

Renewal, Fidelity, and Community: The Society of Mary General Chapter of 1981
NACMS Documentary Transcript

00:06 – Narrator [Sr. Gabby Bibeau, FMI]

Meetings and gatherings take many forms, formal and informal, large and small, in person and virtual. Some meetings are routine. Memories of them quickly fade. Others hold greater significance. Their effects are lasting, their importance felt for years, even generations. The Society of Mary's General Chapter of 1981 was a meeting of great significance. This gathering produced a revision of the Constitutions of the Society of Mary that influences Marianist brothers and priests to this day. This is the story of what led up to this important meeting, how it unfolded, and how it continues to carry the Society of Mary forward.

01:24 - Narrator

Constitutions are the governing documents of a religious society approved by the Church. The first Constitutions for the Society of Mary were submitted to the Vatican by Father Chaminade in September of 1838. Pope Gregory XVI responded in April of 1839 with a Decree of Praise. Though not a formal approval of the Constitutions, this Decree was enough for Chaminade to promote these Constitutions as a Rule of Life for the Marianist religious.

02:02 – Fr. Bertrand “Bert” Buby, SM

In 1839, this is where, really, the Rule of Life becomes very clear in the Founder’s mind. And it is the foundation's piece, I think, for all Constitutions that follow after that. They have to really model themselves on that.

02:23 - Narrator

Formal approval of the Constitutions finally came in 1891. It would take until 1961 - some 70 years after the Vatican's approval - for the Society of Mary to decide to make some significant revisions. Much had changed in the world and the society by that time, and more change was to come.

02:50 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

In 1961, Fr. Joseph Hoffer was Superior General, and this was the year before the opening of the Vatican II. But he decided that that we needed to update our Rule of Life.

03:11 - Narrator

Despite misgivings among some Marianists about the unrest this might cause, the General Chapter of 1961 voted almost unanimously to revise the Constitutions and elected a commission to prepare a text to be considered at the next General Chapter in 1966. This movement to revise the Constitutions was just what Vatican II was urging religious orders to do. Its 1965 document on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectæ Caritatis*, laid out three principles to guide these revisions: the spirit of the gospels, the founder and the founding charism, and the needs and the signs of the times.

04:05 – Fr. Bert Buby, SM

They wanted us, besides returning to the sources, to get the spirit of our foundation once again, make it alive within the communities, within ourselves, and develop Marianist spirituality. That's what this 1961 revision of the Constitutions was to consist in.

04:23 - Narrator

By 1965, the Society of Mary was well into this task, and members awaited the next General Chapter when the draft of the revised Constitutions could be reviewed before submission to the Vatican for formal approval. But along with the text prepared by the commission, three provinces (the Andes, Cincinnati, and Saragossa) submitted their own editions of the Constitutions.

04:56 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

But at the '66 Chapter, they presented this copy of the Constitution. They had a great discussion, but they could not finish in '66. So, in '67, they had another session at that Chapter, and in '67, this book was accepted “ad experimentum,” which means it was not submitted to the Vatican for approval. It had a lot of new things in it and so on, but it was ad experimentum. So, a lot of the brothers didn't really take it that seriously. It wasn't definite anymore.

05:45 – Fr. Bert Buby, SM

The 1967 Constitutions were - there were different groups trying to - three different groups trying to say what we want for a Constitution in 1967. As a result, even the capitulants did not do a good job in presenting the Rule of Life to the communities when they came back, and people were not satisfied with the 1967 Rule of Life, the little blue book that we had. Some of the American provincials were pushing too hard, I think, to get that union that we have, “union without confusion.” We had confusion, no union.

06:30 – Bro. Raymond “Ray” Fitz, SM

I think it was a particularly difficult period of time, and in the midst of this turmoil, they called an interim constitution. And it wasn't clear what was the moral authority of that Constitution. “So, will we follow the old Constitutions or the new Constitution?” But it had a section on it called “community of action.” Right away, that has to be a giveaway. We're not thinking about this in the deepest way possible. It's not action that we're about. It's mission that we're about. It's ministry that we're about, but not just action.

