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Mary: A Woman with a Mission

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[Sébastien writes, "I am planning to improve this paper with the help of some African brothers, but you may use that first edition if you find it interesting."]

With this paper I would like to start a reflection on Mary's motherhood, based on the daily life of real people and the "apostolic" consequences of this motherhood. I would like to work from a particular geographical and cultural context which is West Africa and more precisely Togo, Benin, and Ivory Coast in a certain measure, where what is most known about Mary is her motherhood and where she is called "Mama Maria." My objective in beginning with a specific geographic context is to avoid speculations which are too intellectual (which is the fashion today), and disconnected from the daily life of people so that I can join them in their everyday life. By relying on who they are, what they have, and what they live, I will try to propose to this people an authentic spirituality in a specific geographic and cultural context. I will try particularly to have them discover Mary's missionary dimension which seems to be little known or even ignored, by basing it on Mary's motherhood.

Meanwhile, conscious of the more or less notable differences and nuances among the different cultures and peoples of the West Coast of Africa, I will limit myself to certain general remarks and to things which are most common among these peoples. The examples I will use will be from the "Kabiyè" people of North Togo, which I know the best.

This paper will be divided into four major sections

- The first part will deal with the concept of motherhood in the specific geographic area and relations between a mother and her children.
- In the second part I will try to see how the Church understands the motherhood of Mary and the logical consequences which we could draw from this relationship.
- The third part will follow a similar format looking at the teaching of Father Chaminade.
- And in the last part I will make suggestions about Mary's missionary role by synthesizing the cultural and geographic context, Church teaching and the instructions of Father Chaminade.

The Conception of Motherhood On the West African Coast

Who Is a Mother?

1. A title to be earned

It is true that in this particular geographic area a mother is, first of all, characterized by the fact of having borne children. But there is an important distinction to be made to avoid certain confusions which come when one speaks of motherhood in West Africa. It is a question of fecundity (or fertility) and motherhood. Fertility is very important in this milieu, and it is true that a woman without children risks losing her esteem and being despised in society. But what needs to be noted is that fecundity is not enough to be a mother in West Africa. It is an important element, but not indispensable for being a mother.

Motherhood is not the same as bearing children, as we state a bit too easily, but a combination of elements, the most important of which (but not indispensable) is having children. For example, when a very young girl has a baby, the parents take charge of this baby and let the young girl continue her life, above all if she is still in school. Nevertheless, this young girl will never be called "mother." She will continue to be called a girl until the day she starts a hearth with her husband. This clearly signifies that in West Africa it is not enough to have a child to be called a mother, as one hears very often; it is also necessary to be able to start and to manage a home in order to be a mother. To manage a home also implies educating and caring for children, doing the housekeeping, and participating directly or indirectly in the economic life of the household. The proof is that in families, above all polygamous ones, certain wives who are barren are called "mother" and respected because they participate actively in the life of the household -- the care, education, and management of the home. As we can see, fecundity is important, but it is neither sufficient nor indispensable for motherhood. On the contrary, active participation in the life of the home seems to be enough to receive the title of "mother." There is also the question of age, but it is very relative, and I prefer not to enter into the details. The most important thing to point out is that a mother is characterized more by her activities than her childbearing.

2. The Mission of a Mother

All those who have any idea about life in Africa in general know that the woman is the indispensable pillar of the African family. In fact, there are some families without a father, but a family without a mother does not exist in Africa. In several African cultures the remarriage of a widow is almost obligatory, whereas one often sees some widowers who have not remarried. This is not the result of some chance event. It is because the concrete mission of the woman in the household is more important than that of the man. Outside the work of the household (cooking, buying, cleaning, etc.), all the education of the children is the woman's responsibility, the

