Notes on Marianist Spirituality

Who are you as a Marianist? What instrument do you play in the great orchestra of religious congregations? What is the musical repertoire of your religious family? What is the soundtrack that accompanies and sets the rhythm of your days?

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Dearest Sisters:

The celebration of the anniversary of our Foundation, which has always occupied an important place in the calendars of our Units, will undergo significant changes this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic which still forces us to stay within our communities, either totally or partially depending on your area. This unforeseen situation encourages us to find new ways to highlight this anniversary and to live it with joy and thanksgiving.

As I said in the letter I sent recently, this time is given to us as a precious opportunity to renew our religious life and deepen our spiritual life. And it is precisely on the spiritual life that I would like to reflect in this circular.

Meeting with the young women of our Congregation is always stimulating because it helps me to clarify concepts that we often take for granted. This circular was born from these meetings, from the questions that I have been asked several times about the differences between charism, mission, apostolate and spirituality. One could write a book on these concepts, each of which has its own specific nuances, but that is not the task of these pages.

The work of reconfiguration that we are carrying out has already clarified key concepts such as charism, mission, and apostolate. I will focus above all on the – spirituality - to which we will add the “Marianist” adjective.

17.2 SPIRITUALITY

What do we mean when we talk about spirituality? And about Marianist spirituality? "Sensitivity to spiritual values" is more or less how dictionaries that explain this term define it. Spirituality is a set of spiritual values to which a person refers. Some authors\(^1\) compare spirituality with interior music, with "interior sweetness."

The term “spirituality” refers, in first place, to the spirit. “Spirit,” or ruah in Hebrew, pneuma in Greek, spiritus in Latin, atman in Sanskrit, invokes a set of ideas, concepts, and images: breath, wind, air, and all these words suggest the larger concept of freedom:

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\(^1\) From Pythagoras to Saint Augustine, Dante to contemporary theologians. Cfr. also Vito Mancuso, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmJDnHqkubg\&t=5010s
“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

Humanity is endowed with the great gift of freedom precisely because of our spiritual condition. The more one advances on the spiritual path, the more one advances on the path of inner freedom. Gandhi, the great Atma, the great soul, reached a high degree of freedom, and from this deep and vast inner horizon, he saw the unity of humanity in which there is no place for societies divided by castes and religions, for all are united by the same great spirit. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

In the classical Christian conception, the human being is body, mind and spirit. And it is the spirit that creates the unity between these three levels. The spiritual path is the way to achieve this inner unification.

Returning to the image of music, the body and the mind are the sounding board that, in contact with external reality, allow the spirit to move, fly, resonate, vibrate. The spiritual life is to let yourself be touched by external reality—images, experiences, encounters, relationships—and let them resonate, vibrate, and emit the notes that compose the symphony of existence. This is a symphony that, depending on its encounter with external reality (which is sometimes serene and joyful, sometimes a shock or a blow), will have the characteristics of the Vivaldi’s four seasons, Mozart’s Requiem, Beethoven’s Pastoral symphony, Handel’s Hallelujah ...

Sometimes it takes a long time to prepare a musical instrument when looking for the right wood or material for each type of instrument. And, as every musical instrument maker and musician knows, each instrument is different from the next, though the differences are minimal and typically not noticeable to non-experts. Great musicians have their instruments built in a personalized way by giving precise directions. It takes a long time to prepare an instrument, and a long time—a lifetime—to learn how to play it and improve one’s performance.

Each of us has this instrument: the spiritual essence from which we are intrinsically formed. The spiritual life, like any instrument, requires knowledge of the instrument, of its capabilities; it requires care, attention, practice, method. To compose a symphony, it is not enough to simply have an instrument. You have to make the strings vibrate, press some keys, compose a melody, practice it and memorize it. Who has not been ecstatic and full of admiration after seeing musicians play endless pieces from memory? But how much practice is behind such impeccable performances!

The spiritual life, the spiritual symphony of our life, is the fruit of effort, knowledge, and practice until we get to the point of playing freely, forgetting the notes that make up a chord.

