



Circular No. 5 – December 8, 2014

**MARIANIST CONSECRATED LIFE
A PLUNGE INTO THE HEART OF THE CHARISM**

1. CONSECRATED LIFE: A GIFT FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD ON THE ROAD

My dear Sisters,

November 29 marks the opening of the Year of the Consecrated Life, so designated by the Holy Father, within the framework of the 50th anniversary of Vatican Council II and of the conciliar decree *Perfectae caritatis*. A year that will highlight the Consecrated Life as a gift for the Church and for the world:

This jubilee year is offered to the Consecrated Life so that it might become the occasion for

- ✦ **Making a “grateful remembrance” of the past**
- ✦ **Embracing the future with hope**
- ✦ **Living the present with passion¹**

These are the goals proposed by the dicastery which every Unit has already inserted into their own programming.

In this ecclesiastical context, while we will be helped and accompanied by the Magisterium itself with an abundance of literature on this topic that is already being published, it seems important to me not to pass over in silence another anniversary that is very significant for us: the 175th anniversary of Father Chaminade’s *Letter to Preachers of Retreats, August 24, 1839*.

These two anniversaries shed light upon each other by opening up before us a path that can stimulate and help us towards better insights into the gift of the consecrated life and of our Marianist consecrated life.

The letter of August 24, 1839, directed towards the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary, presents in fact the cardinal points of Marianist consecrated life.

These are two anniversaries, therefore, that invite us to plunge again into the depths of the always new sea of our consecration in order to rediscover its beauty and prophetic quality.

¹ Cardinal JOAO BRAZ DE AVIZ, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Press Conference on Presentation of the year dedicated to the Consecrated Life 2015*, January 31, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.news.va/en/news/year-of-consecrated-life-set-for-2015>

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I confess my hesitation in dealing with a topic already dissected by so many in ways much deeper and more eloquent than I am able to do in the following pages. But I am relying upon the words of Father Chaminade that I dare to make my own: “that a subject so dear to our hearts cannot be exhausted.”²

2. MAKING GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THE MARIANIST VOCATION

Gratitude is one of the fundamental attitudes of the human person, an attitude that gives a distinct touch to relationships, to life itself. Gratitude opens the person to recognizing that all is gift, all is grace, everything is gratuitous. Nothing is to be taken for granted, nothing is owed to us.

Gratitude disposes us to see what is positive in every situation, to catch a glimpse of the dawn on a cloudy day without sun. Gratitude is closely related to joy. One who lives in an attitude of gratefulness cannot be sad.

Remembering “gratefully” means letting joy spring up for the footprints of God in our history, for that dream that awakened the very heart of our existence, opening it wide before a horizon towards which we set out, *cost what it may*, as Mother Adèle herself often said.

We are invited to spend some time in remembering and *remembering gratefully*. To emphasize, therefore, the positive, the beautiful, the milestones, the love encountered and sown along our path, the weaknesses transformed into opportunities for growth, the insights that have made possible setting out for new goals.

In making grateful remembrance of the Marianist vocation, we wish also to remember that Letter that holds the heart of our Founder’s charismatic intuition.³ We find set out there his description of the Marianist vocation and not merely of the vow of stability. More exactly, it could be considered as the “Letter on the True Spirit of the Society of Mary and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary,” as Father Joseph Verrier, SM, called it.⁴

Father Chaminade started from a very realistic reading of his own time: “In our day the prevailing great heresy is religious indifference... the divine light of faith is growing dim and being extinguished...” A reading which nevertheless is not pessimistic because it does not stop at the today of history; it is a reading illuminated by the interventions of God in the history of humanity, interventions in which Mary, by the very will of God, has always had an eminent part: “All periods of the Church’s history are marked with the struggles and the glorious triumphs of the august Mary.”

