spiritual families make specific long-lasting practical commitments in accord with their state of life, in order to nourish and deepen spirituality, cultivate Christian community, and offer common ministries in a well-defined corporate mission. Several of these communities see themselves as in some sense ecumenical or inter-religious. Often the members, lay as well as religious, are available to be sent to new places for the sake of the group's corporate mission.

Rather conservative or traditional Catholic movements are quite prominent in these new spiritual families, but they

are found on a wide spectrum of religious mentalities. The Opus Dei is one of the oldest and best known, as well as one of the most traditionalist, of the groups of this kind. Another group, with a different ideology and an inter-religious outlook but a similar structure, is the Focolare movement. Other well-known examples include the Sant'Egidio community, the Comunione e Liberazione movement, and the Neo-Catechumenal Way.

The new groups have sprung up for the most part in areas that have a long history of creating and developing new forms of Christian commitment. Italy and Spain have witnessed the birth of the best-known spiritual families, and these two countries have each also given rise to smaller families that exert considerable impact (for example, the community of Bose near Turin). France has been the birthplace of a number of varied similar movements, (Communauté des Béatitudes, Fraternité de Jérusalem, Chemin Neuf, Communauté de St.-Jean). The many Spanish-speaking Catholic countries have spawned other groups, even including one with significant Marianist roots (the Sodalitium Vitae Christianae, founded in Peru). From these starting points, the larger of the new spiritual families have spread to many other countries, quickly becoming international and intercultural, like older religious communities throughout Church history.

In these new spiritual families, the center of gravity shifts from a group of religious (each vowed to chastity, poverty and obedience) to a lay community inspired by the desire to live a particular spiritual heritage and outlook. This lay community, in which many members take long-lasting or lifetime commitments, becomes the core of the movement. The leadership of the community most often includes a mixture of men and women, people with professional responsibilities and families. Often this leadership core also includes some priests and/or religious, as spiritual assessors or advisors, but the groups see themselves primarily as lay movements.

Typically, such laity-based groups eventually attract some people who feel called to other states of life – priestly ordination, profession of the three traditional religious vows, or membership in a consecrated secular institute. Such members embrace their vows or other commitments out of the desire to live the characteristic spirituality in close union with the lay members and to place themselves at the service of the common movement. Whatever their state of life, for members of these spiritual families the primary focus is on belonging to the movement, developing it and supporting it.

In such spiritual families it is most often lay members with permanent commitments who hold the decisive key positions of leadership, guide the development of the group mission, structure its ministries, assure financial stability, and establish patterns of formation for new members. Chiara Lubich of Focolare, Andrea Riccardi of Sant'Egidio, and Kiko Arguello of the Neo-Catechumenal Way are examples of this kind of lay leadership. St. Josemaría Escrivá of Opus Dei and Fr. Luigi Giussani of Comunione e Liberazione were ordained diocesan priests who founded and devoted themselves fully to the development of their mainly lay spiritual families.

Thinking of these different figures, it is easy to see how they represent a broad spectrum of Catholic outlooks as well as an enormous vitality and influence in our times. I suggest that we not focus here on particular stances on the spectrum of Catholic ideologies, but rather on the interesting fact that,

whether conservative or liberal, left or right, these groups function with a similar structure which has few parallels in previous Church history.

This development of spiritual families is a *novum* of great significance for ecclesial life. It represents a new ecclesial structure, characteristic of the post-Vatican-II era, to be added to other well-known and long-established Catholic spiritual community patterns.

Late Antiquity saw the rise of monasticism, and the Middle Ages were marked by the new style of the Mendicant Orders; the Counter-Reformation saw the rise of active Orders of priests, while the period after the French Revolution witnessed the flourishing of societies of apostolic life and active consecrated communities, very especially those of women religious. Today we are witnessing the rise of still another form of dedicated Catholic life. The new spiritual families take up a place parallel to well-known older and long established Catholic spiritual patterns.