07:12 - Narrator

During the late 1960s, the General Administration decided that the Chapter of 1971 would not work on the Constitutions, but instead would deal with the issues raised through *Survey SM*, a questionnaire distributed to all members of the Society of Mary for their input on key areas of Marianist life and spirituality. After months of serious preparation, the 26th General Chapter began in July of 1971 in San Antonio, Texas, the first General Chapter to ever be held in the United States. With its focus on key areas of Marianist spirituality, the Chapter produced the wonderful document, *Response*, which covered topics central to Marianist religious life.

08:09 – Fr. Bert Buby, SM

At the Chapter of 1971, there was a great breakthrough. This was, I think, the beginning of what would wind up in the Rule of Life. It was called *Response*, and there was so much enthusiasm at

that 1971 Chapter that I don't think it was ever at that high level, even at the 1981 approval of the Constitutions. That was the best Chapter that I was at, and I don't think the others since that time have come ever near to it. When Fr. [Stephen] Tutas was elected [Superior General] in 1971, it was as though somebody hit a grand slam homerun. The whole assembly of Marianists gathered there just stood up and cheered and clapped.

08:59 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

A turning point was that kind of olive-looking document there, called *Response*, and in that you began to see some things starting to emerge in what was document number seven, *The Marianist Apostolate*, and again began to focus on this [idea] that the role of Society of Mary was this multiplication of Christians. And I think that began to say, “Okay, let's get down [to business]. What is it fundamentally that we're trying to do? It's this formation of faith, the multiplication of Christians. How do we go about that?” And coming out of Vatican Council II – and Steve [Tutas, SM] was very big on this - is that our mission had to be embedded in the mission of the Church. We had to really think about how we were going to be part of the Church. It was important. The concept of our mission having this Marian character, the sense of her shaping the way we did mission, her gifts of hospitality, her gifts of strong faith. Those were all important in that process.

10:11 - Narrator

The introductory letter in *Response* by the newly elected Superior General, Fr. Stephen Tutas, stated the importance of this Chapter: “The work of the Chapter is really intended to provide an ongoing progressive development of the Marianist way of life. In this sense, the 1971 General Chapter is definitively the beginning of a new phase in the life of the Society of Mary.”

10:45 – Fr. Bert Buby, SM

Though no Chapter will be as great as that 1971, because what they did - They took all of this distaste for the Rule of 1967 and sort of studied it from a sociological and modern point of view and said, “This is what's happening in our world today. What do we see as strategies for taking the good out of it and eradicating the bad?” So, there were ways in which *Response* was written that got everybody involved because it was talking about what [we] would call “the signs of the times,” and that maybe was the emphasis of *Response*. And as a result, everybody got into that because it was the spirit of Vatican II now coming alive in a religious congregation. It was just a magnificent Chapter.

11:38 - Narrator

This General Chapter concluded with a mandate to the General Administration to submit a plan for the writing of the Constitutions to the 1976 Chapter. The General Chapter of 1976 and its document, *New Call*, outlined this plan quite clearly. Each province was to elect one member to the Constitution's commission, or COMCO, that in turn was to oversee and give direction to the writing commission, known as the Redaction Committee, or REDCO. The elected members of COMCO nominated members for REDCO, from which the General Administration appointed three: Fr. Eduardo Benlloch, Fr. David Fleming, and Fr. Bernard Vial. Each had a good working knowledge of the three major languages in the Society: Spanish, English, and French. From all that had been gathered from Survey SM and from the Chapter of 1971 as stated in *Response*, along with the directives from COMCO, the three members of REDCO wrote a draft of the Constitutions for COMCO to review. A revised draft was then distributed to each member of the

Society of Mary. Next to each Article were the numbers one, strongly agree, up to five, strongly disagree. Each brother was to vote on and to comment on each Article. The members of COMCO and REDCO reviewed all the input. REDCO then wrote a capitulate draft that was submitted to the General Chapter of 1981.

13:35 – Fr. David “Dave” Fleming, SM

Well, my memory, of course, is the whole thing of getting the Chapter or getting the Rule of Life accepted, because we had worked on that for the previous five years. And we worked on it word by word since I was on that little committee. And then, to see it go through and see some changes made with good changes.

13:57 - Narrator

For the first time in the history of the Society of Mary, the entire membership had a hand in the writing of the Constitutions, known as the Rule of Life.

14:21 - Narrator

After nearly two decades of work to revise the Rule of Life, delegates to the General Chapter of 1981 finally convened in Linz, Austria on July 15th to finalize this revision.

