



INTERNATIONAL TEAM / MARIANIST LAY COMMUNITIES  
EQUIPO INTERNACIONAL / COMUNIDADES LAICAS MARIANISTAS  
EQUIPE INTERNATIONALE / COMMUNAUTÉS LAÏQUES MARIANISTES

# Being Marianist, Being Family

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## Circular #1

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Immaculate Heart of Mary

## Introduction

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It is with humility and joy that I offer this reflection on our Marianist family spirit. I have much uncertainty and fear in my responsibility as the new President of our International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities. But, my faith and confidence are strengthened by the prayerful support and friendship in our global Marianist family, a true family spirit. In recent years, I have seen our family spirit grow in its lived reality, and I believe this is an exciting moment in our history.

Much hard work has been done by the past four leadership teams, led by Presidents Enrique Llano Martínez, Carlos Benéitez and Anthony Garascia. We are now a canonically recognized Private Association of the Faithful. We have defined our identity and our mission. We have affirmed the role that community has in our lives. We have embraced our alliance with Mary as both our reason and our means for who we are, what we do, and how we do it. We have matured as an international ecclesial movement, and this maturity was apparent in our 5<sup>th</sup> International Meeting of MLCs in Nairobi, Kenya last summer. In Nairobi, we were inspired by the hospitality and good works of our brothers and sisters in Africa. This deepened our desire to strengthen our global connections and to find new ways to share our resources. The presence and loving support of our FMI Sisters and SM Brothers encouraged us to

work together as family. We made the commitment to intentionally share the gift of our Marianist charism with the Church and the world. And, we acknowledged the need for all countries to support our work by contributing to the financial support of our International Organization on an annual basis.

One of our greatest gifts is the deepening understanding that to *be* Marianist is to *be* family. In our MLC Statutes and in each of our international documents we proclaim with pride that we are united in one spiritual family with our brothers and sisters of the Society of Mary, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and the Alliance Mariale. There is a growing desire in all four branches to explore this family spirit together, to go beyond nice words and warm sentiments to practical collaboration in mission and life. We are realizing that this family model, given to us by our founders, is both prophetic and timely for today.

This circular is not a theological treatise, for I am not a theologian. And our Marianist historians are better qualified to describe the evolution of our understanding of family spirit. What I can offer is my own experience as a lay Marianist woman and my hopes for our Marianist Family. I have been blessed with dear mentors who have formed me, a community who prays with me, and a diversity of experiences and enriching conversations within our Marianist family. And I have been gifted with the love of David, my husband, and our five children, Luke, Claire, Anna, Benedict and Grace. They have been my greatest teachers of family life and family spirit!

## Family Roots

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade believed that the intimate relationship of family was present within the Bordeaux Sodality by virtue of each member's baptism and special consecration to Mary.

It is a community of fervent Christians who, in order to imitate the Christians of the early Church, strive by their frequent meetings to have but one heart and one soul and to form but one single family, not only as children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ and members of his mystical Body, but also as children of Mary, to be devoted to her through a special consecration and a public profession of the privilege of the Immaculate Conception....All the rules and practices of the association, all the general and particular duties, and even the proselytizing spirit animating the Sodality, emanate from this consecration to Mary Immaculate.<sup>1</sup>

Being family was more than a metaphor for the organization of the Sodality. As a community of baptized women and men, members were sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. By consecrating themselves to Mary, they sought to be more perfectly formed by her in the image and

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<sup>1</sup> From *William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Marianists*, Joseph Simler, SM p. 131. Translated by Joseph Roy, SM. Marianist Resources Commission, Dayton, OH, 1986. Translation of *Guillaume-Joseph Chaminade, fondateur de la Société de Marie et de l'Institut des Filles de Marie*, published in 1901 by Victor Lecoffre in Paris and by Féret in Bordeaux.

likeness of her Son. Together they presented to the world a spectacle of a people of saints, a faith-filled spiritual family that would draw others to Jesus by their own joy and example.

Today, we acknowledge the common roots and charism of our Marianist Lay Communities, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, the Society of Mary and the Alliance Mariale by referring to ourselves as the Family of Mary or Marianist Family. The intentionality of being one spiritual family with four branches has deepened and grown in our recent history.<sup>2</sup> It is acknowledged in the very first words of our first MLC international document,

Marianist Lay Communities are Christian communities at the service of the mission of the church in the world. We are part of the Marianist Family and are inspired by the charism of our founders, William Joseph Chaminade and Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon.<sup>3</sup>

As an ecclesial movement, MLCs are not unique in belonging to a larger spiritual family. Many religious orders such as the Dominicans, Benedictines, and Franciscans have a lay branch, a third order, or oblates. We are not unique in using family terminology to describe the relationship among our members. But our model of family is unique.