Making a grateful remembrance can mean for us, therefore,

- remembering the presence of Mary in this history of our congregation, a presence which is at the base of its origins, its existence and its purpose; remembering the presence of Mary in our personal story and that of our Unit;

² *Letter to the Preachers of Retreats, August 24, 1839, Letter No. 1163.*

³ The Letter was in fact written by Fr. Narcisse Roussel (1813-1885), Father Chaminade’s secretary, but certainly contains the points and the teaching directly dictated by the Founder.

⁴ VERRIER, Joseph. “Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839: Analysis of Content and Style,” in Stanley, Thomas, and Robert H. Hughes (eds.), *The Letter and the Spirit* (Dayton: Marianist Press, 1979), 31.

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- remembering what has been lived through during these 200 years of life that we are preparing to celebrate; remembering the graces received and the hardships;
- remembering the sisters and the brothers who have preceded us, of how many have been “Mary’s instruments” along the path that brought us to knock at the door of the Marianist Family.
- remembering....

2.1. Between past and present: the reading of faith

The memory of the past enkindles a beacon on the present. And for the Founder, the *beacon* which illuminates a present that is restless, uncertain, hazy and, in many ways tragic is precisely: Mary!

The Founder’s conviction, set in stone, was expressed in the clearest terms:

“Mary’s power is not diminished. We firmly believe that she will overcome this heresy as she has overcome all others,... To [Mary], therefore, is reserved a great victory in our day: hers will be the glory of saving the faith from the shipwreck with which it is threatened among us”.

Today, just as yesterday, the accurate and attentive reading of the world as it currently is leads us to see that, when a horizon of faith is lacking, as a consequence solidarity, dialogue and communion are shut down and ideologies, injustices, wars, corruption, marginalization, indiscriminate environmental and genetic manipulation proliferate, with priority given to all that revolves around finance and profit.

Far from leaving us broken down by the winds that erode the fragile rock of our weak faith, remembering leads us to renew our faith in Her whose power is undiminished. Today as yesterday, in Her is all our hope, all our trust. With this conviction we can “embrace the future with hope.”

3. EMBRACING THE FUTURE WITH HOPE IN HER NAME AND FOR HER GLORY

Remembering within the framework of the Spirit that always blows where and when it wills, helps us to better understand the present, opens the heart to new insights, releases new forces, new energies.

That is what the Founder experienced: “Now, we have understood this design of Providence ... and have hastened to offer Mary our feeble services in order to labor under her orders and combat at her side.”

That is the grace of the Founder, who was the custodian of a charism, a gift that was to be cast onto the path of history to bear fruit, to form a Family that would work at the side of Mary, the Woman called today as in the past to conquer evil in all its forms, a Family called to extend her mission as Mother, to show the Marian face of the Church.

The unique insight of Father Chaminade into the place of Mary in salvation history would transform him into a fearless apostle of Mary, supported and driven by an inexhaustible missionary zeal that would make him tireless in seeking all possible means to multiply the apostles of this incomparable Woman, to whom he had already at a young age offered his whole self.

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3.1 We have hastened to offer Mary our feeble services

To hasten: that is a word that seems to be out of sync with the image of our Founder handed down to us. But I believe it is very appropriate and validated by his tireless traversing of the streets of Bordeaux during the Revolution and the roads of France, once he was awarded the title of Missionary Apostolic.

It was the hastening of a man in love. And who can doubt the gentle and intense love the Founder nourished for the Mother of God, in whom he had unlimited trust, to whom he had offered his whole self to make her “known, loved and served”? He himself loved to repeat up to the end of his life: “for a long time I have lived and breathed only to spread the veneration of Mary.”

To hasten! That word occurs often in the Bible.

We need only recall Mary, who journeyed *in haste* into the hill country to the house of Elizabeth (cf. Lk 1:39). Or like the women, who on Easter morning left the tomb *in haste* to go proclaim to the disciples what they had witnessed (Mt 28:8).