Nearly everyone agrees with the principle that Canon Law should follow Christian life rather than dictate it. Hence, the appropriate pattern for leading and governing the new spiritual families and integrating them into overall ecclesial life is not yet clear. The Opus Dei has become a “personal prelature” (a sort of non-territorial diocese), but other movements remain for the most part simply “recognized lay associations,” even though they also integrate ordained priests and consecrated religious. Precise relationships remain to be defined, between members who are ordained, those who have religious vows, and those who live typical family-based lay lives. Similar canonical perplexity has characterized Church history whenever significant new forms of dedicated life have appeared.

Echoes of Blessed Father Chaminade

Looking at this ecclesial phenomenon as a Marianist, I am struck by its affinity to the vision of Blessed Father Chaminade two centuries ago. Like today’s new spiritual families, Chaminade’s foundations evolved gradually and organically from a core of dedicated lay people under his guidance as their charismatic spiritual director. Eventually his foundations aimed to integrate all conditions and walks of life into a single community or movement, while respecting the unique commitments and characteristics of each component (“union without confusion”). Each group of Chaminade’s followers was invited to keep in very close contact with the others: lay people with religious and clergy, men with women, single people with married couples and their children, educated elites with working classes, upper strata of society with ordinary people, the well-to-do with the poor. His “Institute of Mary” (a unified movement that was not a canonical reality, but one intensely experienced for more than a generation) grouped together in a common thrust and spirit lay people with religious, brothers with priests and diocesan clergy, religious women of both cloistered and more active communities, and a large number of consecrated people living invisibly “in the world.” Rather than seeking to illustrate a particular ecclesial theory, Chaminade developed all these groups one by one, in response to the felt calls and aspirations of the members. His vision was inclusive, springing from lived experience.

Like today’s spiritual families, Chaminade’s foundations were not founded out of any desire to establish some new canonical structure but rather out of the effort to channel spiritual aspirations and respond to pressing and evolving needs of ecclesial mission at a new moment in history. Aiming simply to be

innovative in the immediate aftermath of an unprecedented Revolution, Chaminade seems to have been a forerunner today's spiritual families. Whatever their canonical status, such multi-faceted foundations aim to find a place for all ecclesial vocations in a common thrust and spirituality, in a common focus of formation, prayer, communal fellowship and missionary outreach, with a great deal of personal interaction and shared spiritual leadership binding the different components into a psycho-spiritual unity.

We would seem, therefore, to be prolonging the Marianist founding grace and charism if we pay close attention and learn from the experience of the more recent spiritual families mentioned above.

Impediments in the History of Catholic Lay Movements: What happened to the Madeleine Sodality?

What is the main impediment that hinders the ongoing development of a Marianist spiritual family in the spirit of Blessed Father Chaminade today? I believe that the strongest impediment may be the lack of sufficiently strong commitments in the lay components of Marianist life, coupled with the lack of a shared corporate vision on the part of religious that truly includes lay people as key and equal participants in the core of Marianist life. I believe these impediments stem to a large degree from the history of the Marianist Family after the death of Chaminade.

We can begin this reflection on impediments by reviewing what happened to Chaminade's Madeleine Sodality. For a generation, roughly from 1800 until the Revolution of 1830, Chaminade's movement remained vibrant as a spiritual family, solidly based on a dynamic and numerous lay community, in which members of all states of life recognized their spiritual affinity and were committed to a common corporate thrust.

But after 1830 we witness an eclipse of this vision. Chaminade himself remained absent from Bordeaux for six years and returned only at the age of 75, to a problem-laden situation that hardly left room for refounding any lay-centered thrust. In 1830, in the course of a Revolution which replaced one French royal dynasty with another, Marianist houses in Bordeaux were attacked by rock-throwing anti-clerical activists. Chaminade felt it was more prudent to absent himself personally from Bordeaux, in order to keep his many followers (ridiculed by a local newspaper as the *enchaminadés*) safer from further attack.

