1. WHAT SHOULD DISTINGUISH YOU IS ZEAL FOR THE SALVATION OF SOULS

My dear sisters:

With these words of Father Chaminade, written to Adele, he guided the shape of our foundation, which was already imminent. Today he would probably say: What must distinguish you is passion for humanity. This is the passion that Jesus experienced: I have come to set fire to the earth and how I wish it was already burning! (Lk. 12:49). It is a passion that “devoured” him, as we read from St. John: His disciples recalled the words of Scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me” (Jn. 2:17).

1.1 Passion

The term “passion” is very rich, but it is also ambiguous because it signifies suffering, a suffering for something or someone. We express this when we refer to a difficult ordeal or a long illness that affects a person, or peoples, and we say: They are living their passion, which is a clear reference to the passion of Christ.

At the same time, passion also means experiencing a strong feeling that releases energy, strength, creativity, or enthusiasm. In practice, we speak of a passion for art, for music, for sports, etc.

Passion unifies the person, leading one to gather all her energies and direct them towards a purpose, an objective that gives meaning and orientation to life.

For the great philosopher Hegel, passion is the driving force of everything. In the ordering of the world, one of the main elements is the passions; the other is rationality. The passions are the active element…Nothing has been accomplished without interest on the part of the actors; and, if interest be called passion, then…we may affirm absolutely that nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion.

The Marianist spiritual journey, in the approach of the five silences, affirms the need to unify the passions. Tradition and modernity agree by saying that the mystery of each person is contained and defined by his or her desire, and the secret of the mature personality lies in leading diverse and sometimes contradictory desires back to a single, unifying desire or passion. If this happens, the person becomes someone who knows something, and has something to say…. But how do these various desires and diverse passions become unified into a single, dominant desire or passion? Or are we destined to have desires and passions en masse, leading to the dispersion and ambiguity of our being? This observation by

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1 G.J. CHAMINADE, Letter 57, to Adele de Trenquelléon, 03 of October 1815.
Montaigne should serve as a warning for all: “The soul that has no established purpose is lost; in fact, as they say, to be everywhere is to not be anywhere.”

Passion, like holiness, is not reserved for a few: it is not an option. Without passion, a vocation cannot persevere. Without fire, a house cools down. Without passion, a vocation becomes empty and meaningless. Love burns or it is not love. A vocation without passion cannot be contagious.

Growth by contagion was the deep conviction of Father Chaminade, a conviction that we see in Pope Francis when he affirms that the Church grows by attraction: The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as men and women who are happy! Similarly, the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of your lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full.

1.2 Zeal

In Marianist vocabulary, the term “zeal” occupies an important space. What will distinguish you from the other religious Orders is zeal, wrote Father Chaminade to the future foundress. In the system of the Three Offices, the Office of Zeal has its own place.

Zeal is a term we find in the late Latin zelus, with Greek influences derived from the word for “boiling.” It is also a term found in the Sanskrit, yas-ati, to boil, to warm up. It is passion for something that makes you burn, that gives you heat. It is the care, the solicitude, the self-denial, the dynamism, and the commitment to an end, to an ideal, to which all your existence is dedicated.

True zeal, in the religious sense, is where enthusiasm is born and grows. The term enthusiasm, from the Greek éntheos, which literally means “in God,” signifies “inspiration.” Enthusiasm in the spiritual life is characterized by a person who is in God, who is inhabited by a force, by a divine music, a divine Presence. It is a music that is transformed into inspiration, into ardor, into passion, into courage, and particularly into zeal for all that concerns God.

Zeal is the characteristic of the prophets, as we hear from the prophet Elijah: “Come with me and you will see how I defend the cause of the Lord” (2 Ki. 10:16).

An ardent zeal consumes me, because my adversaries forget your words (Ps. 119:39).