It is not the haste of a person who acts thoughtlessly, imprudently, superficially. It is the haste of her whose heart is full and overflowing with something it can't hold back, an announcement to offer, a joy to share, a life to give. For those who are in love, time is short, fleeting, a breath. It must be lived intensely, enhanced. “Time flies, let us hasten to use it profitably,” said Mother Adèle.

To hasten, to leave, to set out on the road: these are actions that become effective only when they are born within, are nourished by silence, by prayer, by listening to the Word, by listening to the world around us, by frequenting the crossroads of history, “unbeaten paths” where we are invited, today more than ever, “to pitch movable tents.”⁵

That is the “quick pace” with which Pope Francis encourages us to follow the path passionately: “led by the Spirit, never unyielding, never closed, always open to the voice of God that speaks, that opens, that leads us and invites us to go towards the horizon.”⁶

3.2 We have taken the name and standard of Mary and are ready to fly wherever she calls us

The Founder, who at age seventy-eight could still get enthusiastic when thinking about Mary's Mission and about the religious Family which he had founded, goes even further, or better still, flies even higher, inviting his sons and daughters to be ready to fly wherever she might call us.

Let the invitation of the Church resonate within us: “Embrace the future with hope!” And let us feel within our hearts the echo of the passionate message of the Founder: Leave, go, fly off in Her Name and for Her Glory, renewing day after day the total gift of yourself to Mary, offer her your complete availability to carry on today her mission as Mother; help Christ to pitch his tent at the crossroads of today's history.

⁵Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, [*Scrutate* – English version not yet available], (Rome:2015), n. 15.

⁶ FRANCIS, “Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord – XVIII World Day of the Consecrated Life,” (Rome: February 2, 2014), cited in [*Scrutate* English version not yet available] no. 10. [Homily accessible at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html]

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4. THE CONSECRATED LIFE BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY

The consecrated life is constantly called upon to measure itself against and to the clash between the dream that it glimpses in darkness with uncertain outlines and the clear, stark reality that surrounds it. It is the perpetual oscillation between dream and reality, the way and necessary discernment leading to the path of prophecy. It is the pendulum of history that, in its perennially oscillating movement, opens up scenarios on all fronts that make us see distant horizons, requiring us to

“Scrutinize the horizons of our life and our time in a vigilant watch. To scrutinize in the night so as to recognize the fire that illuminates and guides, to scrutinize the heavens to recognize the signs that are harbingers of blessings for our dryness. To watch vigilantly and to intercede, firm in faith.”⁷

The reality, of course, is made of weakness, pettiness, fragility. It is important to take note of that. Even so, with humility and trust, we feel the need not to fail the call of the Spirit that blows continuously. We feel the need to “not lose the momentum of walking the streets of the world, knowing that walking, even with an uncertain step or limping, is always better than standing still, closed within one’s own demands or one’s own securities.”⁸

4.1. Go back to sleep

Even the young Samuel, in the middle of the night, was awakened by a dream, by a voice that made him run to Eli: “You called me, here I am!” Eli answered: “No, I didn’t call you; go back to sleep.” Samuel went back to sleep.

But the Lord called again: “Samuel!” and Samuel, getting up, ran to Eli, saying: “You called me; here I am!” But he responded again: “I did not call you, my son, go back to sleep.” (1 Sam 3:5-6).

That is a bit like what can happen to our consecrated life today, a life that is called to dream, to scan the horizon, to wander the crossroads of our time, to be that Church that goes out that Pope Francis dreams about. It is a dream that collides with the world made of weakness, of fatigue, of doubts, of uncertainties, of small-mindedness; a world that instead of becoming a springboard for a plunge in trust and in the abandonment of faith, can call out to go back to sleep.

Go back to sleep. Yes, the world that surrounds us speaks the language of pragmatism, of numbers, of our weakness, of our limitations. Everything seems to make resonate within us that “go back to sleep! You’re just dreaming.” And yet, when was God’s activity ever limited to being in line with the standards of our waiting, our expectations, our measures?

