

Mary and Freedom

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Summary

Marianist life in America is undergoing major transitions among both religious and lay Marianists. Marianist spirituality and Marianist ministries have always interacted. Each influences and empowers the other. This mutual interaction of spirituality and ministry will continue in America. Marianist ministries will reveal the future of American Marianist spirituality.

American Catholic spirituality draws its most distinctive genius from the high ideals of the American ethos. Freedom is the ideal that will link Marianist spirituality and American Catholic spirituality. As American Marianists work for freedom from racism, sexism, and poverty, they will draw on the deep strength of Marianist spirituality; Mary will remain the deepest central symbol of Marianist spirituality. Restoring the temporary vow of stability to Marianist men religious will provide a sign of the importance of Mary during this time of change and waiting.

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Article

What is the future of Marianist spirituality in America? To answer this question, I cast my reflections in this essay in the form of a series of propositions. Some of them are observations or interpretations, others are personal convictions or predictions.

I will elaborate each proposition with comments. I hope they will stimulate discussion at the 1992 International Symposium on Marianist Spirituality.

1. The major transformations of Marianist religious life in America are not yet over.

During the last 25 years, Marianist life, especially Marianist religious life, in America has been undergoing major transformations. These transformations are not yet over.

Change and collapse figure in the large picture of events. Membership in the SM provinces of North America has been cut in half. From a high of about 1600, the total number of members is now passing through the 800s and still dropping.

SM gatherings of the sixties in which fresh young faces radiated enthusiasm have been replaced by slower-paced assemblies of aging members who reminisce about the days when things were more unified and the *esprit de corps* more palpable than today.

Quite a few outstanding Marianist schools of yesteryear have closed or passed out of Marianist hands. Venerable and venerated houses of formation have been closed, sold, or demolished. More

notable than the closing of establishments or the tearing down of buildings is the disappearance of a whole culture and way of life that pervaded Marianist schools and SM communities as recently as the fifties. That reality has slipped irretrievably into the past. Whatever the future holds, one thing is sure: there will be no going back to the way things were.

There are some differences between the way Marianist men religious and Marianist women religious are experiencing all these transformations of American religious life. The year 1999 will mark two anniversaries: the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in the United States and the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Society of Mary. The later arrival of the Marianist sisters has meant a far smaller accumulation of institutions and customs than those amassed by the SM during its extra century of presence on this continent. The Marianist women religious are fewer than the men religious, but they are also younger. They never invested as much in the Marianist schools movement; and, consequently, there has been much less for them to dismantle during the last 25 years. They are far less encumbered by the past than the men, and for them the transformations have not been as traumatic or wrenching.

At this writing, no clear revitalizing patterns have yet emerged to indicate the shape of things to come in Marianist religious life in the United States. Where, we ask with good reason, is it all headed? Is the Marianist venture going to survive in this land? If it does survive, it seems that we will still have to wait some years before all the changes and transitions in Marianist religious life have run their course. The number of Marianist religious in America is going to be small in the next century. Much more literally than ever, the SM will be "the little Society." Dare we hope that this thinning out of its ranks will lead to a leaner, tougher, and more resilient spirituality?

2. Marianist lay communities in America are coming of age.

A less noticed development of Marianist life in America is the growth of Marianist lay communities during the last 25 years. In 1966, a survey conducted by the National Marianist Sodality Secretariat listed 306 members in the eight Marianist adult sodalities that existed in the United States at that time. The current directory of Marianist lay communities in North America lists more than 2300 members and 72 communities. The directory includes about 500 SM affiliates, a category of lay Marianists that had not been counted in the 1966 survey. Even after this and other differences in the two lists are taken into account, the increase in the number of lay Marianists and Marianist lay communities in America is considerable.