man being almost absent from the house (the men in general spend the whole day in the fields). Besides, the woman shares in the work in the fields more often than one thinks. At planting and harvest time the women leave and return at the same time as the men. In addition, they have to get up earlier to prepare the food which is taken to the fields. On returning home, although having done the same work and having spent the same energy as the men, the women return carrying heavy loads while the men return swinging their arms. Returning from the fields the women go right to work – first of all, cooking, cleaning, and all the rest of the housework. The man meanwhile is resting, taking it easy under a tree. This is not to take note only of the daily activities; there are other particular situations such as feasts, ceremonies, and others when the women also have heavy work to do. This little description of the daily life of the woman gives us an idea of the heavy responsibilities which make up the mission of the woman in Africa, more particularly on the West African coast. As I see it, a family without a woman cannot survive, but it can manage with few problems without a man. (Even if the African traditions affirm the contrary, the reality is something else.) The passive picture of a woman depending on a man without whom she cannot survive is a recent reality and is the result of colonization. The man is a functionary who produces money and the woman is a little housekeeper who holds out her hand to her husband at the end of the month. In the tradition, the woman is the most active member and an indispensable pillar.

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Mother-Son Relationships

The relationships between mother and son are, as everywhere, stronger than the relationships between father and son. As I said above, all the education of the children is with the woman. As a result, she knows them better than the man does. She knows their limits, their qualities, their faults, their needs, and their tastes. The relationships of sons with their mothers in Africa are often more intimate than relationships with their fathers. They confide more easily in their mother, in whom they place their confidence. Thus the women are better situated to know the strengths and weaknesses of a child. Children in turn have their duties toward their mothers. They are called to participate actively in the mother's mission to show her their love for her. A "good child" (an expression current in the subregion of West Africa) is first the one who lets himself be taught by his mother, listening to her advice and always checking with her before any initiative. But a "good child" is also and above all a child who is docile towards his parents and more particularly towards his mother, for it is with her that he has the most contact. "Docile" signifies in this context obedient and cooperative. He is ready to come to his mother's aid when she needs him or even when he senses that she needs his help. He anticipates his mother's needs and goes to help her. He makes himself very available to her and lets himself be sent when and where she wants. In a word, a "good child" is one who actively works for the realization of all his mother's wishes. Such a child arouses the admiration of all the neighbors and gives honor to his mother. We can then note that the mother-child relationship is not limited to sentimental affection, but to specific

actions and above all to an active collaboration between them. What this shows is that any child who is passive or indifferent to the needs, desires, or activities of his mother cannot be classified as a "good child."

As I said in the introduction we will now consider the concept of Mary's motherhood in the Church and the logical consequences we can draw from it.

The Concept of Mary in the Church according to Vatican Council II and The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Mary – Mother

God, very kind and very wise, wanting to accomplish the redemption of the world "when the designated time had come sent forth his Son, born of a woman . . . so that we might receive our status as adopted sons" (Gal 4:4-5). "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and was made flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary." This divine mystery of salvation was revealed to us and continues in the Church, which the Savior constituted as his body and in which the faithful joined to Christ as their head living in communion with all the Saints must equally venerate the memory "first of all of the glorious and ever-virgin Mary, Mother of God" (LG 52).

This section of *Lumen gentium* underlines clearly the motherhood of Mary, mother of the Son of God, and her mission in the history of salvation. We will not analyze this section now; we will come back to it later.

Mission of Mary

As we have just said, Mary has an important mission in the history of salvation, and she has taken it on faithfully and humbly. We will now point out certain important stages in this mission.

1. Incarnation

The mystery of the Incarnation comes about thanks to Mary's "yes" at the annunciation (LG 56).

God wanted to save us with our own collaboration. Thus he wanted Mary's "yes" to precede the Incarnation. The Virgin Mary gave the world the Son of God made man for the salvation of all. Because of her "yes" to the will of God, she was filled and enriched by God with gifts corresponding to the high function which she had to accomplish. It is this that the Holy Fathers of the Church recognized in her and

commonly called her Mother of God and all-holy; she who is untouched by any blemish or by any sin, she who has been fashioned into a new creature by the Holy Spirit. In fact from the first moments of her conception, the Virgin Mary has been adorned with the splendor of an entirely unique holiness. This is confirmed by the angel's greeting at the Annunciation, "Full of Grace" (Luke 1:38). But it is in accepting the will of God that Mary became the Mother of God, embracing fully the saving will of God without being hindered by any sin. She consecrated herself totally as the Servant of the Lord to the person and work of her son Jesus Christ, our Savior. She was entirely at the service of the redemption, dependent on her Son, in union with him and by the grace of Almighty God.