Oftentimes, we don’t choose the notes: it is the life around us, the people and events around us, that give us the handful of daily notes to play in the score of life. Our spiritual training will help us acquire the necessary skills to build our piece of music while avoiding dissonances or large intervals when passing from one note to another.

Spirituality refers to the spirit, as we said before. The spirit is the deepest and most interior reality of the human being. It is the pearl in the oyster. Thanks to this faculty, the human being is able to re-enter oneself, to think of oneself, to see oneself, to judge oneself. It is the capacity of self-consciousness, of the consciousness that reaches its most precious dimension in the human being.
Thanks to this capacity, we can enter ourselves, crossing that intimate threshold that no one else can cross. It is this threshold that opens us to mystery, that opens us to God, as Saint Augustine said in his *Confessions*: “You were within me, but I was outside..., You were with me, but I was not with you”.

Spirituality is, therefore, a path that opens us to the dimension of mystery, of the Absolute, the path that ends where the path ends; there is no need to walk, to speak, to look. The words, the sounds, the gestures are interrupted: there is silence, there is adoration, there is peace, there is interior unification. There are no more dissonances, only harmony. It is the mystical dimension of existence.

We have all had and still have these mystical moments: every time we have found ourselves facing the limitless beauty of the sea, the magnificence of a snowy peak, the gurgling of a stream, the sweeping force of a waterfall, the luminosity of a sunset. Every time we have been immersed in the silence of a forest or of a jungle, or before the 360° smile of a child or the deep eyes of an elderly person. These are moments, sometimes brief, in which all noise ceases and the great harmony vibrates within us. And we feel like we are a child in its mother’s arms (Ps. 130). “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Ps. 139). And we feel small and big at the same time because we are immersed in the infinite.

17.3 NOTES ON MARIANIST SPIRITUALITY

Each piece of music is characterized by essential features that make it enter a certain category. We have classical and modern music as well as African, Oriental, Celtic, South American, etc. Each genre has its own characteristics. The same is true of spirituality. We all have some idea of Ignatian, Franciscan, and Carmelite spirituality, to name a few.

Marianist spirituality has its roots in the charism of the Founders and in the tradition of the Marianist Family. If we understand spirituality as a set of spiritual values to which a person refers, or the inner music produced by these values, what values does a Marianist refer to? What notes, what basic chords cannot be missed in our score?

There is a lot of literature about this subject and I refer to it for those who want to delve more into it.

17.3.1 The “Marian” Key

To read a score, you have to start by identifying the “clef” at the beginning of the staff, usually the treble clef. Without it you can’t read the notes the right way. Mary is the key to reading, identifying and interpreting each note that characterizes Marianist spirituality.

Faith, the virtues of preparation, purification, and consummation, all must be grasped with the heart and the gaze of Mary. The aim of Marianist spirituality that arises from our charism is to make us authentic sons and daughters of Mary. Mother Adele never tires of repeating: “Mary is our mother...We are hers and must therefore have for her the hearts of children, have frequent recourse to her with a confidence inspired by the most loving of Mothers.”

Father Chaminade echoed this when he wrote his letter to the retreat masters of 1839: “…tell them the full extent to which they are Mary’s children. All men and women are indeed the adopted children of the Mother of God, but the faithful members of the Society

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2 Letter of Adele 574.3
and the Institute are so in a manner still more perfect by reason of special claims very dear to her heart.”

**Filial piety** has always been at the heart of Marianist spirituality, which is to say becoming children in the Son. If others imitate Jesus as Teacher, or the poor Jesus, or Jesus who heals the sick, we are called to imitate Jesus in his filial love for Mary. Jesus, son of Mary and our Brother, is the One who gives our spirituality a very special brushstroke, a light that illuminates and guides our entire spiritual journey.