What unifies all these otherwise diverse groups is their Marianist spirituality. In one way or another, these communities of lay Marianists embrace the same spirituality as the religious members of the Family of Mary. An increasing number of the lay groups have existed long enough to attain the kind of maturity and autonomy that justifies us in expecting a fruitful interaction among lay and religious Marianists as they chart the future course of Marianist life in America.

For this interaction to achieve its full promise, it is important that we not construe it as one of collaboration. The prefix "co-" does not always connote equality. Co-pastors are not the equals of pastors. Co-dependents are not on equal footing with the addicts with whom they are in relationship. Collaborators were not the equals of the Nazi occupiers in France during World War II. Collaboration is

not always a relationship between equals. It leads to asking who is collaborating with whom. Often, those who are designated as the "collaborators" are somehow subordinate; they are the ones who join in the "labor" that belongs to and is controlled by the dominant group. As we lay and religious Marianists embrace and transmit our tradition, we must construe our interaction as a relationship of interdependence between autonomous equal partners. To our traditional slogan of "union without confusion" we can add "union without subordination." Such thinking ought to come naturally to Marianists in America, where equality has always been an ideal.

Because there is so much collapse and retrenchment among Marianist religious in America, it would be all too easy to slip into thinking that lay Marianists will somehow come to the rescue of religious Marianists by becoming lay collaborators. It may be far more valuable for us to regard what is happening to religious Marianists as a providential sloughing off of what is outmoded to equip them for better interaction with lay Marianists. We American Marianists need to come together and start exploring jointly what lies ahead in our common future.

3. Marianist ministries will reveal the future of Marianist spirituality.

Our spirituality has never been purely contemplative. Marianist religious life is active, not contemplative. Marianist lay communities engage in apostolic works and ministries of all sorts. They have never been simply study clubs or prayer circles. This association of ministries with spirituality is no mere juxtaposition. Our spirituality flows from our ministries at the same time that it inspires them. Zeal for ministry in all Marianist communities draws its power from the holiness to which we are called. It is no accident that the name Chaminade chose for the office charged with Marianist spirituality is the "Office of Zeal." Marianist spirituality empowers Marianist zeal. At the same time, Marianist zeal empowers Marianist spirituality. Our ministries deepen our spirituality and ground it in the nurturing matrix of real life. This reciprocal interplay between spirituality and ministry characterizes Marianist life. We are all missionaries.

From the earliest days of the Bordeaux sodality and Adele's *Association* in Agen, this same mutually reinforcing rhythm of spirituality and ministry characterized the first Marianist lay communities. The spirituality of Mary which lay at the heart of the spiritual lives of these earliest lay Marianists was nourished by their participation in the ministries of their communities. They were convinced that these ministries were part of Mary's continuing mission of bringing Christ into the world. Their personal devotedness and consecration to Mary fired their work with a burning zeal for the multiplication of Christians. At the same time their service in these ministries revealed to them new depths of the role of Mary in their own personal spiritual lives.

The same dynamic interplay between the spiritual life and ministry spilled over into the nascent religious communities that sprang from the lay communities. In fact, Chaminade introduced the Third Object into the earliest rules of the Institute to guarantee that religious life in the two congregations could be lived fully despite the deep involvement of Marianist religious in the world.

Today, we stand at a crossroads. As we scan the horizon for clues about the future shape of Marianist spirituality, it will be worth our while to pay extra attention to the ministries which we experience most vividly as centers of vitality. Which ones beckon to us and draw us most strongly to

embark on new paths? For Marianists, spirituality and mission are two sides of the same coin. It has been true in our past, and it will no doubt be true in our future. What do present and future Marianist ministries tell us about where our spirituality is headed? Which ministries stir up in us the strongest impulses of Marianist zeal? Which ministries are part of Mary's mission of bringing Christ into today's world? Marianist ministries will show us the future shape of our spirituality.

Conversely, if no ministries arise which draw Marianists into joint action, Marianist spirituality will be sterile in America. If it is not enlivening ministry, Marianist spirituality remains an untried hypothesis.