This is why the Holy Fathers of the Church thought Mary was not a passive instrument in God's hands -- she cooperated actively in the salvation of all (the work of the Son) in the freedom of her faith and in obedience. It is also in this context that Saint Irenaeus said about her, "By obeying she became the cause of salvation for herself and for humankind." It is also in this same context that Mary is called the New Eve, who by obedience gives us the life we had lost through Eve's disobedience.

2. Educator and Disciple

The union of Mary with her son Jesus in the work of redemption first showed itself in his conception and continued until Christ's death on the cross. In fact, Mary was not only mother of Christ but also his first disciple in the sense that she was the first to collaborate in his mission.

As every mother, Mary was occupied with the education of Jesus from his tender childhood. She cared for him; she nourished him and taught him to take his first steps.

Even if the Bible does not give us the details, it points out certain events which demonstrate this intimacy between Mary and the child Jesus -- among others, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the finding of Jesus in the Temple, and to a certain extent the visit of the Magi.

As I said at the beginning, the union between Mary and Jesus continued to the cross. Certain events of Jesus' public ministry show this. In fact, all Mary's interventions during the public ministry are full of this sense. From the beginning of his ministry at the Wedding Feast of Cana (John 2:1-11), it is she, moved by compassion for the crowd, who brings about Jesus' first miracle by her request. She also quickly understood that the Kingdom of God is above bodily relationships and connections, as Jesus proclaimed in Mark 3:35. Mary is in fact the first to hear the word of God and to put it into practice, from the time of the Annunciation by the angel to the end of her life. It is thus that she progressed on the way of faith and remained faithfully united with her Son until his death on the cross.

Standing at the cross, she suffered deeply with her only son in his sacrifice, accepting lovingly the sacrifice of her only son for the salvation of all.

3. Mary and the Church

Acts 1:4 tells us that after the death and ascension of Christ, the apostles with one heart persevered in prayer together with some women, including Mary the Mother of Jesus. This little community of prayer, the first and a model for all Christians, prayed with perseverance for the coming of the Holy Spirit promised by Christ at the moment of his ascension. It is the root community of the Church, and as we have noted, Mary was a member of this foundational community of the Church. It is possible then to say that from the beginnings of the Church, Mary has always been one of those who intercede for it. This mediation continues always beside her Son, the unique mediator between God and humanity. Mary's mediation depends on and draws on all the virtues of the superabundance of the merits of her Son, thus continuing to cooperate in a special way in the work of redemption.

The Virgin Mary is by this fact intimately connected to the Church by the gift and the responsibility of her divine motherhood which unites her to her Son, as well as by the graces and special functions which she has been given. She is mother and model of the Church in faith, charity, and hope by reason of her perfect union with Christ. Her holiness and her virtues are a model for the Church, which contemplates and imitates her.

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Logical Consequences

Mary's defining role in the Church has logical consequences for the life of the Christian. It is thus that the Church encourages her children to honor her rightly with a special devotion, to show its recognition in her of a person whom God's grace has made greater than all humanity and all the angels. Because of her role as Mother of the Holy One of God and her association in the mysteries of Christ the unique Savior of humankind the Virgin Mary has been venerated from the distant past. In the same way by reason of her divine maternity and her unceasing intercession for us with her son, we also call Mary our Mother and give her all the help that a child gives his mother. Although the Council itself did not develop this point very far our everyday experiences in our family can help us to infer our duties towards Mary our mother. These duties vary according to races and cultures and each of us knows what a child owes to his mother. We will return to this point further on. For the moment we will avoid going into detail on this subject.

Let us now come back to our original plan to consider Mary's motherhood and our

duties to her as her children according to Fr. Chaminade and in Marianist spirituality.