His absence was unexpectedly prolonged, as he found a great deal to do in supporting and developing Marianist religious foundations of men and women elsewhere, in the Midi (from a base in Agen), in Franche-Comté (from St-Remy) and in Alsace (from St-Hippolyte and Ebersmuenster). Meanwhile, a new Archbishop (de Cheverus) took charge in Bordeaux, and adopted a reserved and critical attitude toward the Marianist foundations in his see-city. The new Archbishop seemed to support critical challenges from disheartened early Marianist religious who eventually severed their connections with the Marianist Family, and he refused to ordain some new Marianist priests, while welcoming them into the ranks of his diocesan clergy. The foundational Marianist educational institution (Institution Ste-Marie) left the city of Bordeaux, under the creative but imprudent management of Fr. Lalanne, and soon met with financial disaster. The *Congrégation* or Sodality of Bordeaux continued rather sluggishly under the guidance of the cautious and plodding Fr. Caillet.

Meanwhile the 19th-century Church of France, resigned to a long-term, unbridgeable polarization from free-thinking anti-clericals, thrived in its defensive and traditionalist, restoration-minded posture. Rather than promote lay communities, nineteenth-century French Catholicism emphasized the role of the clergy and hierarchy and took a mostly condemnatory stance toward modern social developments. Lay communities of mature and active Christians did not really fit into the overall outlook of pious Catholics of the era. Aging adults who had come to maturity in such movements as Chaminade's Sodality integrated themselves into local parish life. Sodalities became no more than quiet pious parochial associations or (more often) groups for initiating children into devout Catholic life. So it was that the Bordeaux Sodality and its affiliates languished. By 1850 it was a movement whose time appeared to be finished.

Meanwhile the French environment was highly favorable to religious congregations, of which many had been founded or revived in the post-revolutionary years. The Society of Mary flourished, multiplied its membership by four in the era of the Second Empire (1852-1871), consolidated its independent structures in accord with the usual canonical criteria, and became clearly identified as a congregation of religious teachers. This development was facilitated by the government of Napoleon III, which took an aggressive policy of favoring universal primary education, largely with the help of Catholic religious men and women. The Marianist movement was thus transformed from a Bordeaux-based multi-branched spiritual family into a nationwide canonically structured teaching congregation of Brothers, with a few priests serving as chaplains. During this period, even the close links with the Marianist Sisters were severed for more than a generation. The focus on active adult laity in Marianist life was all but forgotten. The end result was two clearly structured and relatively flourishing, very independent religious congregations (one for men and one for women), and the withering of lay communities.

Post-Conciliar Revival of Marianist Lay Communities: an incomplete spiritual family

For nearly a century and a half, Marianist religious became thoroughly accustomed to independent action, without interaction with people of other states of life. The religious had a strong and heartfelt conviction that they were the core and the unique center of Marianist life. Most religious had no experience in dealing with adult lay communities. The religious felt responsible to act rather independently and without consulting the laity in projects, particularly educational ones, that promised to contribute to the overall mission of the Church.

Well into the twentieth century, through Catholic Action movements between the two World Wars and eventually through post-Vatican-II developments of lay responsibility, Marianist religious turned again to adult lay communities. The initial steps were greatly influenced by pre-conciliar definitions of Catholic Action as "participation of the laity in the work of the hierarchy." The laity's proper domain was admitted much more readily in social, political and economic realms than in the inner life or mission of the Church itself.

In their generous enthusiasm for promoting lay movements, Marianist religious tended to take the initiative, to become the resource persons and moderators, those who formed lay communities and

guided them spiritually, largely financed them, dictated or at least advised them on structures and practices.

Very many of the members of the new post-conciliar Marianist Lay Communities had first encountered the charism of Chaminade in their years as students; they tended to see their membership in a Marianist Lay Community as a kind of prolongation of the spiritual fervor and apostolic activism of their school years, looking to their former religious educators as guides and initiators. Not a few lay Marianists, whether or not their commitment had its roots in school settings, were content with a slightly passive and subordinate role, a bit like students (albeit very active ones) in a classroom. Both religious and laity fell into this mode of thinking. Laypeople felt little need, little push and little encouragement to take more initiative and organize themselves independently.

In this respect they were part of a widespread Catholic consciousness which gradually recognized the value of lay Christian communities but remained rather passive and dependent on clerical leadership. Very often, the clerical and hierarchical leadership re-enforced this somewhat passive role among “their” laity. More self-directing Christian base communities (*comunidades de base*) thrived more in areas where the lack of clergy was strongly felt.