We see the Marianist Family as our natural way to live out our faith in community. It is an intuition that is appropriate for the Marianist Charism. We particularly appreciate the horizontal nature of its structure, in which Marianist Lay Communities, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, the Society of Mary and the Alliance Mariale live and grow interdependently based on their unique Marianist vocation, in union without confusion.<sup>4</sup>

We are still learning how to be a family that effectively lives “union without confusion”. We are still learning how to be interdependent, to discern creative and effective means of collaboration while respecting the uniqueness of each branch. Interdependence requires a careful balance, and it can be difficult work. Yet, with all its struggles and challenges, it is a valuable lesson to learn and to share.

## Family Roles

Traditionally, families have been formed on a paternalistic model. The head of the household, usually the father, is responsible for making decisions for the good of the family and enforcing his decisions. Other family members are assumed and expected to obey him, to submit to his authority and abide by

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<sup>2</sup> See Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Chaminade's Message Today* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2001). Benlloch provides a brief overview of our understanding of the Marianist Family in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. (pp 100-118)

<sup>3</sup> *Identity of Marianist Lay Communities*, (1993), §1.

<sup>4</sup> *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*, (2009), §2.1.

his decisions. This paternalistic family structure has been the basis for many leadership models in society. Today, we recognize the weaknesses of such paternalism, even the most benevolent. It denies others freedom and agency to be part of the decision-making process, and it is too static to allow for changing roles.

A healthy family provides a secure, loving environment that nurtures the gifts of all members and supports and promotes their growth into the fullness of personhood. A healthy family recognizes the need for clear roles and responsibilities, but acknowledges that these can change. A healthy family will embrace and use all its gifts to accommodate the changing needs of each family member. Our Marianist Family provides such a model of being family. We believe that

Each branch understands itself and is revealed to itself in the others who are an integral and complementary part of its own being and acting. As a result, we understand ourselves as a spiritual family with a structure which unites laity, religious men, and religious women on a basis of equality.<sup>5</sup>

It has not been easy to achieve this spirit of equality while affirming our diversity. The rebirth of Marianist Lay Communities, from the 1950's onward, coincided with the Second Vatican Council's call for more active participation of lay men and women in the Church. As the laity began to assert their presence, 'growing pains' were often apparent. As new roles were embraced by some, old roles were difficult to shed for others. A similar transition occurs within a family as children enter into adolescence. The years preceding the fullness of adulthood are difficult. But the rebellious independence of the adolescent may be nature's tool for leaving behind the security of childhood. Maybe it is a necessary step towards *interdependence* as parents and children struggle to let go of past roles and seek new relationships.

This transitional stage is reflected in our Church and in our Marianist family as lay women and men seek more meaningful involvement in all aspects of Church life. To counteract the traditional, authoritative model of parent/child we, as lay men and women, are sometimes over-eager in asserting our autonomy. And, some clergy and religious cling to or yearn for the old parent/child relationship with the laity. Clearly defined roles within a static, hierarchical model can be more comfortable than dealing with constant transformation and change. This is why change often produces a back-lash of fundamentalist thinking, and nostalgia for the 'good old days'. But, as every good parent knows, there is no going back to the days of childhood.

It will continue to be a challenge to live as a spiritual family with a true spirit of equality. Together with the Society of Mary, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and the Alliance Mariale, we are realizing that family roles are, indeed, dynamic – as they are in all healthy families. With regular and intimate dialogue, we are able to acknowledge each of our gifts and respond collaboratively to our changing needs as a family and to our changing needs in the Church and in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> *Statutes of the World Council of the Marianist Family*, §1.3 and 1.4.

## Women in the Family

As Marianist Lay Communities, we “work to respect the dignity of each human being.”<sup>6</sup> We also promote “a more active role for women and their participation in the decision-making of the Church.”<sup>7</sup> We are proud of the social justice projects sponsored by members of our Marianist family that support and promote the empowerment of women around the world. But, how can we promote a more active role for women in the wider Church when the opportunity for women to share their gifts often depends on the goodwill of local pastors or bishops? How can we, as Marianists, share our family model of equality, which includes gender equality, with the Church?

One possible starting point is the conversation around the Marian dimension of Church. The diverse meanings of this Marian dimension deserve more study and dialogue. During a Women’s Congress at the Vatican<sup>8</sup>, I heard the term “Marian Church” used simply to call the faithful to deeper and more frequent Marian devotions. The “Marian Church” was also applied to women, promoting Mary’s humility, compassion, and simple obedience as the qualities of the ideal woman, wife and mother. The first interpretation is too narrow, and limits Mary’s relevance primarily to private prayer. The second interpretation has several negative implications. It reduces Mary’s role to a simple model for women, whereas she is a model for all Christians, men included, as our SM brothers exemplify. It offers a truncated picture of Mary because it ignores her other qualities, including courage, wisdom, and love of justice. In offering this truncated picture as a model for women, it also distorts the whole personhood of men and women. For instance, it ignores the nurturing qualities of men and it implicitly excludes women from leadership within the Petrine dimension of the Church. The inconsistency in the definition shows that more study and open dialogue needs to take place on what the Marian dimension or model of Church means. We need to have this conversation within the Marianist Family, and to be part of the larger conversation within the Church.