Maternity – Mary's Motherhood and Mission In Father Chaminade and Marianist Spirituality

Mary's Motherhood

Contrary to what one might believe, this chapter will not go as far as what would be in Father Chaminade as in Marianist spirituality in general. In fact, Father Chaminade places his emphasis above all on Mary's missionary role in the life of the Church and on our participation in this mission. He is in the same line as Vatican II in what concerns Mary's motherhood. Mary is Mother of the Church, a motherhood which is made evident at the foot of the cross when Jesus declares her mother of Saint John, who represents all the members of the Church by placing a particular emphasis on the consecrated life:

If all people are adoptive children of God's holy Mother, the faithful members of the Society and of the Institute are her children in a fuller and more perfect sense, in virtue of very special claims which are dear to the heart of God. Like all religious they are, by reason of their vows, attached to the cross of Christ. Furthermore, as they are intimately united with him by the bonds of a more ardent love. They are in him as he is in them. They are his disciples, images of himself, other Christs. Ever since the auspicious day of their profession, he presents them to Mary as he did Saint John from the height of his cross, saying to her, "Woman, here is your son," as if to say, "Because they are like unto me and one with me, adopt them in me, and be a Mother to all of them as you are to me."

Meanwhile, the Marianist faithful to his mission is such again in a more special manner, he says in the Letter of 1839: "But I maintain that by our vow of stability, we belong to Mary in a more special manner than do other religious, and that we have an additional claim in our favor that gives us a singularly strong title to her preference. She therefore adopts us as her more privileged children."

Thus, then, Father Chaminade presents Mary's motherhood for the entire Church, the religious, and finally the Marianists.

We are not going to develop this topic, which is the central point of Chaminade's Mariology, much further. We are going rather to go on to the following point, which is much more important and much more developed in Father Chaminade and in Marianist spirituality. It is the question of our duties toward Mary our mother, the

mission of Mary and of her children

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Mary's Mission

As we have said in the preceding paragraph, Mary's missionary dimension is very developed in Father Chaminade, as well as in Marianist spirituality. In fact, in the Letter of 1839, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade strongly points out the mission of the Blessed Virgin in the Church's history:

Every period of the history of the Church has its record of the combats and glorious victories of the august Mother of God. Ever since the Lord has sown dissension between her and the serpent (Gen. 3:15), she has constantly vanquished the world and the powers of hell. All the heresies, the Church tells us, have been subdued by the Blessed Virgin Mary, and little by little she has reduced them to the silence of oblivion.

Thus Blessed W. J. Chaminade defines Mary's mission in the Church. As we are able to note, it is a great mission and one which is unavoidable, which will last until the end of time.

As elsewhere and always in the same letter, in commenting on the mission of the Marianist and the vow of stability, Father Chaminade shows it to be a vow by which we commit ourselves definitely to offer our feeble services to the Blessed Virgin, who has such an important mission in the Church.

Now we who have come to understand this design of Providence had freely offered our feeble services to Mary in order to labor under her direction and to combat at her side. We have enlisted under her banner as her soldiers and her ministers, and we have bound ourselves by a special vow of stability to assist her with all our strength until the end of our life, in her noble struggle against the powers of hell.

This missionary aspect of Mary comes back strongly in Marianist spirituality and in a more specific manner in the act of consecration: "That our work prolongs on earth your maternal charity and causes the Church, the body of your son Jesus Christ Our Lord, to grow."

And in the Three O'Clock Prayer: "Saint John, obtain for us the grace of welcoming Mary, as you did, into our lives and of assisting her in her mission."

In the Act of Consecration, Mary's missionary aspect is very strongly underlined in a very clear way. We make an alliance with Mary in order to continue with her the mission of her son on earth. We have already pointed out much earlier how Blessed Chaminade saw in Mary the woman who would crush the serpent's head and who would conquer all the heresies in the Church's history. She has a great mission,

indispensable for the salvation of humankind. We Marianists, who dedicate ourselves to her, desire to participate actively in this mission.

Synthesis for a Better Comprehension of Mary's Missionary Dimensions and Marianist Spirituality on the West Coast of Africa

Now, knowing from now on the concept of motherhood in the cultural context of this region as well as the relationship between mother and child, it will be quite easy to present to this people Mary's missionary role in Marianist spirituality.