So it is that today the Marianist Family, a precursor of a new ecclesial structure, is left behind. Newer spiritual families, which have grown up from the beginning with a focus on the lay core, have expanded greatly, while the Marianist Lay Communities (also developing in the post-conciliar era) have experienced only modest growth and missionary outreach.

I believe that renewal and future development of Marianist life for the future will be intimately linked to our capacity to recover this foundational charism, to concentrate on forming an intense and self-governing, self-perpetuating spiritual family. The time for this development seems to have come in the life of the Church. But a holistic and integrated commitment to this vision requires a change of outlook on the part of both religious and lay Marianists.

What Should We Do?

A key question arises for one committed to Chaminade’s charism and aware of the new developments mentioned above: how might we get to the vitality of a dynamic post-conciliar spiritual family, given our rich but complex history and our present-day resources? Where do we go from here?

In the first fervor of ferment just before Vatican II, in 1962 Adolf Windisch published an interesting and influential doctoral thesis on Marianist social thought. This thesis remains fundamental for understanding the genesis of Chaminade’s social thought, but its understanding of mutual relationships within the Marianist Family is now dated. It included a much-echoed diagram that portrayed the Marianist Family as a series of concentric circles, in which the religious were seen as the core, the lay members as sharing in the same charism but in a subordinate way. The religious community (very especially the male religious community) was accordingly presented as the heart of Marianist life. Lay communities were seen as further removed from this charismatic core, to some extent a project of the

apostolic outreach of the religious. (With time Fr. Windisch's personal vision greatly evolved beyond any such concept.)

It is true that commitment to a religious congregation (Chaminade's "man who never dies") fosters a more intensive, quasi-exclusive focus on the charism in structuring everyday life. However, in the concentric-circle view, lay Marianists are definitely second-class citizens, not expected to take too much initiative in the charismatic realm.

Today we can see that a better representation would be a matrix of many nodes, each turned toward a common central spiritual and missionary focus, interacting from each one's uniqueness for the common charismatic good. Such a vision could foster greater initiative, interaction, inclusivity and interdependence, and leave room for a more dynamic development of lay Christian communities.

My tentative suggestion is that today we start small, but with such a view of mutual relationships clearly in mind. Many Lay Marianists of the present time will not feel called to a more demanding commitment. A model from our Marianist origins would be Chaminade's *Etat*, born during the time of Napoleonic persecutions, in which the Founder worked with special intensity with a small inner core, while trying to maintain outreach to a broader, less intense community.

Rather than trying to convert current Marianist communities *en masse* into something that is radically more demanding, perhaps it is more feasible and promising to begin with a small nucleus (or possibly a few small nuclei in different parts of the Marianist world). Some Marianist laity might seek to form small units who take initiative to be self-directing, self-financing, and self-organizing. They would have to evolve their own distinctive lay style of formation and community life, as well as a missionary strategy to reach out to the many Christians who today are in search of a deeper Christian identity.

The initiative for such a new beginning would have to arise primarily from the lay members themselves. They could call on the help of religious steeped in the study and experience of the charism, but the initiative, especially in the first period, would have to remain resolutely lay. The religious would have to resist any temptations, even subtle ones, to provide organizational or financial resources. These small lay nuclei would have to evolve their own way of living the charism, while (we hope) choosing to remain in close contact with the Marianist heritage and those of all states of life who identify with it. Such small nuclei would need to link up with one another, not only with the local religious, for mutual stimulus and support.

With time, if they followed a trajectory like that of today's new spiritual families, these nuclei of self-directing lay Marianists would grow and attract members who are ready to take initiatives and make far-ranging commitments. They would deal in their own way with matters of structure, finance and formation. They would find their own ways to link together, to organize meetings and congresses. They would attract to their membership some clergy and religious whose primary commitment would be to this self-directing spiritual family. In this way we might expect that they would eventually foster good vocations to the consecrated life and the clergy from within their membership, as is the case with other spiritual families today. Is this perhaps the proper route for future Marianist vocations, lay and religious?