As lay Marianists we believe that a Church modelled on the characteristics of Mary is a Church of inclusivity, equality, participatory leadership, and dialogue. It is a Church that stands courageously in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.<sup>9</sup> And, we believe that the qualities of humility, nurturing, and compassion are crucial to the Christian life and not exclusive to women. Men, too, are called to these life-giving qualities. And all leaders are called to embrace these qualities in their service to others.

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<sup>6</sup> *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*, §4.3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, §3.9.

<sup>8</sup> “Woman and Man, the *Humanem* in its Entirety” was an International Congress sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*. It took place in Rome from February 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *In Alliance with Mary*, 32.

Mahatma Gandhi advised people to “*be* the change you want to see”. Our Marianist mission is first to be communities that live out what we bear witness to, to be a sign for the world. The Marianist family strives to be a family that respects the gifts of all members and allows them to use these gifts to their fullest potential. We must now share this reality with others. We must be part of the conversations on the role of women in the Church and in the world, modelling the respectful and inclusive dialogue needed for all voices to be heard.

## **Marianist Family Councils – a Model of Being Family**

The World Council of the Marianist Family (WCMF) was formed in 1996. The Statutes of the WCMF clearly show that we discover our fullest potential in being family. To be Marianist, is to be family.

- 2.1 The Chaminadian charism becomes real and effective to the degree that the Marianist Family exists.
- 2.2 The guarantee of the Marianist identity of each branch is in its union with the other branches.
- 2.3 The actualization of the Marianist Family makes each branch grow in identity and fruitfulness.

The World Council of the Marianist Family consists of the General Administrations of the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary, the Leadership Teams of the International Organization of MLC and the Alliance Mariale. It meets in Rome annually each November.

The World Council promotes and supports the formation of Family Councils at all levels throughout the world. The concept of a Marianist Family Council is simple. Representatives from all the Marianist branches within a certain geographical area gather to meet on a regular basis to share updates on community life, projects, and current issues. Discussion and discernment take place on how to collaborate in areas such as formation, our common mission, vocation ministry, prayer, and specific projects. Family Councils also promote local, national, regional, and international communication within the Marianist Family.

Why are Family Councils so important? They are not only a means of *being* family, they also concretize our Marianist vision of leadership. In a world where leadership is too often exclusive and elitist, we offer seats around the table for a diversity of women and men. And we work hard to respect our diversity--which at times is not an easy task! In a Church where final decision-making powers rest with the ordained, we provide the model of a “discipleship of equals”, of “union without confusion”. Each member’s state of life is respected and supported--lay, vowed religious, or ordained--but leadership within the Council is not tied to one’s state in life. The Presidency of the World Council rotates in two year terms among the leaders of the four branches. And each branch has an equal vote in all decision making. Four branches. Four votes.

Family Councils are an effective and practical model to proclaim our Marianist identity as a family. If there is no Family Council in your area, I encourage you to take the initiative to invite your Marianist sisters and brothers to form one together.

## **A Global Family**

We presently have Marianist Lay Communities in 31 countries around the world. We are enriched with the cultural diversity of our global Marianist family. We are also challenged to form and nurture effective relationships across the miles. To be family, we must know each other and collaborate in mutual support; otherwise, *family* is just a pleasant term.

How do we know each other? The first step is to know *who* we are and *where* we are. It is vital that we have a current directory of all our Marianist Lay Communities around the world. This task requires the cooperation of local communities with the responsables in their area, country and region. We need this information to be an effective, international organization. And, we need to share this information with our Marianist Family so that we all know the present reality of the lay branch around the world.<sup>10</sup>

We also know each other through our communications – web sites, newsletters, blogs, social networking sites, etc. Communications among our MLCs and within our Marianist Family have improved in recent years, but there is still much work to be done to ensure consistent and equitable distribution. A strong network must be in place. (Again, this highlights the importance of an up-to-date Directory.) Our increasing dependence on internet communications is a challenge for many countries that still have limited internet access. Materials must also be available in a cost-efficient format for easy printing and distribution.

We also come to know each other and to build family relationships through international, continental, national, and local gatherings of Marianist Lay Communities. These ‘family reunions’ give us the energy to look beyond our own community to build a *community of communities*. A wonderful sign of our family spirit is the tradition among all our branches to invite each other to our major assemblies and meetings.