Father Chaminade knew the French School of Spirituality and its authors well, each of whom highlighted a particular mystery of the life of Jesus. Bérulle highlighted meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word; Condren delved into the priesthood of Christ, and M. Olier contemplated the profound annihilation of Jesus in the womb of Mary and in the Eucharist. The mystery loved by Father Chaminade is Jesus as Son of Mary, from whom comes filial love for his Mother.

“Let us not forget to arouse ourselves to love the most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary. We should above all imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ in this important point: this is the spirit of the Society of Mary. It is by her motherly care that we will become conformable to this Divine Model. Let us allow ourselves to be directed by this loving Mother, our August Patroness, and let us submit joyfully to her direction. It is principally by this that we will prove to her our love, our thankfulness and our devotedness.”

The imitation of Jesus, for every Marianist, has at its core the imitation of the filial love of the Son towards his Mother: “Devotion to Mary is, therefore, the most prominent point in the imitation of Jesus Christ.” In our Marianist spirituality, it is Jesus himself who continues to love his Mother in us. We could say, therefore, paraphrasing Saint Paul, “it is no longer I who love Mary, it is Jesus who loves her in me.”

Father Chaminade’s vocabulary does not include the expression **filial piety**; the Founder speaks more often of devotion to Mary, a devotion so strong that it enhances mission, the commitment to put oneself at the service of the Virgin to help her in her mission: to give Christ to the world. The term **filial piety** would be used by Fr. Georges Caillet and be included definitively in the Marianist vocabulary, and later in the Constitutions, thanks to the circular **On Filial Piety** by Fr. Joseph Simler, third Superior General of the Society of Mary.

There are those who see in all this a change of emphasis: from the motherhood of Mary towards us to our love for her; from being the object of Mary’s maternal care and allowing ourselves to be formed by her, to our filial duties towards her. In fact, Father Chaminade, while mentioning both aspects, emphasized above all the need to allow ourselves to be formed by her. And this is what stands out in the act of consecration that we renew every day, when we ask to be formed by Mary into the likeness of her firstborn Son.

Marianist spirituality is, therefore, a path of docility, of being formed by Mary. Mary fed and formed the body of Jesus. In the level of grace, Mary forms us, shapes us, nourishes us, guides us and makes us true disciples of the Son.

To let yourself be formed, you have to let yourself be molded. Every disciple must be with the teacher, must listen to him, look at him, let himself be guided; the clay must be placed with confidence in the potter’s hands; flour in the hands of the baker; the seed in

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3 Letter of August 24, 1839
4 Marianist Direction, vol II, 1243.
5 Constitutions of the Society of Mary of 1839, art. 5.
the hands of the gardener who chooses the soil and the season to sow the seed, knowing when to water it and dig around it so that it blooms in all its beauty.

The Marianist places himself or herself in the hands of Mary. However, it would be a mistake to underline one aspect and forget the other. True love is made of reciprocity, even in the spiritual life. Mary’s maternal love for us, forming us in the image of her Son, is intimately linked to the mission that awaits us: to make Mary known, loved and served as the means par excellence to make her Son known. From filial love arises the Marian apostolate that must distinguish us.

Mary forms Apostles in us. Marian devotion within the Marianist Family is closely linked to mission; it is the foundation of the Marian apostolate that must characterize us. It is for mission that Mary forms us, obtaining all the graces we need. It is she who supports us, inspires us, strengthens us to carry out the task entrusted to us. The filial love of each Marianist can only be expressed in the missionary spirit. It is an incomplete, sterile love if it does not materialize in the mission accepted for the love of Mary, in her name and for her glory.

“No one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21). Here we could also paraphrase using a Marian “key” the warning of Jesus to his disciples: Not everyone who says "Mary, Mary" is her son, but those who dedicate themselves to her, body and soul, to make her known, loved and served, knowing that through Mary they go to Jesus.

*Per Matrem Ad Filium.*

**17.3.2 Marianist Virtues**

Allowing ourselves to be formed by Mary is to imitate her virtues, privileging those that our Rule of Life emphasizes: “we seek to grow constantly in the spirit of faith and of mental prayer, humility and simplicity, family spirit and ‘apostolic zeal’ so important to our Mother Foundress. Since our foundation these attitudes have been considered as ‘our characteristic virtues’” (I.9).