God is He who always has the power to do much more than we can even ask or think of; it is He who with only a sling faces a giant; who prevents the handful of flour and oil in a jar from running out; who commands Moses, stuttering and unable to speak, to confront Pharaoh; who doesn’t choose the learned teachers in the Temple but some humble fishermen to announce the Kingdom of God and to change the world; who chooses the weakness of a maiden to cast the mighty from their thrones.

⁷ *Scrutate* no. 1. [English not yet available]

⁸ *Scrutate* no. 16. [English not yet available]

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What destroys everything has never been a shortage of resources, poverty, but rather division: when a house is divided against itself it falls into ruin. And that is the danger to be avoided today as in the past.

4.2 Custodians of the inexhaustible ingenuity of her love

We can't go back to sleep when our heart is alive with the awareness of being "... in a special manner the auxiliaries and the instruments of the Blessed Virgin". She communicates to us her own zeal and entrusts to us the projects which are inspired by her almost infinite charity...."

Embracing the future with hope means repeating incessantly: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening!" That means not "letting any of his words fall into the void," it means being open to God's newness, "to the surprises of a God" who does not repeat himself, who always surprises us.⁹

We are custodians of the inexhaustible ingenuity of Mary's love. Love is of itself creative, new, does not become discouraged, does not go down, does not give up. Humble instruments in Mary's hands, her collaborators, she has asked us to make concrete today what her Mother's love suggests to us, shows us, to promote the embodiment of the Word in the frail and often barren land of our humanness.

Mary is the inexhaustible source of an inventive and creative love which today as in the past helps us to open up new roads. How can we come to this inexhaustible source if not by attending to Mary, pausing in her company to grasp her anxieties, her concerns, to receive suggestions, ideas, advice?

It can be a good thing to listen again to what Father Neubert put into the mouth of Mary herself, in the little booklet *My Ideal, Jesus, Son of Mary*, which surely many of us had in our hands at the beginning of our religious life:

2. ...Without me, you cannot succeed; with me, you cannot fail.

3. Do you want success to crown your efforts? Always come to me and submit your plans to me so that you will never act except in my name.

Consult me in particular every time you make a resolution. Ask me what I desire from you and tell me what you propose to do.

4. ... if you come to me in all confidence and with the sincere intention of executing what seems to be my will, you will ordinarily understand whether or not I approve of your resolves.¹⁰

5. MISSIONARIES OF MARY LIVE THE PRESENT PASSIONATELY

"We are glad that we can thus spend in her service the life and strength that we have pledged to her." "Happy, ...a thousand times happy he that is faithful!"

Father Chaminade's words, "glad," "happy," "a thousand times happy," echo today the Pope who invites the consecrated religious to rejoice, to embrace the present passionately, in the joy of the call. *Rejoice!*¹¹

⁹ Cf. FRANCIS, "Homily for the Easter Vigil, March 30, 2013," cited in *Scrutate*, no. 10.

¹⁰ Neubert, Emil. *My Ideal, Jesus, Son of Mary According to the spirit of William Joseph Chaminade*. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1936), Part III, Ch. VIII, pp. 98-99.

¹¹ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *REJOICE! A letter to consecrated men and women* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014).

At http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20140202_rallegratevi-lettera-consacrati_en.html

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It is important not only to let oneself be *touched* by the present, but to *embrace* it with joy, with passion, with enthusiasm, with courage, with the humble trust of one who knows how to work in the Name and on behalf of another person, of Her, the Woman to whom is reserved today just as in the past a great victory.

5.1 We embrace the religious life in the Name and for the glory of Mary

And here we have the profound, unique insight of the Founder, the characteristic proper to our religious Family: "... it is in the name of Mary and for her glory that we embrace the religious life; it is in order to consecrate ourselves, all that we have and are, to her to make her known, loved, and served.... believe that we have been called by Mary herself to help her with all our strength...."

This is the family character, this is the *air de famille*, the family spirit that the Founder held to be unique and not present in the foundations then known to him.