As we have seen, the woman, the Mother, is indispensable to family life in this cultural context on the part of her innumerable activities which are necessary for the life of the family. It will not be difficult for a West African to understand that Mary, woman of her times, also inevitably had a role in the life of the Holy Family. Mary's mission in the history of salvation is thus not to be limited to her natural or spiritual motherhood, as is very current in this subregion. The cultural values of this subregion can help us to understand easily that a mother's role in society is not limited to her being mother of her children. A mother is above all characterized by her social activities rather than by her childbearing. It is in this context that we gave the example of girls who had children but who continued to be called "girls" because they were not able to participate actively in the management of the family.

In the same way, Father Chaminade perceived, besides Mary's motherhood, her active role in the history of salvation. Thus for Father Chaminade Mary is not a passive woman. She participates actively in the history of salvation and continues to work actively for the salvation of humankind. We can thus count on her and collaborate with her.

Besides, the relationships of mother and child in our subregion can help us to understand the relationship between Mary and the Marianist. We saw in the first part that a child was good or bad according to whether or not he participated in his mother's mission. In such a context it will be easy to understand that the Marianist is a person who wants to be a good son of Mary and for this reason comes humbly to bring her his feeble services in her coredemptive mission. In the second part we noted the texts of Father Chaminade which clearly underline this idea. In fact, simplifying things, it could be said that Father Chaminade defines the Marianist as one who for love of Mary offers his services to assist her in her mission.

We have freely offered our feeble services to Mary in order to labor under her direction to combat at her side. We have enlisted under her banner as her soldiers and her ministers, and we have bound ourselves by a special vow of stability to assist her with all our strength until the end of our life in her noble struggle against the powers of hell.

(Letter of 1839)

We then have all the cultural aspects possible to develop Mary's missionary dimension in this subregion. This leads us to reflect on the mission of the Marianist in such a context. The Marianist is best placed to bring to this people Mary's missionary role, for Blessed Chaminade and Marianist spirituality underline strongly, as we saw in the third part of this work, Mary's active role in the history of Salvation and in the life of the Church. The Marianist, and especially one from West Africa, has two advantages -- his culture and Marianist spirituality -- to bring to the people of West Africa the idea of Mary's mission, woman in action, woman who fights (against evil) and crushes the head of the serpent. This people will thus be able to see in Mary not only her role as mother but also her missionary role and the call to participate in this mission as a member of the Marianist family in one of its four branches.

Conclusion

As you must have noticed, our objective in this reflection was to start from the cultural advantages of the West African coast to put forward the missionary role of Mary, a role which is very little known, in relation to motherhood. "Mama Maria" is the common name for Mary. In the light of this reality Marianist spirituality is a **fortuitous arrival** for bringing to the people its contribution. In fact, as we have tried to show, Blessed Chaminade insists very much on Mary's mission and on her active participation in the salvation of humankind most precisely in the Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839. Marianist spirituality, faithful to the Founder, also strongly emphasizes this missionary aspect of Mary which we find in the Act of Consecration and in the Three O'Clock Prayer. The Marianist Family benefiting from this spirituality, these cultural advantage of the subregion, and its four branches has all that is necessary to help the people of West Africa to discover in Mary a woman in mission and to invite them to participate in this mission, and perhaps as members of the Marianist Family. Why not?

At the end of this reflection we want to invite all who might be interested in this theme of Mary, woman in mission, to continue this reflection and to deepen this theme.

A social consequence of this reflection could be the liberation of the woman, of which much is said today. In fact, the very active role of the woman in mission that is found in Marianist spirituality as well as in West African culture, as we have pointed out, would give again to woman her true value in society and in the family. The woman plays a role as important -- if not at times more important -- as the man does in West African society. The story of Queen Pokou, who sacrificed her son to save all her people, gives a good example of a woman in action who has gone so far as to sacrifice her Son.

Dear Marianists, our mission is grand but we also have all we need to fulfill it. Let's go!

Translated by Timothy Phillips, SM
Rome, April 2001

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