When we speak of the Marianist virtues, we think of the spiritual task given to us at the beginning of our religious life that made us take the first steps during the years of initial formation: the virtues of preparation, purification, consummation.

Talking about virtue is no longer fashionable in a world that exalts spontaneity and freedom of the individual as if this freedom is antithetical to everything related to order, tradition, learning, regularity. In reality, “virtue has more than one meaning: one, it is the force that allows an act to be performed, as when we say ‘by virtue of’; two, it is the measure that achieves an adequate balance, as when the elements of a plant are taken and its curative virtue is obtained; three, it is the skill that is acquired with the habit…”

Virtue is a skill acquired through systematic and continuous exercise, so much so that it becomes an inner habit, a mental attitude. Alas, if virtue were only an outer garment! If it were only an external formality! But if such was the case, we would not even be talking about virtue. Virtue derives from the Latin word *virtus* which means “strength,” from which the word *vir*, “strong man,” also derives. The exercise of virtue has as its purpose the acquisition of the habit of doing good, of choosing good, of choosing what builds my inner being, of what makes my life better as a person, as a human being called to inner freedom. Virtue, in fact, allows one to acquire the greatest of powers: power over oneself. It allows one to possess oneself, to realize the inner harmony that we all long for.

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All the great religious traditions are convinced of this, as we observe in a famous Buddhist proverb: “Sow an act and you will reap a habit; sow a habit and you will reap a character; sow a character and you will reap a destiny.”

Father Chaminade, as we already know, made the practice of the virtues the fundamental commitment for growing in the spiritual life: “A constant effort to advance in the practice of the Christian and religious virtues and to win souls for God—these are the two principles whose consequences must form the basis of your modest Constitutions and all the regulations based on them. Your Order will have no type of strictness in the practice of penance; but this will be great because of the practice of the religious virtues and in the care to be taken that the works of zeal are not harmful to the interior spirit.”

Therefore, it is not a matter of heavy external mortifications, but a strong commitment to ensuring that our external activity does not endanger the inner path, the spiritual life without which all activity would become sterile.

17.3.3 Ignite motivation

As an experienced spiritual father, the Founder instructed Adele in the formation of candidates for religious life. Training young women and advancing them in the spiritual life means presenting the motivations that should encourage and support their commitment to the practice of virtues. A spiritual life without motivation is like a building without a foundation. It cannot last long. That is what he underlines when he sends a young woman from the Bordeaux Sodality to Agen: “You must keep her well occupied and train her in the practice of the virtues without prejudice to her occupations. You will move her to do whatever you wish by suggesting all those motives that stir the heart to love of God, devotion to Mary, and the salvation of souls.”

Why practice the virtues? Why undertake a path that requires exercise, effort, and perseverance, especially at the beginning of the spiritual journey? Answering this question is not secondary at all. Motivation is, as the term itself says, the motor, the engine that allows us to grow and move towards the goal we have set for ourselves. The engine is the will that is set in motion by motivation. If virtue is synonymous with good, motivation is that inner force that sets in motion the will without which it will not be possible to choose that good. It is not enough to know what is good to practice it; it takes motivation to move the will to freely choose that good.

Here we see the need to purify our motivations so that the aspired good is chosen for the good itself and not for personal gain. If I am only being generous to receive fame, esteem or anything else, the fuel—that is, the motivation—that has set my will in motion is clearly of poor quality, dirty, and in the end the engine will be damaged, the residue will clog the pipes and performance will be compromised.

