



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

Marianist Lay Communities And the New Evangelization

Circular #2

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Immaculate Heart of Mary

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade continues to bring joy, inspiration and renewed hope to our Marianist family around the world. Locally, nationally, and regionally, our Marianist Lay Communities are gathering with the Alliance Mariale, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and the Society of Mary in thanksgiving for our common roots and history. I encourage you to visit the World Marianist Family web-site¹ for updates, news, and inspiring photos and videos.

Our Chaminade Year is also a time for prayerful study and reflection on the prophetic vision of our Blessed founder.

The Vision of Chaminade

Blessed William Joseph Chaminade throughout his life, and especially at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar in Saragossa, received a powerful Marian inspiration. With Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, he shaped this inspiration into a new missionary

¹ Available at <http://marianist.org/>.

*vision for the revitalization of the Church in France by means of establishing lay communities in Alliance with Mary.*²

The Church in France was almost completely destroyed by the violence and anti-religious philosophy of the French Revolution. Rebuilding the Church seemed an impossible mission, but Chaminade had confidence in the vision he received in Saragossa. His method was simple: form communities of faith-filled women and men as in the days of the early Church. These communities will gather for prayer, faith formation, and mutual support. They will gather, and they will be sent. Each member will go forth, in mission, to incarnate Jesus into a world in need of justice, peace, compassion and reconciliation. Together they will present to the world a spectacle of saints, a faith-filled spiritual family that will draw others to Jesus by their own joy and example. They will multiply Christians by contagion!

This was a new fulcrum for new times. This fulcrum would move the seemingly insurmountable boulder of religious indifference. It would revitalize a whole generation of Christians lost to the secularism of the revolution. Chaminade was convinced that this method would be effective and successful, because he offered it all into the hands and heart of Mary.

Blessed Chaminade's gift to the Church was a simple, practical and effective model for a new evangelization. It was a timely gift for the post-revolutionary Church in France. And it is a timely gift for our Church today.

The New Evangelization

*We consider our personal and community life as our primary means of evangelization, in service to the mission of the Church in the world. We seek to collaborate in all missionary activities aiming at the multiplication of Christians and the development of a world that is more just and compassionate, more free and more interdependent.*³

The Church acknowledges the need for a new evangelization in our time. Pope Benedict XVI recently created the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization⁴. He has also convoked the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The synod will gather in October 2012 to discuss

² *In Alliance With Mary*. (2005), §1.

³ *Mission of Marianist Lay Communities*. (1997), § 1.4.

⁴ Apostolic Letter in the Form of *Motu Proprio* Establishing the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. Benedict XVI, (September 21, 2010).

the topic, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. The *Lineamenta*⁵, outlining the initial topics for discussion, was sent to all bishops in February, 2011.

Evangelization was at the heart of Chaminade's vision. The new evangelization is at the heart of our mission as Marianist Lay women and men. We face the same challenges as our founders. How do we spread the gospel in a society that is indifferent and even hostile to religion? How do we renew a desire to seek God in a culture that no longer has a need for the Divine? How do we form modern women and men into mature, committed, and faith-filled people of God?

The language of the *Lineamenta* echoes our own Marianist language in our international MLC documents. It acknowledges the need to discern carefully the signs of the times. It knows the importance of dialogue. It promotes the role of the laity in evangelization. It calls for formation and education that weave faith into the wholeness of a person. It acknowledges that new methods are needed for new times. And it stresses the importance of proclaiming the good news with joy.

Discernment – Reading the Signs of the Times

*In community, we develop a critical conscience and learn important skills: methods for starting communities and animating their faith; social analysis and theological reflection – discerning the “signs of the times” – and ways to serve in various ministries and to act for justice and peace in the global village.*⁶

The bishops have identified the importance of careful discernment of the “signs of the times” in preparation for the upcoming synod. The new evangelization must begin with “a process to discern the changes in various cultural and social settings and their impact on Christian life, to reread the memory of faith and to undertake new responsibilities and generate new energies to joyously and convincingly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus.”⁷

The *Lineamenta* studies six different sectors for their possible gifts and challenges for the new evangelization: culture, society, social communications, economy, science and technology, and civic and political life. The document gives a brief overview, but it models a careful reading of the signs of the times. Each of the sectors requires “turning a critical eye towards our manner of life, our thinking, our values and our means of communication.”⁸ The discernment is also an occasion for a “self-evaluation of

⁵ *Lineamenta*, “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”. XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, (February 2, 2011). Available online at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html.

⁶ *Being in Community*, (2001), §2.6.4.

⁷ *Lineamenta*, 5.

⁸ *Lineamenta*, 7.

