

Transition of the Marianist Charism

Ted Cassidy, SM

In this brief article I want to share how I see the charism of Chaminade and our Marianist Founders as being transformed to meet the needs of the Church and of society today. There is so much distraction from authentic methods of living Christ's way today. To take another road, groups of people are banding together to support themselves to keep discovering how to pray, how to evangelize, and how to build up society in creative ways, based on the strength of the Marianist charism. The Society of Mary and the Marianist Sisters mission is to support this new-yet-original Marianist way of the Spirit's guiding the Church.

I have had the good fortune of experiencing in various expressions the Marianist charism. Here are two recent experiences.

Lay Marianist Life in Cleveland and the World

My first example involves a member of the Marianist lay community here at St. Aloysius Parish in Cleveland, a woman who recently told me how much she loves our charism. She is a member of a lay community of about fifteen members that meet twice a month. At their semimonthly meetings during the past few years the members have gone through the Marianist System of Virtues, processed the Call to Justice sponsored by the Marianist Province Office of Justice and Peace, and committed themselves to a new covenant in front of the parish.

In addition, I have attended meetings of six young adult graduates of the University of Dayton who are forming a new community to support themselves in their efforts to live this charism. While attending UD, they were formed in Marianist spirituality, prayer, and community building tools to reach out to help society. They want to continue forming their community. At the most recent meeting they shared about their efforts to adjust to new jobs in finance, computer science, teaching, and in higher studies.

These examples of Marianist lay community development are being duplicated around the world. What we are seeing is that members of the lay communities are discovering how this precious charism of Chaminade and the other Founders is so helpful to them in living and deciphering the Christian life for our times.

Neutral Zone: Marianist Religious Life

At recent gatherings of the brothers of our province, Trinitarian Brother Paul Michalenko gave a workshop on the dynamics of change and transition. Brother Paul stressed that every good organization goes through periods of growth and then decline, which calls for new ways to adapt to current conditions. He demonstrated that when an ending is developing a neutral zone is experienced in which a new beginning can develop. When we are in the experience of loss, most of us are in a transition deficit, grieving and needing time to process. This is the Paschal Mystery in operation. The Holy Spirit is active, and it takes a clean break with the past, as Moses led his people to do. Christ died and new life came in his resurrection. It takes an open mind, an open heart, and an open will to grasp what new call is developing.

In the neutral zone we can seek to understand why the change is important. We need new information. We need support and ways to build temporary structures that will help us get through. We need to see our purpose and stay focused on a vision of the future that matches our purpose for existence.

Evolution of Marianist Life

Father Ade Windisch, a Marianist and sociologist, has left us outlines of the major changes Marianists have gone through since our beginning in 1800. In a letter to Pope Gregory XVI in 1838, Chaminade said the Society of Mary and the Marianist Sisters are to be directors or guides for the Family of Mary. However, the spirit of the Church in the nineteenth century, influenced by the First Vatican Council, created a defensive and paternalistic spirit and culture that influenced the Church and the Marianists and which prevented the growth of the laity. Gradually after the Second Vatican Council, in the Society of Mary, the laity's place in the Church was fostered. The SM rewrote its Constitutions, and at a number of General Chapter meetings, it gave prominence to the role of the laity. The first international Marianist Family coordinating committee was founded in 1993. The Society of Mary, the Marianist Sisters, and International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities met together to form an international coordinating committee, called the World Council of the Marianist Family. What Father Windisch is saying is that the great change in the Church's pastoral and dogmatic positions on the role of the laity has helped the Society of Mary to find how our charism can transform its main purpose.

Transition demands a discernment process. It is going through a neutral zone. Are we now not experiencing the gradual transition from a primary role of the apostolates of the religious orders

to the expansion of the role of the laity? We are gradually grappling with what is happening and how the Spirit is leading us. We are learning how to discern and cooperate with the Spirit in this change.

It certainly does not appear to be the demise of the religious orders. It is rather the religious order finding a new way of assisting the growth and development of the lay movement.

Support of Mortification

Father Quentin Hakenewerth's description of the Virtue of the Support of Mortification helps us grasp how to cooperate with this process of change.¹ When our support systems are changing, when we have fewer vocations to the religious life, when we have to close missions that have been treasures, there are steps that this Virtue of the Support of Mortification encourages us to follow. The first is to not overreact.

- Maintain who we are.
- Keep our integrity.
- Keep alive that part of us which is the true self.
- Let the feelings from what is happening emerge.
- Look into the process to discover what newness is happening.
- What is the good that we want to hold on to?

Brother Paul says organizations that were most at home with their previous and present success find the most difficulty in adapting to the new. He says successful outcomes of any phase

¹ Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *Growing in the Virtues of Jesus* (San Antonio, TX: Burke Publishing, 1996), pp. 87-96.

triggers its demise by creating new challenges that it is not equipped to handle. The very thing that the organization had to let go of is the very thing that got it so far. Whenever there are painful, troubled times in an organization, a developmental transition probably is going on. There will be retardation when the organization is going through this development stage and does not make a transition when the time is right. Organizations need to respond to the changing realities of their environment.