Mother Adele was aware of this when she wondered if an impure motivation was hiding behind the wonders that one of her religious was doing: “I have perceived, to my great surprise, how quick-witted she is. And so many other rare qualities which she had kept under wraps: all her talents, her skill and aptitude at learning, and her ability to do whatever she sets her mind to, even without any prior learning. At the moment she is turning out wonderful work in various media: embroidery, drawing, collage, painting artificial flowers, multicolored decorative designs with sequins or all in white...She has made rapid strides in writing, in reading both French and Latin. She is gifted in music and drawing, having practiced both as a child. Her speech has improved in tone and quality. She can be very playful and very gracious. She has grown taller, and put on weight. She can captivate whom she pleases and when it suits her fancy. She has also

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8  Letter n. 61, to Adele de Trenquelléon, January 11, 1816.
9  Letter n. 76, to Adele De Trenquelléon, November 10, 1816.
become very cunning. She is so discerning that she has fully read the minds of most of our sisters...I feel that she will be either an excellent religious or a great vessel of perdition, both for herself and for others.”

It all depended on her motivations.

Purifying our motivations means choosing what is good because it is good, because it makes us better, because it makes us more authentic, more human, because it fulfills us as people. It means choosing good because it makes us freer, less of a slave to our selfishness and passions. It means choosing the good because it is the best way to make ourselves more beautiful, possessing that inner beauty that radiates light, fulfillment, and peace, and for this same reason makes the world around us better.

17.3.4 Faith in the Presence of God

Marianist spirituality is strengthened in meditation, a meditation based on faith in the presence of God. As the Psalmist explains well: “I am silent; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it” (Ps. 39:9).

The silent, calm and repeated practice of the presence of God, taught from the beginning to those new to Marianist spirituality, is what has fascinated me since the first days of my religious life. It is the Marianist mantra that should accompany our lives: I believe, Lord, that you are here! It is the prayer of Faith in the presence of God, the point of departure and arrival of Marianist spirituality. “God is here,” says a beautiful song in Spanish, “as true as the air I breathe, as true as the morning rises, as true as this song you hear.”

The exercise of faith in the presence of God stops time, immerses eternity in the sacred space of our being, of our spirit. It brings us to the center, unifying our being that is so often branched and dispersed. Faith in the presence of God brings us to the innermost point of ourselves and then projects us to the outermost point: the universe, the immense, God! The practice of faith in the presence of God has God who is Father as its object, but let us not forget the three essential components: practice, faith, presence.

Practice: it requires exercise, regularity, perseverance, patience, commitment. No skill is possible without constant practice. In each area, the skill will become spontaneous and natural the more it has been the subject of great exercise and commitment.

Faith: the adherence of the heart to the truth that has been revealed to us. It is not a belief in something or someone that I do not know, that I have not seen or experienced. It is the attachment of the heart, it is the faith of the heart, it is loving the One by whom we have been touched, transformed.

Presence: Presence is above all to be present to oneself, to live in the present moment. It is self-awareness. All this is to reach the threshold to cross, the threshold that leads us to transcendence: “the power of now.” The Power of Now is the book that made Eckart Tolle famous and that very effectively expresses the strength that comes from the ability to live with full awareness of oneself and the present moment.

Father Chaminade may not have been as famous as Tolle, but he had already felt the power, the strength, and the peace that comes from living in this awareness of God’s presence moment after moment, as well as the need to practice it during prayer and throughout the day: “...keeping yourself in the presence of God, or again, in keeping yourself united to Our Lord Jesus Christ and to the Blessed Virgin. What strength you will derive from this union! What lights...” And also: “You are to pour yourself out in

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10 Letters of Adele, 375.2
11 W.J. CHAMINADE, Letter 995, 18 September 1837, to Claude Mouchet.
the holy presence of God. *Ambula coram me et esto perfectus*. This much you say to your brothers—well! Do it yourself.12

The Founder is said to have received the gift of being able to live with his thoughts inhabited by the constant presence of Mary. This certainly was a gift obtained through a constant path of prayer, silence, faith and love for the Mother of God.

17.4 ALLIANCE OF THE MARIANIST FAMILY

Marianist spirituality invites us to make the Marian face of the Church brighter. This causes me to ask myself: is our face Marian? Is the face of our congregation, of our Marianist family, Marian?