A Missionary Vision

The development of such a new kind of Marianist Family would necessarily involve a common missionary vision. Chaminade, as a “Missionary Apostolic,” seems to have begun his foundations with such a missionary vision (“rekindling the torch of faith” in a newly secularized environment, as he later explained to the Pope) primarily in view. On the basis of this missionary vision, Chaminade proceeded gradually to specify spiritual guidance and community norms, formation criteria and organizational structures, in the light of that all-embracing missionary vision.

Similarly, today’s new Catholic spiritual families are characterized by a broad missionary vision, their own approach to the work of the Church in today’s world. Each of today’s spiritual families accentuates certain characteristic dimensions. The Focolarini emphasize the work of “unity” and integrate ecumenical and inter-religious outlooks in a prominent way in all their undertakings. Wherever it exists, Sant’Egidio is known for its initiatives for peace and for its outreach to the urban poor. The Bose community is famous, in Italy and beyond, for its efforts to develop dynamic modern contemplative and liturgical spirituality. Opus Dei seeks to promote the role of the Christian laity and channels it in accord with its famous guidebook (Escribá’s *The Way*). The Neo-Catechumenate is distinctively focused on deepening adult Christian formation, returning to many practices of the early Church. Whatever the precise form of the missionary vision, it must be shared as a fundamental motivation for all the members of the spiritual family, and it requires the commitment, galvanizes the energies, of all the members, the lay core as well as any consecrated or clerical members.

I believe that Bro. Ray Fitz has a similar vision in mind when he speaks of a “Marianist Movement,” one which stimulates and channels the spiritual energies of today’s young Catholics and focuses greatly on all-pervasive questions of urban justice and reconciliation.

Any new missionary vision must be the result of reflection and experience by the members, especially the lay members, of the emerging Marianist spiritual family. It will take time to develop and specify in all its richness. But it is not difficult to foresee certain dimensions, which constitute almost necessary starting points:

- The “new evangelization” of the world is an urgent ecclesial priority of our times, and one in close harmony with the emphasis on an integrated, incarnational “faith of the heart” that shaped Marianist origins.
- A “global vision” seems essential today, as we reach out in a world that is global in mentalities and contacts, and as we integrate Marianist experience worldwide – such a vision may motivate generous efforts of the Family to reach out to new situations in need, especially in the Global South.
- Generally Marianists today feel called to a special option for the poor, whom Chaminade called “the most numerous and the most neglected,” in favor of developing “a society that is more just and fraternal.”

- Most Marianists will feel motivated to make a special option for young people, the “generations of the future,” who were the first recipients of Chaminade’s own efforts and whom all of Marianist history has prioritized through works of education and human development.
- Marianists will clearly want to integrate a Marian dimension, perhaps a “Marian style of Church,” which stresses gradual human development, patient dialogue and listening, respect for individual uniqueness, participative leadership, and solidarity with the poor and the weak.
- Following their Founder, Marianists tend to be attracted by an intense community spirit, where people are gradually drawn into interaction that develops and motivates the life of each person, calls on a great variety of gifts and insights, and creates a diversified but commonly focused missionary thrust.
- An unambiguous commitment to the renewal of ecclesial life, prolonging the refreshing missionary vision of the Second Vatican Council, seems highly appealing to most Marianists, as well as a sign of fidelity to the Church universal.

No doubt others would modify this list and add some additional emphases. The foregoing is meant only by way of example. Personally I would opt for a Marianist Family vision that stressed ecumenism and positive inter-religious dialogue of life, action, reflection and spirituality. I would also plead for a Marianist missionary vision that stresses inculturation and eschews excessive dependency: instead of turning to the richer, dominating developed world for safety and security, I hope the Marianist Family would take a stance in favor of cultural diversity, where each component respects the others and seeks to learn from them. In a dialogue about mission, a great variety of insights would surely emerge.

Precise dimensions of a common missionary vision would need to be developed over time, with a wide-ranging process of dialogue and discernment. What seems essential is a common missionary vision to motivate and structure deeper commitments of people who find the courage and feel empowered to organize themselves dynamically and take initiatives.

Conclusion

The foregoing is offered, not as a ready-made vision but as a stimulus to others. I believe that we are at a crucial point in Marianist life. From my perspective the foregoing thoughts suggest some possible next steps. I look forward to the reflections and insights of others.

- **First Draft: David Fleming, s.m.**
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