4. The great task of assimilating the European Catholic immigration into the American mainstream has been achieved.

During the hundred years from 1850 to 1950, the US Church faced the immense task of helping the huge wave of European Catholic immigrants maintain their faith as they entered a new life on this continent. Bishops gave the task top priority. Church resources were committed to the effort. Church leaders enlisted the aid of as many men and women religious as possible, especially in creating and conducting the American Catholic school system, one of the major tools fashioned to accomplish this task of assimilation in the American setting. Unlike various state-subsidized school systems in other countries, Catholic schools in the United States were from the start privately funded and separate.

The system worked. The large European Catholic immigration has been absorbed into the American mainstream and, for the most part, has kept the faith. The schools are still here, but they are now committed to other tasks. Sometime in the sixties, the system itself stopped expanding. American bishops and religious orders no longer establish new schools or construct new school buildings. And the once large number of religious who staffed the schools has dwindled to a small remnant.

Marianist religious played their part in the creation and expansion of the American Catholic school system. They took the Marianist approach to education that had been fashioned in France and adapted it to American needs. In particular, they adapted it to the great task of assimilating the European Catholic immigration into the American mainstream. Whereas Marianists in other lands engaged in education to help their students resist secular forces in a hostile culture, the aim in America was to help students embrace the culture and enter into the secular society of this new nation. The secular somehow strikes American Marianists as benign rather than hostile. As the decades followed one another, Marianist religious drew satisfaction and motivation from the growing ranks of graduates of Marianist schools who filled roles of leadership in American life. Making leaders was a project to which one could easily contemplate dedicating a lifetime. The contribution of these Marianists who preceded us has been generous and effective. We are grateful to them, and we admire them. The example of the task they accomplished inspires us.

Now that this task is over, Marianists in schools look around with an odd disquiet, and wonder whether their presence is still needed. Should the few who are left linger in the schools and continue working at the other tasks to which the schools are committed? Are the original reasons Marianists first got involved in schools in France still compelling? Marianists on other continents continue our traditional school ministry. Shouldn't we?

5. American Catholic spirituality draws its most distinctive genius from the high ideals of the American ethos.

No matter how much we have "arrived" in the American mainstream, we American Catholics are sometimes distracted from appreciating fully the genius of our nation's culture and its newness in contrast to our European Catholic origins. For several centuries, the Church in Europe has fought a losing battle to retain its political and social power. European Catholics have had a hard time shaking loose from the spell of the Holy Roman Empire and the fright that overtook Church leaders at the time of Galileo and the dawning of the Modern Era.

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution did not simply raise up the beautiful ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the drive to recognize every individual's human rights. These great shifts in civilization also brought anti-clericalism's vitriolic ridicule of the Church and the violence of the Reign of Terror. By 1800, the established European Church was already on the defensive after three disorienting centuries. In the course of the 19th century, it grew even more alarmed and took refuge in the protection of authoritarian governments and special ecclesiastical privilege. When democracy, freedom, and individual rights were not being condemned outright by Church authority, they were regarded with suspicion and mistrust. The century saw a steady erosion of the Church's political power, as the Church was forced to endure Napoleon's insulting treatment of popes and later suffered the loss of the Papal States.

At times we American Catholics have been lured into nostalgic longing for a return to the medieval past of European Christendom or into praising the 13th century as the greatest of centuries. But our American sensibilities never allow us to stay comfortable for very long with romantic thoughts about the crowned heads of Europe. Too many of our forebears came here to escape the oppression of royalty and other degrading aspects of European political and social systems. We never quite get the point of the feast of Christ, the King.

Even if we are Catholic, we know in our bones that democracy, equality, and freedom are ideals that really move us. We have never really believed that Americanism was a heresy. We are sure that these American ideals are not just compatible with our faith but are, in fact, an experience of the liberation of the Gospel. To the ears of American Catholics, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on religious liberty sounds like an espousal of the freedom of worship. It thrills us to hear the Church getting around to proclaiming one of the truths we have always held to be self-evident.