Look down from heaven and regard us from your holy and glorious palace! Where is your zealous care and your might, your surge of pity? (Is 63:15)

Zeal is the characteristic of the Apostles. The great Paul is an eloquent example of this. He has done everything for the Gospel in order to proclaim Christ. He has endured everything: travel, shipwrecks, prisons, toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:27-28)

3 V. MANCUSO, Il bisogno di pensare, pg. 103, Garzanti, 2017.
4 POPE FRANCIS, Letter to Consecrated Men and Women on the Year of Consecrated Life
And he invites us, he invites the Romans: \textit{Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in Spirit, serve the Lord (Rom. 12:11).}

\textit{Put on the armor of God...with your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. (Eph. 6:13:15)}

\textbf{Zeal is the characteristic of missionaries} of all times, from Saint Francis Xavier to Saint Therese of Lisieux, who, though she never left Carmel, became the patroness of missions. Or Saint Teresa of Calcutta, to mention only names of those well-known. How long is the list of missionaries whose hearts have throbbed and, who, not only with their feet, have reached their brothers and sisters at the ends of the world!

The Family of Mary also has her list of missionaries. Each community should devote some time to remembering this. Let us echo today what Father Chaminade wrote to Adele: \textit{Your community will be entirely composed of religious missionaries}\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{2. ZEAL WAS, IN HER, A DEVOURING THIRST}\textsuperscript{6}

This is how Mother Marie-Joseph de Casteras described the zeal of Adele: a devouring thirst for the salvation of souls that compelled her to make the most of any situation that arose. This is, undoubtedly, one of Adele’s greatest characteristics: a zeal that was passion, enthusiasm, and dynamism for the mission.

Adele was passionate about everything that pertained to faith, mission, the poor, charity. She had great love in her heart, and this love explains everything. This was a love that was not extinguished but grew with time. She interrupted her moments of reflection and prayer, family meetings, whatever she was doing, to welcome her little students who came at all hours to the chateau. Often, in the evenings, she taught the servants of nearby estates because they were busy with various chores during the day. But she did not neglect the workers at the chateau, following the example of her mother. This was a zeal that compelled her to become all to all. With Saint Paul, one could say \textit{I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible...all this I do for the sake of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9: 19, 23).}

And to us she repeats: \textit{If we are to be little apostles, our zeal will need to be constantly invigorated. But since example is the best teacher, let us begin with ourselves.}\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Let us make better use of the years which the good Lord still grants us and consecrate to him our mature years, so that we no longer live but for this divine Savior... You know that we must be “little apostles”... It is our obligation to become worthy of this glorious vocation to which the Lord calls us in spite of our unworthiness.}\textsuperscript{8}

Passion must be kept alive. Saint Paul recommends to Timothy that he maintain the gift he has received, to \textit{guard it} (cfr. 1 Tim: 6:20). To rekindle the torch, to use a term dear to our Founders, is to rekindle passion for the Lord, the love which had done day enticed us.

\textit{Our lives do not simply depend on the things we have to do and the roles we have to play. In the Christian life, and more than ever in the religious life, passion for the Lord is

\textsuperscript{5} G.J. CHAMINADE, Letter 57 to Adele de Trenquelléon, 3 October 1815.

\textsuperscript{6} MOTHER MARIE-JOSEPH DE CASTERAS, Memories and annexes, Positio, doc. XVI.10 pg. 530

\textsuperscript{7} ADELE DE BATZ, Letter 172.3.

\textsuperscript{8} ADELE DE BATZ, Letter 230,6.8
decisive. Love for the Lord is certainly different in the various ages of life: in youth, in maturity, in old age, but it must always be present and must always be revived.\(^9\)

Adele’s zeal was born of contemplation, born of love for Christ, and passion for Him whom she loved above all other things. Love for God made her sensitive to all that was in the interest of his glory. Joy gleamed in Adele’s face when she talked about the success of any work or activity. She was willing to go to the end of the world for the mission of Mary.

In Father Chaminade, too, though he was more calm and less exuberant than Adele, we can discover this great passion, which he expresses in a particular way whenever he speaks of Mary and her mission. It is true that the Letter of 1839 bears the style of his secretary, but in it we find the passion that animated the Founder and his deep convictions linked above all to Mary and her mission:

- The power of Mary shall not be diminished
- Mary is the Woman who has triumphed and will triumph
- She has chosen us. She will be at our side. She will give us everything necessary to carry out the mission that she entrusts to us.
- We believe with the holy Doctors, that she is our hope, \textit{tota ratio spei nostrae}. She, the Mother, the refuge, the help, our strength and our life.\(^{10}\)

Passion prevents discouragement from finding open doors and settling in our hearts. Whenever discouragement knocked on the door of Adele and Chaminade, it found passion and trust in Mary ready to send it back the way it had come. There was no room for discouragement. This picture of our time, so sadly accurate, is, nevertheless, far from discouraging to us, the Founder affirms in the same letter of 1839.