- Is it not the very success of the SM schools and other missions that can get in the way of the development of the laity?
- Is it true?
- What do we need to let go of?

I sense we have to let go of control or any residue of paternalism. It is much more developing the skills of direction that Chaminade encouraged. We are the guides to a new life. We model and we offer support systems for the growth of the laity. This is no mean task. It will take much effort for us to keep building support systems for the laity.

This is how the Virtue of the Support of Mortification guides us. Discover what change is happening.

- Where is the true self of the Society of Mary in this day and age?
- What is the Spirit saying it will take much support to discover?

Chaminade's suffering at the end of his life and refusal to go along with the administration of his successor, the second Superior General, Father Caillet, SM, gives us an example of how to get through the changes we must face. Father Vincent Vasey, SM, explains how Chaminade wanted the vow of poverty to be observed according to the tradition of St. Benedict and the Constitutions of the Society.² Chaminade did not want to leave this life with the impression that he permitted any abuse to this vow. Chaminade grasped how essential this was to the continuance of the Society. He realized that the charism has to keep its essential features. Both Chaminade and St. Francis used the word "bastard" to describe their congregations if they did not keep the vow of poverty.³ What was going on in the mind of the Founder when he used such strong language? It appears Chaminade realized the true charism of the Society could be lost in Father Caillet's administration. It was the sense that some part of the system that was in place was not open to the Spirit. The Marianist charism flourishes only with persons who are not ego centered. It can operate only with a detached love.

As we transform, we in turn are transformed. Our openness to the Spirit will show how to go.

- Is not the core of our charism the reality of groups coming together in community to have Mary lead them to find the life of Christ?
- Does this not happen when we carefully go through the System of Virtues and are directed well?
- Does our charism not function when we are changing society by this method?
- Are not the external works in all their good results from this small group process?

² Vincent Vasey, SM, *Chaminade, Another Portrait* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1987), pp. 270ff.

³ *Ibid*, p. 271.

Without a community of prayer—those searching and being aware of the work of the Spirit, with Mary as a guide—we are nothing. With it, we are a great strength in the world.

When I experienced the young adults struggling to live this way and when I see our group here in Cleveland delving into the heart of faith in Mary, I see our charism at work. The Society of Mary is called to foster this development. This is our future. This is what now we have to enable. We are called to develop new structures, new means to let this happen in the modern age.

- What new media, what mode of direction, what workshops, what means of communication, what formation for our candidates, what retreats are needed?
- What is the first way to proceed?
- What will keep us from being able to do it?

Our responsibility as Marianists is to learn how we go through transition and even transformation of ourselves. How do we help each other go through this process? The great teachers of the Church have given us methods at different times in history. St. Teresa of Avila gave us her Interior Castle. Learning from her is learning how to go through discernment for change. In her seven stages, the person learns how to cooperate and live in the mystery of God. She shows how to name the experiences a human being goes through to live the life of Christ. She shows us the first level of human habits needed; the second stage helps the indwelling of God become more intimate. The third stage goes into the interior and seeks to rid the self of ego domination. The fourth is contemplation, and the fifth is a spiritual rebirth. The sixth is entering the dark night on

a deep level where God's desire for us meets attachments to the world. In the seventh, we finally find our true home in Christ. The transition that religious are going through today can certainly profit from using a method like Teresa's. She enables the person and the group to discern and discover the will of God

St. Augustine, when writing his *Confessions*, finally discovered that he was not really writing about his biographical life. He was finding who God is and how the Trinity was present in his life to lead him.

It is demanding to live through St. Teresa's seven stages. It is delightful to write one's biography, as Augustine did, and to find out how God is leading.

I mention these examples because these masters point us in the right direction. We are on a journey as Marianists. We are finding how God is calling us to live our charism in a new way.

The entire Church is being called to transformation. We are invited to live in union with Christ, to live in profound union with him in the castle of our souls. We support each other in this life. Our Marianist way of doing this is through communities of faith. We have done this for almost 200 years. Religious life is at the core of our support for this. Now our laity is coming forth in many new ways. We religious are the light for these groups. We are the teachers of teachers; we are those who have the vow commitment to show the way.

Brother Paul Michalenko and Dominic Perri state:

Through our work as consultants with dozens of religious congregations, we experience that many consider a narrow set of options. We believe that one size does not fit all religious groups as they discern their future. In fact it is the diversity of charisms, lifestyle, apostolic and spiritual expressions that make religious such a gift to the church and the world. A response to the pressing issues facing religious congregations calls for an individual response by each religious community based on their unique history and reality.⁴

I propose the major function for the future of our Society of Mary and the Marianist Sisters is in doing all we can to foster the growth of lay Marianists. This certainly is underway, but to bring it about with strength, it will mean much transformation. Yet, this is the work for us members of the Society of Mary. We are dying, but we also are rising. Our Marianist charism calls us to be together as we discover where Mary is leading us. She is teaching us.

⁴ Paul Michalenko and Dominic Perri, "Authentic Responses to the Future of Religious Life," located in *Human Development*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Winter 2012), p. 3.