American Marianists, too, share this affirmative assessment of the American experience. When Marianist teachers educated generation after generation of young Catholics into being good Americans, they had no doubts that they were engaged in a work eminently worthy of a lifetime of dedicated effort. Their aim was not to shield their student's faith from contact with American culture. The aim was instead to integrate faith with being American. Mary's spirit easily guided this work. She was, after all, the nation's patroness under the title of her Immaculate Conception, a privilege dear to every Marianist heart.

6. Marianist spirituality arose as a response to challenging change in culture.

From our beginnings, we have sought to overcome the obstacles to faith in modern culture and society. Chaminade assessed the modern situation as one in which traditional cultural and social grounding for Christian faith was being rapidly and devastatingly eroded by a secular indifference to religion.

Chaminade knew, of course, that valid criticisms had been lodged against the way Christian faith was lived in the past and embedded in culture; but he was even more aware of the fact that the ways of the past were either rapidly disappearing or gone for good.

For a century leading up to the French Revolution, the old European cultural matrix for the faith was being undermined. The Revolution made a direct attack on Church organization, on its ties with the state in the *ancien regime*, and on its status as the established Church in the union of throne and altar. All that was left after the Revolution was the debris and wreckage of old Church arrangements. Gone, too, was the routine and automatic transmission of the faith from one generation to the next in the social fabric of ordinary life. Doubt filled the empty spaces left by the disappearance of belief and practice. Skepticism and ridicule easily dismissed religion as little more than superstition and a tool for the aggrandizement of the ecclesiastical elite.

7. The spirit and mission of Mary lie at the heart of Marianist spirituality.

Amid the devastation left by the Revolution, how was the faith to be preserved? Chaminade's inspired surmise and conviction was that the future lay with Mary. He launched a network of communities penetrated by the spirit and mission of Mary, where Christians could in a new way live and learn their faith.

These communities provided a new matrix within which faith was easy, even amid the hostile environment of a secular culture indifferent to religion. For their members, Mary was still the Promised Woman who eludes the power of evil with the strength of her faith. Mary was holy because she believed. The power of her actions was grounded in her faith. Her spirit pervaded the new Marianist communities, whose members allied themselves to her and committed themselves to her mission. They were sure they could find no task more important than that of making her better known, loved, and served. As Chaminade was fond of pointing out, these communities showed an astonished world the marvel of a people of saints who were a living demonstration of the fact that faith was as practicable then as it had been 18 centuries earlier within the first Christian communities.

These earliest Marianist communities were voluntary groups. They grew by the principle of attraction. New members made a free choice to join because they were drawn by the attractive beauty of goodness. The communities were differentiated into a variety of types, some for Marianist religious, some for Marianist laity, and some for various forms of Marianist religious living in the world.

When some of the lay Marianists and later an even larger number of religious Marianists committed themselves to the burgeoning new movement of education and the 19th-century drive to enroll virtually all children into schools, these Marianists carried with them the sense of Mary's spirit and mission they had learned within their Marianist communities. They spread their contagious enthusiasm for the faith. They were confident that the goodness which flows from faith makes faith attractive and

belief easy. They were convinced that this contagious goodness of faith and this experience of the spirit of Mary was just as real in a school setting as it was in Marianist communities.

And so the characteristic interplay of Marianist spirituality and Marianist ministries had its genesis. From the start, the spirit of the communities was the spirit of Mary.

8. Freedom is the ideal that will link Marianist spirituality and American Catholic spirituality.

How do these considerations shed light on the situation of American Marianists today? What is the future of Marianist spirituality in this land?