Christianity today, which must repeatedly learn to understand itself, beginning from its roots.”⁹ Questions at the end of each section in the *Lineamenta* encourage dialogue, reflection, and evaluation on the local level.

We, as Marianist Lay Communities, know the importance of discerning the “signs of the times.” We also know the difficulties of discerning together in our global diversity. We experienced this with our latest document, *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. We are indebted to the hard work and commitment of our writing team in Spain. They spent many months formulating, distributing, and evaluating a survey sent to all our MLC around the world. The purpose of the survey was to discern the present realities and future challenges for our Marianist Lay Communities. The results of the survey formed the basis for the document ratified at our 5th International Meeting of MLC in Nairobi, Kenya.

Critical discernment is a difficult task, but a vital one. And it must be the first step in our new evangelization. We cannot evangelize unless we know the person and understand the social reality in which they live. And we cannot deeply know another unless we enter into an honest and open dialogue with them.

Dialogue

*One of the main challenges for our MLC’s is to attain a dialoguing openness within our environment, which may result in a greater social and transforming influence, and in a greater missionary commitment.*¹⁰

The bishops stress the importance of dialogue in the new evangelization. Proclamation “first requires moments of listening, understanding and interpretation.”¹¹ Dialogue must be maintained “not only with those professing a religion, but also with those who consider religion non-essential in life.”¹² This dialogue must extend beyond church walls. The image of the “Courtyard of the Gentiles” is used as an analogy for the space outside of the temple where Jews mingled and conversed with persons of all faiths and no faith. We, too, must be present in the world where deep conversations take place.

Dialogue is difficult in a world and Church fraught with divisive debate. For example, a lack of openness is evident in our Church today in the growing polarization between traditionalists and progressives. On both sides of this ideological divide are passionate women and men seeking God. Debating who is right and wrong merely deepens the antagonism. How can we, as Marianists, help to heal this divide?

We must know how to model true dialogue. Dialogue requires a deep openness to the mind and heart of the other. The goal of debate is to convince others that we are right and they are wrong. In debate,

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. 2009, §2.10

¹¹ *Lineamenta*, 3.

¹² *Lineamenta*, 5.

there is always a winner and a loser. In a dialogue we seek to better understand each other, to find the unity amid our diversity. And when we find this unity, we are all winners.

Respectful listening is at the root of dialogue. As Marianists, we have a valuable tool at our disposal; the System of Virtues given to us by Blessed Chaminade.¹³ These virtues of Jesus help us to use silence wisely, to choose our words carefully, and to be present to the other with our whole being. Growing in the virtues of Jesus helps us to be formed into women and men capable of facing the challenges of dialogue in the new evangelization.

We also cherish our spirit of inclusivity. Our communities are “characterized by a welcoming attitude and approach to people, respectful of the times and styles of each person. The spirit of Jesus moves us to welcome and accept everyone as they are.”¹⁴ Marianist Lay Communities are in the heart of the Church, but we are also a “Courtyard of the Gentiles” to many women and men who seek God but are distanced from the institutional Church. When we provide a welcoming space for dialogue, prayer, formation and meaningful mission, we are participating in the new evangelization. For some, we may be their only experience of Church. For others, an MLC may be the stepping stone to active participation in parish life.

The Role of the Laity

*This group of lay is the starting point of a missionary venture emerging as an answer to what Chaminade believes to be a divine inspiration to Christianize the society in which he lives. The role of Mary in the history of salvation encourages him to offer a lay response, in the midst of the world, showing the message of the Gospel lived out in communities of faith. This is carried out in a way accessible to everyone, attracting others in the same environment by contagion, as the yeast inside the dough.*¹⁵

The new evangelization differs from the traditional, first evangelization practised by the missionaries of the past. The new evangelization is “primarily addressed to those who have drifted from the Church in traditionally Christian countries.”¹⁶ This is “a commitment not of re-evangelization, but rather of a new evangelization; new in its ardour, methods and expression.”¹⁷ Blessed Chaminade recognized the important role of the laity in the work of re-Christianizing France. It was a prophetic vision, echoed two centuries later by Blessed John Paul II,

¹³ An excellent resource for individual and communal study is *Growing in the Virtues of Jesus: The Marianist method of Virtues for use in groups* by Quentin Hackenewerth, SM.

¹⁴ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. §2.4.

¹⁵ *Marianist Lay Communities International Statutes*.

¹⁶ *Lineamenta*, Preface.

¹⁷ *Lineamenta*, 5.