14:37 – Fr. Dave Fleming, SM

So then, in '81, we got together, and the whole focus of the Chapter of '81 was on writing this Rule of Life and approving it, word for word, Article by Article. There were 114 Articles, I think, in the Rule that was approved. And so, everything had to be gotten through, and everything had to be voted on by everyone.

15:02 - Narrator

But now the question was how to begin this daunting task.

15:08 – Fr. James “Jim” Heft, SM

It was made clear to us at the beginning once we decided to take the text and work on it that had been produced in 1979. There was a bit of debate because some people didn't like some things, other people didn't like other things, so on and so forth. But when they faced the stark alternative, namely starting from scratch, I think sanity prevailed. And we said, “Okay, we'll work with this text.” Now, once that decision was made, commissions were formed. It was made clear that everything was going to have to somehow be, in embryonic state at least, in the first chapter of the Rule. All the key things of the foundation, Chaminade, Mary, community, mission, and the issue of stability. And we were told that we really had to work hard and quickly because we wanted to be able within - The Chapter was six weeks long, so we wanted to be able within maybe the first two weeks to have a text pretty well agreed upon by everybody, so that when they worked on the subsequent chapters which would elaborate the different elements in chapter one, they would have a frame of reference to work with.

16:34 - Narrator

The group succeeded, setting the stage for the other commissions to take up their work of writing the remaining chapters.

16:42 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

Chapter one, which a number of the Americans also worked on, is very unified. So, if you look at chapter one, it has the themes all the way through. And so, it's kind of an integrative document, which I really found very helpful.

16:59 – Fr. Dave Fleming, SM

I would say most of it went very smoothly. People agreed on what we said about Mary and what we said about religious life and the vows and community and prayer and so on.

17:15 - Narrator

Discussion about chapter five on mission was a notable exception to the otherwise smooth proceedings, bringing to light a range of opinions. The commission for chapter five was a diverse group which had its advantages.

17:32 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

What made us some difference, I think, in the work that we were doing in chapter five: first of all, just the global nature of the assembly. So, we had people from South America, from Europe, some from Africa giving us insights in different ways. And I think while I had a lot of sensitivity for social justice issues coming into the Chapter, it was great to hear what was happening in South America in terms of their concerns about the poor and those type of things.

18:14 - Narrator

Soon, three different schools of thought emerged regarding the true mission of the Society of Mary.

18:21 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

I mean, if there were camps, it was a big camp on schools, one on what I'd call kind of the Lay Family of Mary, and then there was a kind of social justice, transformation of society, liberation type of groups. From the lay communities, "the preferred means of sharing our charism and education has been a privileged means of carrying out our mission." So, I think trying to reconcile those two, maybe not done perfectly, but then trying to [figure out] how can we do both of those. And then, this introduction of peace and justice helping to build a just and fraternal society, I think that was something new, but it was controversial because those words were never used before in respect to our Marianist apostolate. But I do think it came out of Chaminade's insight of the French Revolution, of where he was trying to rebuild the structures of society through everything from book clubs to visiting the prisoners in jail and lots of things. And so, people felt there was a strong continuity there in that whole process.

19:35 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

Social justice was... fomenting in society in general. Fr. [William] Ferree's famous thesis on social virtues was just a new way of thinking, and I think that's why in the former Constitutions we didn't have anything about social justice. But it wasn't in the Society in general very much either.

20:04 - Narrator

Despite these diverse opinions, the commission managed to pull together all these viewpoints into a single cohesive framework.

20:15 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

I think the breakthrough that came through was the focus on the charism - Article 5.4 and 5.5 and so on - that talked about and set the role for the notion of the Marianist Family being the focus of our ministries. And then, what the breakthrough on the commission was, “Well, let's just look at different things that our people were doing.” So pastoral ministries, schools, and so on. And we got to that issue around building a just and fraternal Society. We just picked up the work that was done in *Response* and shaped it into some Articles.

21:04 - Narrator

One important and challenging element of the General Chapter was the need to express these important ideas and various languages. There was simultaneous translation during the group sessions of the Chapter, and the three-member team of REDCO wrote drafts of Articles in the three working languages: English, French, and Spanish. When working across different languages and cultures, however, communication can be tricky.