How can we make our Marian face brighter? How do we make the Marian face, which our vocation calls us to show, beautiful and attractive? There are people that when we see them we can immediately relate them to a culture, a country, a family. There are brothers and sisters who resemble each other like drops of water; there are brothers and sisters who, although they have very different physical features, resemble each other in their way of being and expressing themselves.

Whoever looks at us, who knows us, recognizes in us those common traits that identify us as members of the same charismatic Family?

Today, religions are in crisis. Churches are emptying, but there is no crisis of spirituality. There is a thirst for spirituality, a need for interiority, a need for transcendence. Too much materialism is creating disgust and emptiness and is opening new space for new spiritual paths.

The same crisis that we are experiencing worldwide due to Covid-19 is opening new opportunities that were perhaps unthinkable a few months ago. Can Marianist spirituality offer new generations a beautiful, attractive and valid path? How?

The world is changing and changing rapidly. The Pope, when launching the Educational Pact,13 spoke of the need for a “broad alliance.”

The term "alliance" is very dear to all of us. The alliance that we have made with Mary is an alliance that we live within the Marianist Family. This alliance with Mary must become a concrete and active alliance to activate us as a Marianist Family to offer the beauty of the Marianist spiritual journey to a world that is increasingly thirsty for values and meaning. Perhaps it is the right moment to introduce this pact of alliance in the Marianist Family so that we can meet, reflect, dialogue and find new ways and ideas to offer the Marianist charism to our society.

Artificial Intelligence is making great progress and presents the church with an unprecedented spiritual and ethical challenge: how to evangelize Artificial Intelligence, how to give it a heart and a spirit so that humanity is not at the mercy of cold and calculated machines that only pursue profit? “The Church must strive to inform and inspire the hearts of many thousands of people involved in the creation and development of artificial intelligence systems.”14

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12 Ibid., Letter 1223, 17 October 1840, to Father Chevaux.
13 Pope Francis launched the “Global Educational Pact,” an event that will address the shared responsibility of everyone in the field of education; the event that had been scheduled for the month of May in Rome has been moved to November 2020 due to Covid-19.
It is not enough to see the dangers. We face a challenge and an opportunity. How can we prepare ourselves, as a Marianist Family, to offer a heart to the cold, robotic, yet intelligent future that looms on the horizon?

17.5 MULTIFORM HARMONY

To return to the image of music with which we began this circular, we can say that each era has its own music. Music is the language that expresses the expectations, the sufferings, the rage, the hopes of a people, of an era. As the sons and daughters of Mary, how do we fit into this orchestra? With what instruments? With what training?

In Dear Amazonia, the Pope speaks of various dreams. We must always dream, we must always put our hearts beyond obstacles. If I may dream, I dream of this alliance, this Alliance between the entire Marianist Family, that it may insert itself in a renewed, fresh, dynamic and charismatic way in the great orchestra of the ecclesial family, of the human family. This is a challenge to study, deepen, delineate and renew the Marian face of the Marianist Family.

As it is also expressed in Evangelii Gaudium, I see in the Marianist Family a people with many faces called to show “the beauty of her varied face.”\textsuperscript{15} It is the Holy Spirit who “builds up the communion and harmony” of the Marianist Family. The Holy Spirit Himself is harmony: “it is He who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony.”\textsuperscript{16}

How to be a true, multiform harmony that is attractive? If we have to play the same score with more voices, more instruments, how can we do it if we are not together to practice and be in tune? Which choir, with sopranos, baritones, tenors, mezzo-sopranos... don’t foresee joint rehearsals in addition to individual and group rehearsals? How can the four branches of the Marianist Family present themselves as a Charismatic Family if, in addition to each branch’s own meetings, they also do not have time for study, reflection, and joint planning? How can harmony with multiple voices be achieved without constant practice by the entire choir?

We, Daughters of Mary, must prepare ourselves with responsibility and creativity to offer the notes of Marianist spirituality that best characterize us.

Happy anniversary of our Foundation.

\textsuperscript{15} E.G. 116
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 117