At this moment the lay faithful, in virtue of their participation in the prophetic mission of Christ, are fully part of this work of the Church. Their responsibility, in particular, is to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response – consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees – to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society. This will be possible if the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to again take up in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel.¹⁸

It is true that many Catholics have “drifted away” from the Church but many others have left, or are on the verge of leaving, because of disappointment, disillusionment, or anger. In North America and parts of Europe, we are facing a crisis in the leadership of our Church. Sexual scandals and subsequent cover-ups have tarnished respect for the clergy. Many adult Catholics no longer accept an authoritarian style of clericalism that treats them like children. The recent focus on liturgical language and ritual details seem out of touch with the present reality within the Church and in the world. Many women and men who have distanced themselves from the institutional Church have not “lost” their faith. They are struggling to find a way to live their faith in a meaningful way in today’s world. The situation is not unique to our time.

After the French Revolution, the Church was struggling with internal opposing forces. Some priests and bishops focused on re-establishing the structure and privileges of the past. Others, like our founders, focused on rebuilding the faith of the people of France. Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, Mother Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous did not spend their energies harbouring anger at the past – despite personal exile, hardships, and persecution. They spread the faith from the ground up by forming sodalities of women and men from all back-grounds, lay, vowed religious and ordained. All were formed in their faith, so they could form others. All were evangelized so they could evangelize others in turn. In this way the faith would spread by a multiplication of Christians.

Today, more than ever, the lay faithful must take an active role in evangelization. We must provide a new face of the Church to a world that, too often, sees only her sinfulness. How do we do this? We do it by seamlessly weaving our faith into all aspects of our lives,

In face of the current situation in the world, our MLC’s support honesty, sincerity, cooperation, professionalism, effort, and responsibility in our jobs. Being authentic to Gospel values is indispensable for our members. In all areas of our lives, our actions as Marianists will touch other’s lives and will influence society.¹⁹

We are called to evangelize with our lives, to show the beauty of the Gospel lived with honesty, sincerity, and integrity. We are called to be women and men grounded in prayer and mission with Mary at our side. And we are called to be well formed in our faith so we may speak the truth of the Gospel with enthusiasm and with ease.

¹⁸ On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, *Christifideles Laici*. John Paul II, (December 30, 1988), 34.

¹⁹ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. §4.5.

Formation

We value development of persons and encourage life-long learning and growth of unique God-given gifts. Individual members and the community as a whole, each with resolutions for future growth, seek to advance in wholeness, maturity, and liberation.²⁰

In the *Lineamenta*, two aspects of formation are addressed by the bishops. The first is the “educational emergency” within our society,

education increasingly tends to be reduced to simply communicating to persons determined skills and teaching succeeding generations to gratify their desires for happiness through the products of consumerism or through a short-lived self-gratification...In this way, the essential purpose of education ends up unfulfilled and forgotten, namely, forming individuals capable of living life to the full and of making their unique contribution to the common good.²¹

Education of the young was a favoured means of evangelization for Blessed Chaminade, and continues to be at the heart of many of our Marianist works. *The Characteristics of Marianist Education* stress the formation of the whole person. Staff and students at our Marianist schools are committed to

1. educate for formation in faith
2. provide an integral, quality education
3. educate in family spirit
4. educate for service, justice, and peace
5. educate for adaptation and change

Faithful to these characteristics, Marianist schools are responding to this “educational emergency” of our times.

The second aspect is formation in faith. In order to be credible witnesses and effective evangelists, we must “know how to speak in ways that are intelligible to our times and proclaim, inside these areas, the reasons for our hope which bolsters our witness (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). Such a task is not accomplished without effort, but requires attentiveness, education and concern.”²² Again, the legacy of Blessed Chaminade provides us with a tool for ensuring that our communities address the formational needs of the whole person. He left us the structure of the Three Offices: Religious Life, Education and Temporalities. When we attend carefully to each, we are able to maintain a balanced faith life that is prayed, studied, and lived. Each aspect nurtures and supports the others.

²⁰ *Being in Community*. §2.6.2.

²¹ *Lineamenta*, 20.

²² *Lineamenta*, 22.

Annual reports from our National Responsibles identify a strong desire and need for formation and formation resources. Our Nairobi document affirms this,

We need to strengthen our MLC formation to improve our being Christians in the world. To do this we involve all the branches of the Marianist Family in the preparation of leaders, both lay and religious, to improve the formation in our MLC's.²³

As Marianist Lay Communities, we understand the importance of formation that addresses the whole person. This is the catechetical model that is required for the new evangelization. Doctrine, alone, will not answer the needs of the modern woman and man. The teachings of our faith must be woven into a life of prayer and just action. To be an effective agent for change in our world, our faith must engage our mind, heart and hands. We must be open to the creative action of the Holy Spirit, like Mary was, for new times require new methods.