Even more wonderful initiatives are the inclusive Marianist Family gatherings that are taking place in Latin America, East Asia (Korea and Japan), France and other countries. We hope that these initiatives will continue to grow, and look forward to the future possibility of a world-wide gathering of all four branches of the Marianist Family.

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<sup>10</sup> The FMI and SM provide the Leadership Team of the MLC with an updated copy of their International Personnel Directory each year. This is an invaluable resource in our work. It provides a quick and easy access to contacts around the world. It may not be practical for us to have a complete list of all MLC members. But we should have an updated list of MLCs in each country along with the contact persons, leadership teams, and national responsables.

When we know each other better, we can support each other and collaborate more effectively. We nurture friendships across the miles. We are inspired by the works of our Marianist Family in other lands and find ways to share our good news. We seek creative ways to share resources and experience. We work together in new foundations to ensure that the Marianist Family lives fully as a family of many branches.

When we know each other better, the world news becomes family news. Earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, religious persecution in India, monetary crises in North America and Europe, violence in the Congo, political unrest in Kenya – all these stories affect us more deeply because they are happening to our sisters and brothers. We share the reality of these situations with each other through messages, and offer help when we can. Through family sharing, we also discover realities of other countries and cultures that go beyond the reductive media images. And, always, we unite in prayer for security, peace and justice for all.

## **Family Resources**

As in all families, money can be a major source of tension. There will always be family members who have more money than others. There will always be family members with greater needs. And, there will be family members who demand accountability, equity and fairness in the sharing of family funds.<sup>11</sup>

Maintaining our spirit of equality is a challenge given the global scale of financial inequality. This is a challenge for us on two levels. As the lay branch, we are sometimes unable to financially support mutual projects in our Marianist Family. And, it is a challenge among our own Marianist Lay Communities as we continue to grow in number in countries where the financial needs are great. Our leadership team is constantly concerned with having sufficient income to support our work and fulfill our obligations. We will always need money.<sup>12</sup>

It is tempting to say that our goal is financial independence. But financial independence, in Western thinking, focuses on having sufficient money to take care of ourselves. Independence and self-sufficiency are goals of our individualistic society. On the other hand, in many countries in the global south, being family comes with an expectation of sharing. The wealthy relative must share with the relatives who have less, not as a matter of generosity but of obligation. What we face are two extreme

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<sup>11</sup> As lay Marianists, we have benefitted greatly from the financial generosity of the Daughters of Mary and the Society of Mary. They have supported Marianist Lay Communities on the local and international levels. Generous FMI and SM donations from around the world ensured that delegates from all countries would have the opportunity to attend our International Meeting in Nairobi. It is with gratitude and love that we acknowledge the help and support from our family.

<sup>12</sup> Each lay Marianist is expected to pay dues in the amount of one hour's salary to the International Organization of MLC. The Assembly in Nairobi gave strong support to working together to reach this goal.

views of how family resources should be distributed: an unhealthy stress on financial independence that focuses on everyone taking care of their own needs, or an unhealthy stress on financial dependence with its accompanying roles and expectations of giver and taker. The logical point between independent and dependent is *interdependent*. This is what our family spirit calls us to be. It is one of our biggest challenges both as Marianist Lay Communities and as members of the Marianist Family.

How do we live this interdependence? Good stewardship is the wise use of all our gifts: time, treasure and talents. Though necessary, finances are only one need within a family. The giving of our time and our talents deserves as much recognition as the giving of our treasure. In a world that judges a person's worth by material wealth, we are called to acknowledge the gifts of each person holistically and to acknowledge our need for all these gifts. In this way we will nurture a spirit of *interdependence*. For example, there are many wonderful formation and social justice projects around the world where our sisters and brothers are giving freely of their time and talents. We need to connect them with sponsors in other parts of the world who are unable to do this work, but are able to offer financial support. We also need to acknowledge the gift of prayer as a support for our communities and mission.

We must give generously of the gifts given to us by our loving and gracious God, whether they be time, talent or treasure. A healthy family requires sufficient income to provide for all its members. It is imperative that we support our Marianist Lay Communities financially on the local, national, and international levels to the best of our ability. But we must also remember that the true wealth of a family and its members is not judged by the size of their bank account.

## **Conclusion**

Being family is always hard work. But, we know that the rewards go beyond the good of the family itself. The gifts that are nurtured within family overflow into a world in desperate need of mature, faith-filled women and men who seek to work together for the good of all, to incarnate Jesus in their own place and time. This is our mission, in union with Mary, and through her in union with our Marianist Family. May we learn from her and with her how to ponder deeply, discern wisely, and act justly and courageously as a family who proudly bears her name.

*May the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit  
be glorified in all places  
through the Immaculate Virgin Mary.  
Amen.*