This is the answer that should come from our lips without hesitation when, in different settings, we are asked point-blank: "What is your charism? What is characteristic about you?"

This is the family spirit that characterizes us in a unique and special way: "it is in the name of Mary and for her glory that we embrace the religious life," convinced that it is the way willed by God himself for people to encounter Jesus.

The profound conviction of being called by Mary herself to embrace the religious life in Her Name and for Her Glory is what filled the hearts of Chaminade and Adèle with joy, with gratitude, with unwavering trust and that today should fill ours.

That is an awareness that does not always exist at the moment in which we enter this religious Family that belongs to Mary. It is an awareness which we are called to acquire, to assimilate above all in our initial formation, but which will continue to progress and deepen to the extent of our fidelity to our vocation. In this matter, the formators have a fundamental role and responsibility.

6. A VOW OF TEMPORARY STABILITY?

There have been several occasions on which I have been provoked by the reactions of those who are surprised to hear that the Daughters of Mary profess the vow of stability even at their temporary profession, as provided for in our *Rule of Life* approved by the Holy See in 1984, and ask for explanations.

I think it is, therefore, useful to recall the motivation for offering, especially to our young people, the possibility of giving the reason when questioned about the motive behind the vow of stability at the time of temporary profession.¹²

"Stability is not synonymous with perpetuity, but the contrary of it is instability, so it is not contradictory to speak of temporary stability. A soldier, for example, who enlists in the army for five years, is in a situation of stability for five years; a domestic worker who signs a contract for only one year is in a stable situation for only one year. There is no reason, therefore, to be surprised if the vow of stability is made even by a temporary professed. In such a case, the subject commits himself to persevere in his own Institute only for the set time: one, two or three years."¹³

¹² I am working here with what was stated on several occasions by historians Father J. Verrier, already mentioned, and Father J.-B. Armbruster.

¹³ Verrier, Joseph. *Op. cit.*

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That is why each of us makes the vow of stability already at our temporary profession.

7. THE HOLY NAME OF MARY

As already mentioned in *Communication No. 6*, we welcomed the proposal to re-evaluate the possibility of reassuming our original patronal feast, the Holy Name of Mary. The General Chapter of 2017 will decide upon this matter on the basis of the reflections and suggestions that each sister will be invited to offer.

Within the framework of the Bicentenary, we have a precious opportunity to return to the origins and to the reasons that led our Founders to make certain choices rather than others.

With the present Circular all the Units will be sent two files concerning the *Name* and the *Holy Name of Mary*, for which we are very grateful to Sr. Marie Luce Baillet and Sr. Marie Joelle Bec.

We invite the Units' Responsible to see to their diffusion so that they might become material for study and reflection accessible to all.

It will be an optimal contribution for living the Bicentenary with the Spirit of Adèle and Chaminade.

The Delegates will then bring to the Chapter the reflections and suggestions of their sisters from their respective Units.

My dear Sisters, may Mary's song burst forth from our hearts in gratitude for the gift of the Marianist consecrated life, for the gift of being called by Mary herself to be her collaborators. And may that song of praise be transformed into a fervent and trusting plea that the Mother might count new sons and daughters *ready to fly wherever She sends them*.

Happy Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary!

I count on your prayers and assure you of mine and of those of the Councillors, a prayer that intends an embrace above all for the sisters who are ill or in difficulties.

Alongside Mary joy expands. The Son she carries in her womb is the God of joy, of contagious, engaging delight...

In Mary the Church is all who journey together: in the love of those who go out to the most fragile; in the hope of those who know that they will be accompanied in their going out and in the faith of those who have a special gift to share. In Mary each one of us, driven by the wind of the Spirit, fulfils our own vocation to move out!¹⁴



M. Franca Zonta, FMI
Mother General

¹⁴ (*Rejoice!* 13.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_20140202_rallegratevi-lettera-consacraati_en.html).