We, too, find ourselves dwelling in a culture turned secular, even more secular than the one faced by Chaminade and his contemporaries; but its secularity is not in itself an obstacle to our faith. We, too, feel the effects of the Enlightenment; but for us they are mediated by the American, not the French, Revolution. We know that in our land the secular is not as threatening as it may be elsewhere. While we work to deflate the pretensions of American civil religion, we value the opportunities for faith in this land of freedom. As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out long ago, Americans mingle the ideas of Christianity and freedom so completely that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other.

This fusing of faith and freedom is one of the deep dynamics of the interaction of the American ethos with Catholicity. It is not surprising that images of Mary among American Catholics have been lately shifting in the direction of liberation and that some hail her as a woman of freedom.

How does the Marianist vision manifest itself within American culture and American Catholic spirituality? What are the obstacles to faith in this culture?

I suggest, first of all, that today as in our past Marianist spirituality in America will manifest itself in Marianist ministries. I suggest, further, that ministries which aim at equality and freedom in American settings are those with the largest promise of integrating Marianist spirituality and American Catholic spirituality. Situations in which there is a lack of equality or a lack of freedom are among the biggest obstacles to faith in this culture. The minds and hearts of Americans are constricted by inequality and the absence of freedom. Conversely, when they experience growing freedom and equality, Americans find it easier to believe in Gospel values. Consequently, in our culture, evils such as racism, sexism, and the humanly degrading results of poverty become obstacles to faith precisely because they rob individuals of equality and freedom.

It will be easier for people in America to believe the Gospel if they are living in a milieu in which progress is being made in the struggle against racism, poverty, and sexism. If we wish to continue our traditional Marianist mission of seeking to overcome cultural obstacles to faith, we need to find ways of engaging in ministries that overcome these evils in American life. Working towards freedom and equality will evoke a flowering of Marianist spirituality.

9. The struggle against racism, sexism, and poverty draws on the deep strength of the Marianist gift.

Working towards freedom and equality is a long and arduous task, which is far from being accomplished. The struggle for racial equality, for example, still goes on, more than a century after the end of the Civil

War. Poverty is still an affront to Americans. Even though we live in one of the world's wealthiest nations, we are still at a loss about how to wage war on poverty effectively. The contemporary women's movement is the most recent episode of the battle against sexism in this land. This battle, too, is one that will be long and hard. If we American Marianists can bring the special emphases of our spirituality to any of these struggles, we will be activating the typical Marianist interplay of ministry and spirituality.

Most American Marianists today are from the middle class. How can we enter into partnerships with the poor to mount new strategies to overcome the dehumanizing effects of poverty in our culture? How can we continue and improve such efforts which we are already making? Our long-standing involvement in the ministry of education makes it one of the best areas for us to do this work. In fact, some of the most promising efforts we are making to do something about the effects of poverty involve our schools. The Marianist world continues to be a school world. These efforts frequently coincide with the struggle against racism in America. Untiring partnership and presence with people of color and poor people will manifest the spirit of Mary, who stands with the oppressed and does not give up or forsake the scene of struggle.

Standing with people who are disenfranchised by present Church teachings or discipline regarding sex is another place where American Marianists can continue to contribute to the growth of freedom and equality. While the Church slowly develops and elaborates its teachings and practice in sexual matters, various groups are waiting for the dawning of a better day: divorced and remarried Catholics, Catholic lesbians and gay men, married priests, Catholics who privately choose to use birth control, women who experience God calling them to be priests. Catholics like these are asking new questions. Is procreation the only thing that makes sex natural? Is indissoluble marriage the only thing that makes sex legitimate? Are all homosexual acts always sinful for all people at all times? Will it always be impossible for women to be ordained? Will married priests ever be allowed to legitimately preside at the Eucharist?

If Marianists continue to stand with Catholics who ask questions like these and if we help develop new pastoral strategies to enable those disenfranchised by current teaching and practice to stay in the Church and not leave in anger, bitterness, or despair, we will make a marvelous contribution to the efforts of people to keep the faith with freedom and dignity. Mary used to be a great symbol of sexual purity to past generations. Can she now stand as a symbol of sexual dignity and freedom?