### 3. GO OUT TO CONQUER HEARTS

What does the Church expect from us today? Adele would say that today, like yesterday, it is a question of setting out on the road, of leaving, of going out to conquer hearts: \textit{As a new swarm of apostles for the Lamb...go forth to the conquest of hearts, to snatch them from the devil, to deliver them to Jesus}. Go with the courage and determination of St. Peter; cast your nets of divine love into the waters Providence will show you; express no personal option, but go wherever the Lord calls you.\(^{11}\)

This invitation of Adele can also be found in the insistence of Pope Francis: \textit{I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries}. “Go into all the world”; these were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us (cf. Mk 16:15). A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine.\(^{12}\)

Go out, we repeat with Adele’s passion, to conquer hearts for Christ. Only a heart that burns with love can inflame other hearts. Only a heart that burns with passion for the Marianist charism and the mission of Mary will be able to inflame other hearts, will cause to be born in other hearts the passion for the mission of Mary, will be able to find new

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\(^9\) L. MANICARDI, \textit{La vita religiosa: radici e futuro}, EDB, Bologna 2012, 133.

\(^{10}\) G.J.CHAMINADE, Letter 1163, \textit{To the Retreat Masters, 24 of August 1839}.

\(^{11}\) Letters of Adele de Batz. 618,5

\(^{12}\) POPE FRANCIS, Letter to Consecrated Men and Women, par. 28
missionaries of Mary. By contagion, Father Chaminade would add. The future of the Marianist charism is contained in the heart of those who preserve and nourish the fire of the mission lived in the Name and for the glory of Mary.

All those, and hopefully each Marianist, who have experienced the flame and passion for Mary, her mission, and for the charism, will easily understand what these words, though they are very poor, have expressed. The deep understanding of the charism is a gift that is received throughout life, in different moments and forms. You do not have it at the beginning of the road. For this reason, there can even be the risk that someone spends all her life, all her energies in the Marianist Family without experiencing the ardor, the zeal, or the passion for the mission of Mary that animated the hearts of the Founders. That is why it is a grace that must be asked for incessantly. That is why I invite you to pray the Act of Consecration, which we repeat every day, with this intention: to receive the grace of passion for, and understanding of, the charism that we have received.

Ask and you shall receive (Mt. 7:7). The Mother of God asks nothing more. It is, therefore, a prayer that contains in itself certainty that it is being heard. Let us ask for this gift with confidence and perseverance for each of us and for the entire Marianist Family: the gift of zeal, the gift of passion for the mission of Mary.

The brothers and sisters who preceded us expressed all this with the vow of teaching. This fifth vow was suppressed by the Church because it expressed the object of the Institute: education in the faith. Since vows express our means, education in the faith, as the purpose of our Institute, could not be the object of a vow. The Church has legitimately suppressed this vow, but, as Father Joseph Verrier SM said, we are now at the cusp of being a reliquary without a relic. We are in danger of losing something precious, something very dear to the Founders; that is, what was the object of the vow: the zeal that must distinguish Marianists to rekindle the flame of faith by multiplying Christians.

Even though the vow of teaching that we make is something we have in common with other orders, this vow is far more comprehensive in the Society and the Institute than anywhere else. Its object is to carry out Mary’s words, “Do whatever He tells you,” and, therefore, extends to all classes, both sexes, and all ages, but to the young and poor especially, so that it really sets us apart from all other societies that make the same vow.13

4. GUARDIANS OF THE SACRED FIRE

The charism, like fire, must be guarded, protected and nurtured. I think of the vestals of ancient Rome, whose task was to strictly guard and feed the sacred fire that burned day and night. It would have been an ominous sign if the fire went out. All of us must be “vestals” of the sacred fire of the charism that has been entrusted to us.