New Methods for New Times

We want to seek suitable ways to respond, as followers of Jesus, to new and complex challenges of our situation. We are entering a new phase in which the Lord clearly calls us to “leave our homes” (Gen. 12, 1) and to open up to other communities, regions, countries, and to the world. As our communities are located at greater distances from one another, we strive to stay connected and to foster and celebrate our Marianist Charism.²⁴

The new evangelization is calling us to “New Ways of ‘Being Church.’”²⁵ We are called to “forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today.”²⁶ The concept of new methods for new times runs deep in our Marianist blood. Blessed Chaminade was forging new paths when he focused on the gifts and power of the lay faithful to re-evangelize the Church in France. We continue to forge new paths and new ways to form community and evangelize around the world. Here are just a few examples,

- Agora Marianista²⁷ – produced by our Marianist Family in Spain, this interactive web-site continues to be one of the most popular religious web- sites in the country.
- Chami RADIO from Peru²⁸
- the growth of online Marianist Lay Communities

²³ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World.* § 2.7.

²⁴ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World.* § 2.11.

²⁵ *Lineamenta*, 9.

²⁶ *Lineamenta*, 5.

²⁷ Available at <http://marianistas.org/>.

²⁸ Available at <http://www.chamiradio.org.pe/>.

- online courses in Marianist Formation²⁹
- a proliferation of Marianist web-sites, blogs, and social networking pages such as Facebook.
- gathering in real time across the miles via Skype or other technologies

I have attended three MLC International Meetings; in 2001, 2005, and 2009. Every four years there is an amazing growth in the technologies that are available to us. After the meeting in Nairobi, many delegates used Facebook and Skype to stay in contact with each other. Even Chaminade, Adèle and Marie Thérèse have their own Facebook pages!

While we embrace new technologies, we must be conscious of the unequal access to technology in our global family. There are still many areas where poverty and geographical isolation require us to use simple methods for spreading the Gospel. We, in the global North, have much to learn from our MLCs in Africa. They remind us that the most valuable interaction takes place when we offer warm hospitality, or accept hospitality from our sisters and brothers. As in the days of the early Church, faith is shared in the intimacy of a face to face encounter.

Sharing the person of Jesus is at the heart of evangelization. Each of us must use the tools and means that are at our disposal. Whether we have much or little, we are called to use the gifts that we have and offer them joyfully for the service of Mary's mission.

A Joy-Filled Spectacle of Saints

*In face of individualism, we choose to live our faith in community. We can offer the world a real experience of a joyful and liberating God, a symbol of love for all those who are seeking spirituality – a characteristic of our times.*³⁰

Blessed Chaminade insisted that the sodalities be joy-filled spectacles of saints. This is not a false joy, but a joy grounded in the hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is joy that knows our loving God has conquered suffering and death with the promise of new life. It is the joy of living one's faith in community. In English we have a phrase that says "you can catch more flies with honey." This means that people are more easily drawn to a message through the sweetness of joy than by force or threats. The *Lineamenta* concludes with these inspiring words,

And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with

²⁹ See the International Center for Marianist Formation, available at http://www.icmf.info/eng_home.asp and the North American Center for Marianist Studies (NACMS), available at <http://www.nacms.org/>.

³⁰ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. §2.3.

fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.³¹

Conclusion

The beatification during the Jubilee Year of William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Marianists, reminds the faithful that it is their task to find ever new ways of bearing witness to the faith, especially in order to reach those who are far from the Church and who do not have the usual means of knowing Christ. William Joseph Chaminade invites each Christian to be rooted in his Baptism, which conforms him to the Lord Jesus and communicates the Holy Spirit to him.³²

The *Lineamenta* is only a discussion paper for the upcoming Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, but all bishops are encouraged to promote this discussion on the local level. It is important that we participate, when we can, in local dialogues. It is important that we, as Marianist Lay Communities, make our presence known in the Church. Self-promotion does not come naturally to us, for we have a humble spirit. But our presence is needed. Our Nairobi document states,

As we gain greater knowledge of the Marianist Charism, we want to share who we are and what we do in the wider Church. Through the example of our lives we can make this visible to the Church.³³

The renewed call for a new evangelization is providential for us in this Chaminade Year. We are celebrating, with joy, our past history and our present reality as a Marianist Family. We are also challenged to live out the legacy of Blessed Chaminade in our own place and time. Our Marianist charism provides an inspired and practical response to the call for a new evangelization. We must embrace the gift of our charism, and offer it with generosity and courage for the good of our Church and our world.

I send my love and prayers to you and all our Marianist Lay Communities around the world. I also send my warm affection to all our Marianist Family - an inspiration and model for new ways of being Church, together.

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

³¹ *Lineamenta*. 25.

³² *Homily at the Beatification of Pius IX, John XXIII, Tomasso Reggio, William Chaminade and Columba Marmion.* John Paul II, 3 September, 2000.

³³ *Marianist Lay Communities in the Church and in the World*. § 3.6.