We need not stop with the sexism that has insinuated itself into the Church. The larger American culture still has a long way to go before it is cleansed of this poison. We Marianists can add something to this larger struggle as well. As we work to make our communities more and more into beachheads of non-sexist culture in this land of freedom, we can also join in the effort to expand such beachheads elsewhere.

10. Mary will continue to be the deepest central symbol of Marianist spirituality in the future.

When I was a novice, I was especially moved by one of the articles in the old Simler Constitutions of the Society of Mary. After stating that the particular relationship we have with Mary is our gift from God in the Society, these Constitutions point out in Article 295 that each member of the Society

delights in honoring and loving her and in causing her to be loved; he does not weary thinking of her and having recourse to her, speaking of her goodness, explaining how she is, in all truth, our Mother, our life, the cause of our joy, and the ground of our hope: *Haec mea maxima fiducia, haec tota ratio spei meae* (St. Bernard).

This article recalls the Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839, where Chaminade also cites Bernard's claim that Mary is a complete reason for our hope. The accent on hope is especially appropriate now, when we are in the thick of transition and still uncertain about the shape of the future. Now is surely the time to think about her, have recourse to her, speak of her goodness, and explain anew how she is the ground of our hope.

Working against evils such as racism, sexism, and poverty in our culture is a daunting, exhausting, and nearly impossible undertaking. The more we grapple with these obstacles to freedom, the more intractable they appear. Where will we find the prudence and wisdom to know what to do? When we know what to do, how will we learn the skills and muster the courage to do it?

Perhaps we Marianists can bring a special strength to this difficult task. We are allied with Mary and consecrated to her mission. We believe that she was conceived without original sin. Whatever else original sin may mean theologically, it does mean that we are susceptible to the guile of the principalities and the powers, the evil spirits that pervade our human cultures. Sexism is one such power. So is racism and the disdain heaped on the poor. Original sin blinds us to the evil of these powers; it allows us to be gulled by the glamour of evil. It is all too easy for us not to recognize the cunning deceit of these principalities and powers or to mistakenly think they are something good.

Our belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception gives us hope in this situation. We believe that she was free of original sin and that she was not taken in by evil. She saw the evil in her world and suffered because of it, but she was not deceived by it. Since there has been this one case of a human being who possessed the freedom to encounter evil and not be deceived by it, there must be a potential for this freedom in human nature. Obviously, this potential goes unrealized in our own personal experience. We have the kind of "darkened intellects" which make it almost impossible for us to detect the big lie of evil. However, our belief in Mary discloses that the potential for this freedom lies deep in our humanness. When we come up against a particular evil such as sexism, we take heart. We can already make out the rough outlines of the lie that it is, and we have grounds to hope that our ability to recognize this evil for what it is will grow even better as we work to transform our culture. We are confident because we know a secret. We know that deep in our humanness there is a capacity to recognize the beguiling lie of evil for what it is. What a wondrous way to participate in the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception! Bernard was right. Mary is the ground of our hope.

11. The time has come to restore the temporary vow of stability to Marianist men religious.

The present is thus both a time of change and a time of waiting in the Marianist world of America. We are waiting for the transformations of Marianist religious life to run their course. We are waiting for explorations of existing or new Marianist ministries to be made. We are waiting for new embodiments of Marianist spirituality to disclose themselves. While we wait, we would benefit from some strong

symbols which would send out a clear signal that our future still lies with Mary. One symbol that would send out this signal unmistakably is the restoration of the temporary vow of stability to Marianist men religious.

Marianist women religious have already taken this step, and it is time for the men to follow suit. Restoring the vow to temporary professed makes it clear that perseverance is not the deepest meaning of the vow. Our confidence in Mary and our consecration to her mission are the vow's deepest meaning. Restoring the vow to the temporary professed will draw the attention of all of us to Mary and heighten our consciousness of her power as we proceed into the future.

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