I always feel great joy and gratitude when, in the course of my visits, I find myself facing one of these “vestals,” one of these guardians of the sacred fire, guardians of passion for the Marianist vocation. They are sisters who, in “old age,” have physical limitations, but inside they have a fire that continues to burn with vivacity, spreading light and heat. They are sisters with young hearts, because it is passion and love that keeps a person young. They are sisters constantly attentive to what is happening in the local Church, in the world, in the Congregation. They ask and are interested in the new missions; they ask for news of sisters they have known in the past; they worry about those who are sick, ask questions about young women in formation and about the future of the Congregation. They vibrate because they shake the world and carry in their hearts the cry of humanity, bearing

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13 G.J. CHAMINADE, Carta 1163, A los predicadores de Retiro, 24 de agosto de 1839.
witness to a faith that is founded on rock, which is based on the unshakeable certainty of Mary’s presence. They radiate a beauty that time does not wrinkle because it is born from the deep. It is the beauty that lives in the heart, in love, in the ideal that they carry within the source of their being. They are our great “vestals” who guard the fire that animates and enlightens the Congregation. Thank you, dear sisters.

If so many of you are now the “guardians of the sacred fire” of the charism, the witness and vitality of the Marianist mission is carried on the shoulders of our young people. In them weighs the responsibility of choices and decisions to embody the charism today, so that the seed of the Gospel continues to fertilize cultures. It is up to them to fertilize the digital culture that is making our planet smaller and smaller. Dialogue between generations is essential; listening to young women, and to our younger sisters, is fundamental.

This is what emerged from the recent Synod of Bishops, whose theme was young people: Young people are called to continually make decisions that guide their lives. They express the desire to be heard, recognized, accompanied. Many experience how their voice is not considered interesting or useful in the social and ecclesial spheres. In various contexts, there is a lack of attention to their cry ... and also lack of adults available to listen. [...] Sometimes there is a tendency to provide ready-made answers and solutions without letting young people’s questions arise in their newness, and without grasping the question. Listening makes it possible to exchange gifts in a context of empathy. This allows young people to contribute to the community, helping them to convey new sensibilities and ask new questions. At the same time, it creates the conditions so that the proclamation of the Gospel touches the heart in an incisive and fruitful way.14

May each one of us prioritize listening in our communities, so that this exchange of gifts may be possible in the context of affection and empathy.

To guard, as we have already said, means to feed, to renew. A fire that burns is certainly not a museum object. Keeping and renewing the charism means deepening your knowledge through reading, studying, reflecting and sharing.

At this stage of the reconfiguration process in which we are living, we are all invited to reflect on our charismatic identity, which is to be the Marianist Sisters that the third millennium expects. For this task, it is necessary to go to the sources. It is essential to return to the bosom of the charism, as I mentioned in a previous circular. It is a great personal responsibility, and even more so for those with responsibilities in various offices at different levels.

We can all do a little exercise. Let’s visit our community’s library and stand before the “Marianist” shelf:

Where is it located? Is it accessible to all? Is it organized? Is there a sister who looks after it? Are some collections incomplete? (for example the Chaminade Legacy volumes?)

Do I know, at least in general, the subject dealt with in the various books? How many have I read in the last three years?

The list of questions could continue. I understand the difficulty posed by the scarcity of translations of Marianist texts in certain languages. But in general, at least for the most common languages, there is a considerable bibliography. It is important to remember the

necessity of studying the charism in our initial and ongoing formations. It reveals the place that the charism we have professed to know, love and serve occupies in our hearts. And you know very well that the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart.

What will distinguish you is zeal...

And as for us, what are we distinguished by? What characterizes us? Can I identify a characteristic of my community? And of me? What passion animates me? What motivates me to continue onward? For what or for whom do I live my days?

Passion gives aroma to the days, gives perfume to time. In ancient China there used to be a scented clock. The incense that was burned measured time by filling it with perfume. Passion for God, for all that is beautiful, good and just, gives fragrance to life. Maybe that’s why some saints have taken on the aroma of perfume at certain moments of their lives; from others emanated perfume at the time of their deaths. Certainly, these are extraordinary events, but we can also fill with aroma, that is, with beauty and flavor, the daily life of our days and seasons. All this depends on what burns inside us, what burns in our hearts.

Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the way? (Lk. 24:32)

Let us walk with him, talk with him, and our hearts will burn. And then what will distinguish us will be zeal, will be passion. And we will be the aroma of Christ! The aroma of Mary!

Happy Feast of the Immaculate to All!
A feast to live in the Marianist Family.

Sr. M. Franca Zonta
Mother General

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15 For those who want to explore this topic: BYUNG-CHUL HAN, The aroma of time, Herder, 2015.
16 Cfr. 2 Cor. 2:15.