21:39 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

You know, English was the official language of the Chapter, and Fr. Ferree wrote up a paper. And I don't remember on what subject, but he wrote it up. It was translated into Spanish, and the French translated it from the Spanish into French. So, there were these copies around, and Fr. Ferree happened to pick up a copy of the French, and he said at the end, “Who wrote this?” He said, “You know, this sounds very much like the one I wrote.” Just to see what translations do to things. You know, there's an interesting translation to Article 59. For me is the most inspiring in the book, and it starts like this (it's in English): “In every Marianist community, we aim to live in such a way that the presence of God is felt.” And if you want the Spanish translation, Spanish says that “the presence of God is *manifest*.” One is a little bit more external than the other, and it's just interesting to me. The translations really do make a difference.

23:13 - Narrator

The nature of one's vocation within the Society of Mary was also a major topic of discussion, resulting in more changes in the Constitutions.

23:24 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

The three categories also came... because the old Constitution was very clear: there were priests, there were teaching brothers, and there were working brothers. See, at the time of Father Chaminade, the working brothers really were not educated. They didn't have much studies. They were excellent carpenters and workshop people and so on. And that started to disappear in the time of Fr. Hoffer. They already said, “No, you can't make that distinction anymore because the work has changed so much.” For example, if you have a highly educated brother who works completely in technology – you know, a computer expert - he's not a teacher, he's not a priest... he's not a working brother in a sense. It's not manual work. And so, that started to disappear. And now, in this present time in our Constitutions, Article 13 [and] Article 69 describe three groups: the priestly ministry, the culture / educational area, and the people that are devoted to work, but

technical work and so on. So, it's not three categories anymore. It's kind of three groups. In Article 74, it does say that education is our privileged apostolate. So, it does it does keep the emphasis on education, but we don't have those distinctions so much anymore.

25:29 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

Because we were in the era of Vatican II and there was a lot of... orientation towards not making such hard distinctions between a brother that had the working category and the brother that was in the teaching category. Those distinctions kind of... were not as well accepted at the time of the Chapter. That's where I think the differences came. I think what was taken in by the Chapter at that time was to say, "Okay, what's the function of the different areas as opposed to calling one group 'working brothers,' one group 'teaching brothers?'" So, I think we came up with a good solution to it, but obviously it wasn't good enough to get everybody on the thing and behind it. But at the time, there was this [feeling of] "Why were we making distinctions among the brothers?" That's what I think.

26:30 - Narrator

But what of the distinctions between the ordained and those not ordained? What roles are reserved for each? This mixed composition of brothers and priests has been a distinguishing feature of the Society of Mary dating back to its foundation. There has always been one Marianist vocation, and as Article 13 states, "the Marianist community seeks to portray a more faithful image of the Church; it rejoices in the mutual enrichment this mixed composition brings to its community and mission." But when the Chapter members considered the possibility of a brother being appointed as Provincial, there was concern about how this might be viewed by the Vatican.

27:23 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

There were some... members were really afraid to change anything about the mixed composition. It came up that we wanted to change the positions that were reserved to priests. Before, it was Superior General, Provincial, and Novice Master. And then, in the Chapter, we pared that down to just the Superior General, and there were members who wanted to make that open also. But there were people like Fr. [Vincent] Vasey. He said, "If we touch that, the Vatican is going to come back and make us decide whether we are clerical or lay, because those are the two categories in canon law." And it's true! Every time we have had to submit our Rule to the Vatican for approval, we had a big discussion with the Vatican over this.

28:39 - Narrator

In the end, the Chapter members reached an agreement, and the Chapter came to a close.

28:47 – Fr. Dave Fleming, SM

And by the end of it, we have the whole thing approved. People thought it was a very momentous moment. I remember Fr. [Noël] Le Mire, who was the French Head of Religious Life and a member of the GA [General Administration] before that, getting up and saying, "Now, you know, this is like back in 1891 when our Rule of Life was first approved. Now we've come to something really new." And he got us all up, and we all sang the Magnificat when we finished it and all that. So, that was very significant.

29:30 - Narrator

Fr. Vasey was right to have been concerned. Formal approval would not happen until 1983, and but for the support of Cardinal [Eduardo] Pironio, the head of the Vatican Office for Religious Life, it may not have happened at all.

29:49 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

Cardinal Pironio was a great support of us, and he kept saying, “Stick with it. Stick with it. Don't give in.”

29:58 – Fr. Dave Fleming, SM

He was a great friend of the Marianists, and he had been a supporter of the Marianists, and he'd known them quite well in Argentina and appreciated us a lot. And so, he was the head of the religious life committee at that time in the Vatican for the Pope. But he was on his way out because a lot of people thought he was too liberal and too open to too many things. And so, in 1983, he was ready to approve. But he said we better get this finalized quickly or his successor will come, and he will not approve of it, especially a brother as Provincial or a brother as Novice Master. I remember I was on a visitation. I was provincial at that time in St. Louis, and I was on a visitation in India. And I got a phone call from Rome saying, “Come back to Rome quickly!” And “we have to do a final version, a few little details, and then we'll send this right away to this committee, and they'll approve it before Cardinal is kicked out.” And so, we did that. We came to Rome, the three of us. We had a few little [things]. We didn't have many changes to make, but we had a few little things to do. And then, they submitted the final text to the Congregation for Religious in the Vatican, and it was approved. And very shortly after that, within a month or two, the Cardinal was removed. And it's quite true, quite clear, that if his successor had been in charge, he would not have approved the Marianist Rule of Life.

31:53 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

I remember being at a meeting of the Superior General once in Rome when the Franciscans were also asking the Vatican to approve some changes in their Rule that brothers could be superiors of communities and so on. And I was at a meeting in which there was a Fr. Torez who was the canon lawyer of the Congregation of Religious, and this subject came up. And some people said, “Well, what's the problem here?” and so on. And one of them said, “Well, the Marianists...” And Fr. Torez said, “The Marianists are an asterisk in the canon law.” We're an exception, and that was that way.

32:56 - Narrator

Other than a slight revision to the Rule in 2006, the Rule that was approved by the General Chapter of 1981 remains largely unchanged. It continues to govern the Society of Mary to this day, proving itself to be a document that challenges and inspires.

33:30 - Narrator

The Society of Mary's General Chapter of 1981 was indeed a meeting of great significance. It provoked a variety of immediate reactions and lasting effects.

33:45 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

Fr. Joseph Verrier, who was then a very respected and loved master of our spirit, but he was really afraid of the new Rule of Life. And I was living with him in Rome when the new Rule was approved, and he didn't say anything. But after he read it for a while, he said, "Well, actually, it turned out much better than I thought it would." So, it was very good.

34:20 – Fr. Jim Heft, SM

Being able to be part of that discussion, and even recognize certain lines that you wrote yourself or you contributed to - I don't know, it gives you a certain sense of not really satisfaction as much as being an instrument.

34:47 – Fr. Stephen "Steve" Tutas, SM

We were entering a new era. I think our Chapter put us on the cutting edge of the religious life. I think we had picked up the fundamental issues. We had to be involved in social action. That was a hard haul. That took time, and it came up on Chapter after Chapter. But I think we entered into that. I think we recognized faintly our own mixed composition is a special gift. I think the development of the laity was a great step, but we have to work on those. We're not there yet, but we have a thing in place.

35:39 – Bro. Ray Fitz, SM

I just felt like this was just very enriching for my religious life. The emphasis on faith, on community life and all that integrated into our apostolic formation of people, apostolic faith connections. The integration was just very exciting, and I said this is something that really I find very enriching. I came back from it just so energized and so positive about where we were going as a religious community. And I still today, reading it, I say, "You know, if we live up to that, we're going to be a pretty powerful force in the Church." So, that's the feeling I came away with.

36:24 – Fr. Quentin Hakenewerth, SM

I like the present Rule of Life more than the old one. It has a lot of very deep spirituality. There's a lot of spirituality in our Rule. You can take that to meditation, and it's not just the rules and regulations and conduct. It's the living values and spirit, especially our relationship with Mary, our relationship with one another. If you take that seriously, it seems to me it's just stronger in some things than in the old Constitution. There's a missionary dimension to our community life now. I said before, I don't think we've really taken that up too seriously, but it's there, and it keeps calling us.

37:22 – Fr. Dave Fleming, SM

It didn't immediately give all kinds of new energy to everything, but it gave a new framework for understanding what we're about.

37:38 - Narrator

There's no better way to understand what the Society of Mary is all about than to read from Article 2, Chapter 1 of their Rule of Life: "In calling us to be Marianists. God asks us to follow in a special way Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary for the salvation of all. Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to work for the coming of his kingdom."

38:16 – Credits

Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ, vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ. Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle. Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte; Et Iesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui, nobis post hoc exsilium ostende. O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.